Gil Hizi

Kölner Corona

This Corona thing is not quite comparable to any memorable situation. The anthropologist's mind attempts to reach insights about social responses to this crisis, but there are few constants in this equation. Even stories I hear from friends and family back home do not ring familiar. This leaves me wondering to what degree my experience in Cologne is telling about the city, about German society, about life as a foreigner? Any insight evaporates much faster than the virus…

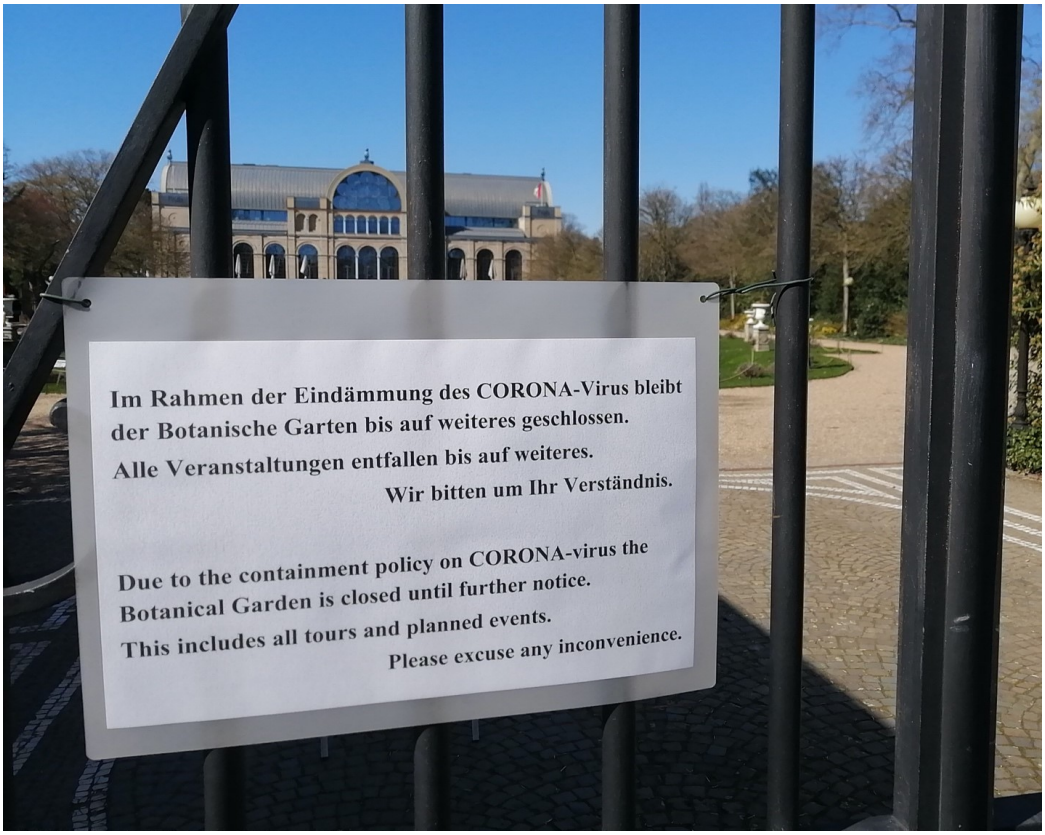
I recently arrived at Cologne along with my wife and baby daughter to conduct a postdoctoral research. I am Israeli, living in Europe for the first time. We came mentally prepared to endure a dark cold winter, and it turned out not so bad. Between the Christmas markets and Karneval, the friendly Kölner spirit kept winter warm. We still had some bureaucratic growing pains, but March seemed to come right on time when we began feeling settled, blooming along with the yellow daffodils in the city's parks.

While the Corona threat has been creeping in for a while, people's responses here changed drastically after the WHO declaration on a pandemic on March 11. The same day my wife wondered if she should stick to her plan of meeting a mother-friend in our local Spiel café so that our kids could play together. Since the café was very lively two days earlier, I didn't see any point in canceling. But on March 12 my wife and her friend found themselves sitting in an empty café, the only customers that day. They felt like clueless foreigners deserted in the abyss by the responsible citizens. The fact that the café on that day was probably most germ-free as it has ever been understandably could not ease the confusion…

I read several posts recently in an "Israelis in Cologne" Facebook group where people contemplate the situation. One thread asked where members would feel safer in this period: Israel or Cologne. Opinions were divided. Some focused on the seemingly

better healthcare system in Germany and the relatively high ratio of hospital beds/citizens. Others spoke emotionally about the comfort of being close to the family in Israel and evading the apparent European “indifference” to this emergency. The question they could not quite answer is how would this “closeness” to their family play out these days. Israeli society is apt to transitioning from the routine to states of “emergency” that produce perceived national “solidarity”. Israeli people’s sense of identity during crises is not very divided in terms social class or regionality but more through religion-ethnicity. As a result, the social resistance to accepting an “emergency” state and suspend most commercial and entertainment activities is relatively low. But what usually allows this transition is the feeling that the crisis is exclusively “ours” rather than “global”, and that friends and families can get together and bond. Even in the most extreme cases (quite rare for most Israeli citizens these days) that people must take shelter, this involves two or three generations cohabitating under the same roof. This sense of community is much more elusive when the threat seems less political and when solidarity, counterintuitively, demands social distancing. Still, people continuously seek some form of familiar contact.

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Sign notifying that park is closed due to corona, source: Gil Hizi.

Here in Cologne, despite the recent shift, people I met seem less obsessed with the feeling of crisis. Within the activities that people pursue there is an attempt to find moments of joy. Perhaps the biggest clash here in these early spring days is between the alarm of the Corona and the call of the sun. Northern Europeans people flock to the parks on warm days in what seems to be a very compulsory recreation. A reasonable compromise between lockdown and recklessness?

I hope this virus is seasonal. The world population needs health and my daughter needs to go to Legoland.

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