
The Unusual Frontier-worker

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I am a ‘border-worker’. However, I am one of the few in the category who moves between two countries not for economic but for family reasons. Instead of working in wealthy Switzerland and living in the less opulent Italy, as the vast majority of cross-border commuters do, I live in Switzerland and work in Italy. Even worse, I do not work in the north of Italy (for example, in Lombardy to then move to the Italian-speaking Canton Ticino) but in the southernmost part, Sicily.

Thus, like the many regular intra-European travellers, I managed to live with the Covid-19 emergency for about a month, often flying from the Milan Linate Airport, and then renting car on arrival in Sicily at Catania Airport in order to avoid public transport. This lasted until a warm morning of early March, when I was almost diverted to a Parisian airport to spend 14 days in isolation there. Luckily, I managed to reach Geneva Airport and from there go by train to the village where my family lives. I arrived just in time, because a few hours later the situation worsened, especially in northern Italy. Then, all face-to-face teaching in my University in Messina was replaced by remote activities.

What follows starts on the day of my arrival in Switzerland and ends on 11 May 2020. My Sicilian encounter with Covid-19 will be discussed elsewhere.

The Setting

Yvonand, where I live, is a municipality in the French-speaking, mostly Protestant Jura-Nord Vaudois district, Vaud Canton. It has a territory of 1,339 square km and borders with the mostly Catholic Fribourg Canton. Located on the southern shore of Lake Neuchatel, on the Payerne-Yverdon-les-Bains railway line, it largely lies in the Grand Carrière nature reserve. It has a bank, post office, three supermarkets, two boulangeries and half a dozen restaurants. Half of the 3,400 inhabitants live in the centre, where there is a library, a fire station and two churches: the Temple d’Yvonand, parish seat of the Reformed Evangelical Church and the church of Saint Pierre, part of the Catholic parish of Yverdon-les-Bains. The inhabitants of Yvonand are called *tapa-sablia*, nickname for *tape-sable* (source of sand), due to the presence on the territory of one of the few sandy beaches on the south coast of the lake. Crossed by the Menthue River, the town is a renowned tourist place, especially for internal tourism from the Swiss-German cantons, but with a substantial presence of visitors also from the nearby French Jura. It has several campsites, tourist resources and a marina-port capable of hosting 500 boats. Most inhabitants work in nearby Yverdon-les-Bains, or in Fribourg and Lausanne. The local gendarmerie was closed on 17 March as a consequence of the rapid spread of Covid-19 in the Canton.

Our Apartment at the Time of the Pandemic

We live on the ground floor and have a small garden. There are four members in our household. The children have one room each, my wife and I our own room; then there is a combined living-room and kitchen and two bathrooms. We have a desk with a computer and two PCs. We enjoy stable friendships in a mixed, heterogeneous neighbourhood as is often the case in Switzerland. The most recent friendships are the parents of our children's schoolmates, who attend the local Elementary School. Some of them are also neighbours, others live in the vicinity. Our children usually go to shared meeting places and regularly enter their schoolmates' homes because we know their parents. Their classmates normally come to our home, mainly in the afternoon for a snack. This was the norm before 13 March 2020. From that day everything changed.

Apart from the news in the media, that day a notice from the Municipality of Yvonand appeared on the door of our apartment building (Figure 1). The document formalized what we already knew from the publicised directives. The document listed limitations that were not as stringent as those in Italy, but were sufficiently limiting as to make us understand that our individual and collective life habits were to change dramatically. The document focused on how to act in the event of symptoms attributable to Covid-19 and on the official means of communication that the municipality would use (the Facebook account and Municipality portal). A few hours later, further notices arrived by letter and by telephone. Among these, of particular concern to us were the suspension of the *maman-de-jour* activity (cantonal home-reception service for children during non-school hours) and the suspension of school activities. These occurred with immediate effect for four weeks (later extended for an additional two weeks). As for moving around, the children had to limit themselves to what was necessary.

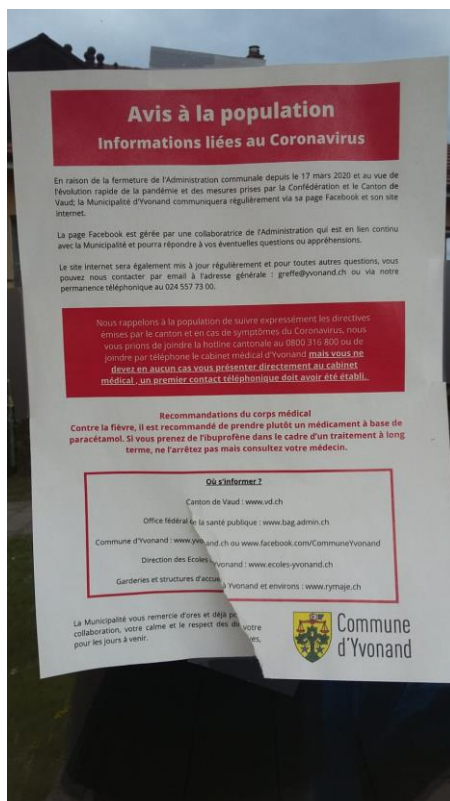


Figure 1. Municipality of Yvonand: Formal notification of restrictions. Photo by the Author.

However, limits on gatherings were not stringent, in fact it was possible to meet in a group of maximum 5 people, observing the proper distance. There were no limits to the use of private vehicles or upon the number of passengers in a car; however, limits were imposed on the use of public transport. From the next day, restrictions extended to public spaces, including the natural reserve and nature trails (Figure 2), as well playgrounds and recreational activities areas. After a few days, sports areas, especially those close to the Municipal Stadium, were also closed (Figure 3). Then public administration premises were closed, and access to public services (for instance, the Post Office) and supermarkets limited.



