

## Logging in to life in Zurich: migration in the midst of a pandemic

How do you settle into a city when everything comes to a standstill? What access to services and everyday information do newly arrived migrant women receive from the city of Zurich during the pandemic? How is integration possible in times of pandemic-related social distancing?

These are the questions that anthropologist Alice Hertzog explored in spring of 2021. Alice works in migration and urban development. She attended “Daily Life in Zurich”, the course for women new in the city, as a participant; the course promised her good ethnographic fieldwork. She summarized her observations and findings in a "workshop report".

Alice Hertzog – 21<sup>st</sup> Jan. 2022

Last spring, I signed up for the course “Living in Zurich” offered by the city to newly arrived migrant women. My motivation was partly academic curiosity, I’m an anthropologist working on migration and urban development, so the course promised to be good ethnographic fieldwork. I’m also planning on applying for Swiss citizenship at some point in the future, so it couldn’t do any harm to tuck away the certificate as evidence of my pro-active integration. It’s not the first time I’ve signed up to this course. I initially joined as a new migrant when I moved to Zurich in 2013. However, I never quite manage to finish it, with work always getting in the way, nonetheless as a serial drop-out I have learnt a thing or two.

This time around I was particularly interested in meeting women who had arrived in Zurich during the pandemic. My research has shown how cities have been increasingly at the forefront of welcoming migrants, responding to their immediate norms, granting access to services and providing integration mechanisms. But how would all of this work during a pandemic? How do you settle in a city when life is upside down? The women on the course were arriving during a period of enforced social distancing, and might not be in anybody’s social bubble.

All over the world, COVID-19 was having dramatic impacts on migration. From the massive return migration in India, to the overnight suspensions of free movement, or drops in migrants’ capacities to earn money and send money back to their families. But what was happening in my city? How were migrants in Zurich coping? And could this course help to address their needs during the pandemic?

I went to meet the course organiser Cristina in her office in City Hall. It was empty and eerie, with the open office spaces abandoned by staff working from home. Balancing my computer on the far corner of her desk to keep social distance, she told me what she was planning for the course. Like much of life last year, it was going to be on zoom. They were planning to run it in 13 different languages, I would be free to move in-between the English, French, Portuguese, Spanish and German groups.

The course was attended by a mix of socio-economic groups, from venture capitalists to cleaning ladies. Some were stay at home mums, housewives, others were editors, set-designers, auditors, architects, or worked in human resources. For all of them the online format offered more flexibility, enabling them to combine the course with everyday life. Women tuned in from their sitting rooms and kitchens. Some attended in full work-gear, perfect make-up and hair, double screening with their professional lives. Others darned socks or had toddlers climbing onto their laps, saucepans boiling in the background. The online format made the course more adaptable and inclusive. The ladies in the Thai language group asked to switch to evenings or weekend sessions, instead of a weekday morning because they all had jobs. And the Chinese group had women from other parts of Switzerland wanting to join, as news of the online course spread among the diaspora the online format meant it was accessible to women living all over the country.

Like so many other groups worldwide we navigated the new etiquettes of zoom meetings - "so whose going to unmute first?" asked a Val from California in the first session. The course leaders adapted their sessions to the online environment, using digital content much more actively than I remembered from past courses. Participants also pulled up websites and online resources to share with the rest of the group, jumping from window to window, and pasting online resources in the chat or WhatsApp groups. Given that the city of Zurich provides access to so many municipal services digitally it seemed to make complete sense to offer an introduction to various municipal services online.

Covid was reshaping everyone's experience of migration. As an anthropologist, it was interesting to see how the pandemic was accelerating or rearranging kinship relations. For some of the participants, the pandemic had separated families, but it had also sped up relationships. Sarah from New

York wasn't planning to move in with her long-distance Swiss boyfriend so quickly. But as Covid cases grew and international borders closed she jumped on a plane to Zurich. She was still working remotely for a publishing company in New York. So far from trope of the trailing spouse, Sarah hadn't sacrificed her career for love. The pandemic had actually made trans-local lives and working remotely more acceptable. For the city of Zurich, it also means that migrants like Sarah are not necessarily going to be looking for jobs in the local economy. Although given Swiss prices, the price of a cup of coffee is pretty eye-watering if you aren't earning in local currency.

Other migrant households were being recomposed in unforeseen ways. Amanda, a Brazilian who had been living on the Ile of Wight had moved to Zurich, suddenly to find her adult son, who had just graduated from university also moving back in with them. Others found themselves stuck in Switzerland, unable to travel home, and not knowing when they would see relatives abroad again.