Figure 2. Notice of closure of the nature reserve. Photo by the Author.



Figure 3. Notice of closure of sport areas. Photo by the Author.

The multinational company where my wife works had already imposed smart working from home. The circumstances that made this mandatory included the possibility of having been in ‘contact’ with someone who had been in Italy. From first ‘contact’, one had to

quarantine for two weeks; in our case, the quarantine had paradoxically already been extended twice because I continued to travel to Italy and she was consequently unable to return to work.

From 13 March the quarantine and the negotiation of spaces and schedules at home involved all the four of us. First, we had to re-shape our going out, meetings and management of common spaces. Above all, this had to be explained to our children. They were accustomed to continuous contact with others and, in their eyes, what we proposed seemed like a form of long-term imprisonment.

Mostly because of my travelling, at least for the first weeks, my children suffered from the lockdown more than their mates. I was critical of the not-too-compelling measures I saw in Switzerland. I did not approve of them, especially because I was witnessing what looked like an uncontrollable growth in Covid-19 cases in Italy, and even the death of friends there. Nevertheless, I must admit that I experienced only one problem in Switzerland during the entire lockdown. It happened in one of the Yvonand supermarkets at the beginning of the pandemic, when despite documented cases of Covid-19 in the village distances were not respected.

For my children, however, the most serious problem was the inability to access common green areas, playgrounds and, above all, the common condominium spaces that were vital for meeting their friends.



Figure 4. Instructions on basic protection against the new Coronavirus graphically explained. Photo by the Author.

Distance School Education

The day after the suspension of school activities in the Canton, with embarrassing Swiss precision the local school was already well prepared. This shocked me as never before, especially as I contrasted the reaction-times of the Confederation with those in Italy. The school set up a distance service, with videos made by the teachers, daily lessons and a double-track homework-system that, improving more and more, would occupy the children for the weeks to

come. It was a mixture of videos, assignments and final assessments for all school subjects for the two classes; part of their school tasks involved online activities. However, equipping home spaces to accommodate the new practices dictated by the emergency meant transforming our children's rooms into playgrounds that had to function also as study-rooms. In other words, one had to try to alternate moments of leisure with school activities, with the problems associated with both my wife and I being involved daily in several hours of meetings and lessons and having to work simultaneously. The first problem was managing the time we could allow the children to access the computer on the desk.

Smart Working

My wife and I both fall into the smart working category, which allows one to overcome the problems created by the need for 'social distancing'. Here, technology played a key role because it allowed us to continue managing meetings and distance teaching. My university equipped itself with a web-portal creating virtual rooms to carry out lessons and exams, department and class meetings, doctoral councils and even student advising sessions. Obviously, this brought out several problems, starting with the management of the exams. This is a highly sensitive issue, particularly felt in the Italian University tradition based on oral exams. Despite being a reliable practice in face-to-face exams, this proved to be weak in the context of the new remote-exam model, especially because of the long time required for the exams to be carried out. To guarantee transparency, each exam requires the involvement of at least two commission members and three students.

In the private sector — for instance, in a multinational — the management of time and resources is linked to different objectives, starting with the use of working-time, including annual holidays. Therefore, my wife and I organized our home spaces to manage my wife's daily meetings (5 hours on average) and my lessons (4 hours on average). Meetings and lessons needed different spaces and could not overlap; moreover, given the limited space in the apartment, it was not always possible to isolate them from the voices of the children and their spatial needs.

A few weeks after the start of the lockdown, the Yverdon-les-Bains hospital was equipped to administer Covid-19 swabs through a drive-in test. However, while ensuring all basic activities, access to health services had been significantly limited (Figure 4). Once I had to go to the general practitioner due to a severe throat and mouth plaque inflammation caused by the increase in meetings, receptions and distance lessons. The appointment was fixed four days after my request.

Exit and Limitations

Having a garden, albeit small, allowed us to carry out outdoor activities, even those that did not take place in this season. We started eating out regularly for lunch and began to cultivate small garden spaces. In a few weeks the children turned the garden lawn into a desert; still, the need to guarantee some physical activity had to be managed, somehow. An appointment with a Youtube channel broadcasting HIIT online lessons was organized for each afternoon. Some

neighbours who did not have a garden and were prevented by the regulation from using public spaces, gyms or the nature reserve, went to the Vaud or Jura hills.

We equipped ourselves for indoor sports. We bought a step for HIIT lessons online; then purchased online a ping-pong table. Over time, however, the children began to climb the plants next to our garden fence to look out: the fence divided the garden from the public road. The climbers managed to communicate with other children and agree on meeting-schedules on mobiles.

Like our neighbours, we tried to purchase food online, but for the first month this was practically impossible because deliveries were either not made due to high demand or, at best, were postponed by a month. So, we went shopping for food once a week. Nevertheless, online shopping went on for other goods; we repeatedly bought clothes, books for the children and what material they needed for homework — paper, ink refills (the latter difficult to find because its demand grew exponentially) and so on.

In addition to shopping at local supermarkets, other practices also had to change (composting, throwing out the garbage). Limits dictated by ‘social distancing’ were stringent from the beginning, even with neighbours — including, for instance, the family with whom we share the garden fence.

Loosening the Lockdown

The Confederation rules aimed at containing the spread of Covid-19 were never as stringent as those in Italy. The lockdown was partially lifted on 5 May, with the opening of some commercial activities, and then from 11 May, with the re-opening of schools. Schools instituted half-classes on alternate days and detailed hygiene and prevention measures. The opening of other activities (for instance, hairdressers) and Municipal buildings (albeit on appointment by e-mail) followed. New rules followed the loosening of restrictions, including the first explicit invitation to use facemasks when unable to guarantee distance.