The course became a space to exchange information on Covid and discuss uncertainties. Often nobody had the answers, we lacked the clarity, weren't quite sure what was going to happen. Will I be able to travel to Latin America? Which vaccines will be approved? The course leaders made sure everyone knew who Guy Parmelin and Alain Berset were, they showed participants how to navigate the BAG website, and where to download the official posters on hand-washing. The pandemic was an opportunity to observe Swiss political decision making and federalism in real time. Antonia asked, "How come the federal level approves the vaccine but the canton is responsible for its roll-out?" whilst Katia wanted to know why restaurants were open in Basel but not in Zurich. The pandemic was a masterclass in political decision making in their new country.

Participants themselves were a great source of up to date information. Hannah told us about a twitter feed that was translating the ministry of health's press conferences into English in real time. Nicole knew of an expat blog that had reliable updates. The participants communicated key information between them: now we can meet in groups of ten, restaurants open next week, lateral flow tests are free to pick from Monday onwards, girls there are free vaccination slots in Oerlikon.

The Spanish group was interesting to observe in this sense. They were

incredibly well informed of the various tier groups for vaccination. They knew that those living in shared accommodation or working in the care sector could get early access. One of the participants, Manuela was a newly arrived doctor, and took it upon herself to explain how the various vaccines worked, the approval procedure, and insights into immunity from the medical community. With the lateral tests she warned them, “careful ladies, it’s like a pregnancy test, be careful with the negative result, it doesn’t mean you don’t have it.” I felt that every zoom meeting in Switzerland needed a Manuela if we wanted to get national vaccination rates up.

The women enquired about socialization and norms in Switzerland before the pandemic. Natalie asked, “what do people do here, I mean before, do they kiss or shake hands?” Lizz wanted to know if her neighbours’ behavior was due to Covid, or just because the Swiss were cold, “I mean its difficult to know, are people keeping their distance because of Covid or is it always like this?” “Why doesn’t the old lady I see in the staircase say hello when I greet her?” New arrivals were struggling to see what was cultural and what was exceptional - what was the city like before the pandemic? Was it bustling, or still oddly quiet? Were people warmer? It’s hard to get a sense of one’s new home when everything is in a state of exception.

In the course we learnt some basic Swiss geography. I learnt that the mountain on the Toblerone packet is the Matterhorn, about the Bernina Express, and the names various significant lakes and peaks. But what was even more interesting was to see how new geographies were emerging during the pandemic. Participants, like the rest of us, were using spaces differently in order to stay safe. The women traded tips on big open spaces, Anastasia told us how she got lost one day and stumbled across the Sihlfeld cemetery where there was loads of space. Alex recommended going up to the Uteliberg, “you can eat a hot sausage up there without getting too close to anyone.” Instead of meeting up in cafés, a group of participants arranged to visit Zurich’s blossoming cherry trees instead. They were importing new practices that abided by social distancing, treasuring the access to nature that had become so important to all of us during lockdown.

The pandemic also became an opportunity to get to know the country better, as Julie from France pointed out, “one advantage of Corona, is that we can’t get out, so at least we are visiting Switzerland” whereas Becky, who had arrived in 2019 for one year and ended up staying longer then expected

experienced being here during the pandemic as “an oasis” grateful that she could discover all of the amazing countryside, while her home country was in a strict lockdown.

Not all of the course content was based on Covid - life continued, and other topics were addressed - health insurance, Swiss politics, schooling. Where do you register for daycare, what are you entitled to? How do I set myself up as an entrepreneur? Do I have to repass my driving license? A lot of the course is also about informing participants of the how to navigate normal life. We learnt how the health system works, all about pensions plans, and voting rights. Often there was a gender focus, women were told they could keep their name when they got married, that the city hospital Triemli had a good gynecology service and how to report sexual harassment anonymously online. The programme is a crash-course in adulting, and one that should be part of coming of age, for migrants, but for locals too. It provides the tools to navigate all kinds of everyday tasks, that keep life together, tasks that often end up on women’s to-do lists.

But not always! One woman, Fabiana, had arrived two months ago, she had been working in pharma for fifteen years, and had just landed a job in Switzerland for a pharmaceutical company working as the Global Head of Business and Acquisitions for emerging markets. In the first session, she explained that her husband will be dealing with all of the settling in process - so would it be okay if he joined the course instead of her? The camera zooms in on him, and he comes to introduce himself, a smiley toddler playing in the background. These women are not just interested in learning how to become a good spouse in Switzerland. In one session, they are shown a video made a few years back by past participants. Wearing 1950s costume, hair in curlers and floral aprons the women dance to a choreography whilst instructing each other on how to recycle household waste properly. Its cringeworthy, and Jullia calls it out, “that is just incredible - where are the men?”

Most of the time, the course appears to foster a sense of empowerment, informing the women of their rights. As the course started, we were in the midst of a referendum to ban the burka in Switzerland. The reasoning being that migrant communities were undermining women’s rights. For many of the women on the course, they were on the contrary experiencing new forms of gender discrimination in Switzerland. Adriana, who runs her own business had also just arrived from New York told us “the landlord didn’t want to

speak to me - he only would speak to my husband - I thought it was probably because he was a Hassidic Jew but it turns out he was just Swiss well I guess it's just minor", "No" another voice on the call chirps in "that's not minor."

We talk about touchy topics. In the French group one day, the course leader starts asking me about Harry and Megan. Why are we spending precious time discussing the royal family I ask myself, until she expertly slides from them to the topic of bi-racial marriage and racism. So much more respectful that by directly prompting the other women on the Zoom call, say Charlotte from West Africa or Cheyma from Lebanon to speak about their experiences. In the Spanish group one day the topic of domestic violence is raised, the leader creates a safe space, let's talk about this she says, "not because it's a direct concern to you, but because you are mediators in your communities." We discuss the rise of domestic violence during the pandemic, the traits of psychological abuse, the help lines, special units. And slowly questions pop up, "what if the person has no-where else to go?", "if I make a report, can I withdraw it?" "are there policewomen in the unit?"

Others times, we discuss why Swiss CV's list marital status, the pitfalls of part time contracts, the lack of affordable day care, why Swiss women only got the vote fifty years ago. In one session the course leader explains that many public Swiss schools don't have school canteens. "Oh that's so sad" says Lucia, "so the children just eat lunch on their own" then it dawns on her and the rest of the group, women are expected to be at home to make their children lunch. Eyes widen when they learn that only in 2025 will schools have canteens, and that one argument is to create social equality because lots of migrant children don't go home for a hot lunch. And then we laugh when Li wie from China asks why small children have textile classes at primary school. She doesn't understand why they have to learn to use sewing machines given there is no big textile industry in Switzerland. Its arts and crafts Li Wie - her new friends explain - they are not training children for factory jobs in the textile sector!

The women are more empowered and vocal than I am used to seeing in Swiss settings. When discussing citizenship applications, we learn that you have to show you are actively contributing to the economy. Lara, whose husband works at Google chirps in, "I'm part of the economy even though I'm a housewife - my husband couldn't work if he didn't have clean shirts and food to eat." The women also mentor each other through various bureaucratic difficulties, Nina has been told her child can only get Swiss citizenship if he

starts an apprenticeship. Her new no-nonsense friend Sofia won't be having any of that, "Go back to that office, they are just testing you - ask for the specific list of requirements on paper, get it, print it out, read it at home in your own time, bring it to us." Natalie also seems to be having to renew her foreigners pass more often than she should, the course leader tells her "go see that admin, tell them you are doing the course, that other people don't have to renew as often as you do." There is a lot of internal coaching and mentoring - and the women follow-up with each other's concerns week after week, checking in with each other, and celebrating their successes. The sense of solidarity was palpable. The women attending the course were also concerned at how they could help out during the pandemic. Carolina started working for a food distribution centre, making food packages for an NGO, "at first, she said, I didn't feel I could do anything without speaking German, but then I found this and saw I could make a difference to those in need." Far from being a needy migrant, Carolina had started her life in Zurich by reaching out and seeking to help her host community in a moment of crisis.

I could see an online sisterhood emerging, one that was diverse, honest with each other, and bravely starting a new chapter in their lives. As a migrant myself, my attachment to Zurich grew over the pandemic. Like the women on the course, I had a sense that we were all in it together, that we were part of the same local community, trying to keep ourselves and each other safe from this new virus. Yes, I was unable to travel back to England, my granny couldn't meet my baby, I wasn't able to celebrate my Dad's sixtieth - but I felt like I belonged in Zurich in a way I hadn't before. I felt privileged to be able to walk in the forests, that schools stayed open, that no curfews were imposed, and that the health service was excellent. Covid didn't care if you spoke Swiss German, if you had a foreigner's permit, what your income was, or if you knew how to ski. In that sense it was a leveler. As a foreigner I often feel I have a limited ability to impact local change - especially when it comes to the regular referendums where we lack a voice. However, this time around the outcome of the pandemic, the ability to limit infection rates was reliant on all of us - migrant or not.

For the women who attended the course, it would be interesting to see how their long-term integration into the city will be shaped by this experience, will they feel a special connection to Zurich? Or have they missed out on key opportunities to socialize and make new friends? I look forward to the day when they can experience Zurich at its fullest - mingle in the crowds, sunbath

among hundreds of bodies at the lake, dance in packed clubs and invite each other over for brunch. Until then, I think they are well equipped to take on whatever is coming our way, and with the help of the various lessons learnt from each other and the instructors on the course, they will do a great job of navigating the new normal.

\* All of the names have been changed

Alice Hertzog teaches at the ETH Zürich and works for the Benin Swiss Initiative at the Museum Rietberg