

Moving to Germany during the Covid-19 Pandemic – Tales of the 2020 Summer & Beginning School Year in Deutschland

By Maureen Kersting

When our family left Delaware County on July 24, 2020, it felt like we were fleeing into the unknown. What would life look like in Germany? Could we truly count on schools and activities for the children, something that had been missing from our lives since March 2020? Soon enough we landed in Frankfurt, then another short flight to Hamburg, a van ride to Kiel, and finally we were home. Our doctor came to our home and swabbed all four of us for Covid19, and within 24 hours we had our negative results. We could start our new lives.

We quickly realized that everyone around us was taking the pandemic seriously, even though the cases per hundred thousand residents was much less than back home in Pennsylvania – Kiel had almost exactly 90% less cases per 100,000 than Delaware County. Our shuttle driver to Kiel had made a partition out of a plastic drop sheet, like what you would use for painting, and duct tape. He cheerfully told us that his wife was high risk for Covid19, and so he had been recently tested. He continued to say that the masks are only for in enclosed areas (shops, restaurants, buses) or when you cannot keep 2 meters apart, and everyone does it. There's signs in every shop to wear a mask, hand sanitizer dispensers as soon as you go into a shop, and either a

security person or a store employee standing there ensuring the number of people allowed is not exceeded and that masks are worn. Some places have little tokens for you to take as you enter the store, and if no tokens are left, then you must queue to enter until a token becomes available. Fortunately, he concluded, there will be a sign as you enter each shop to tell you what their system is. He assured me it would be easy enough to understand. He was right.

Certainly, there are those who forget to wear a mask, or do not wear it properly. However, I have seen it happen multiple times that citizens enforce masks and distancing amongst themselves without it causing an argument, but rather an apology is given from those at fault, and then proper masking and distancing happens. One example of how seriously people are washing their hands: My daughter and I used an employee restroom in a bike shop that had THREE soaps for the workers – for before, during, and after work hand disinfection. There are radio updates as a part of the news about the day's virus numbers, locations, and rough tracing information, all done in an even tone and without political slant. There are also signs in most shop windows, public areas, government buildings, and even at store checkouts about how we wear masks for each other, not for just ourselves. It is a community effort here.

How does this translate to our lives? Some things that are always burdensome, like the paperwork that comes with moving, can feel nearly impossible. Opening a joint account at the bank could not happen without being

angemeldet (registered at the courthouse as a resident of the city), and we could not become *angemeldet* for two weeks after arrival because the city hall had extremely limited hours due to Corona, and this type of paperwork had to be done in person. I still cannot get an appointment at the *Auslandsamt* (the office for international persons) to apply for a visa for similar reasons. Other things are mildly inconvenient, such as queueing in all-weather outside the bakery or the butcher with 2 meters distance between the customers.

The positives, however, vastly outweigh the negatives. Unlike our American school district, here the kids are starting in school for full days. They wear masks to walk in the building, but not for recess or in the classroom. When they returned to school, recess was only with their classmates. Now, three weeks later, recess is at the same time across the entire grade, although each class must stay on separate areas of the large playground. If a kid were to get cold symptoms (including just a runny nose) they must stay out of school until 48 hours after they symptoms end.

As for after-school activities, they are also taking place. The gymnasiums each have a certain number of children allowed inside based on the square meter area of the gym, and the changing rooms have also been assessed similarly. For example, at our daughter's gymnastics group, only 6 masked children can be in the changing room, but then a maximum of 10 children can participate in the gymnasium itself (unmasked). It feels like there has been an application of

careful thought and science behind each Corona-related decision, and furthermore, the thoughts and science behind the decisions have been openly shared. To continue the gymnasium example, we received an email with an Excel-style table showing the area in square meters of each local gymnasium the sports club would usually have access to, the number of participants the area would allow, and the number of club members for each sport, thus including or excluding each gym. This allowed us to see why scheduling problems were happening initially. It still feels like such a relief to see a calm, rational approach being applied to our lives.

Has it been easy all the time? No, certainly not. We definitely, all four of us, mutter "Stupid Corona" with regularity! The kids must remember their backpack, homework, raincoat, bicycle helmet, school snack, water bottle, AND a mask every day. That extra item, the mask, is difficult to remember! The emotional, mental burden of being careful, of being IN a pandemic, persists. And yet the anxiety, the feeling of being ADRIFT in a pandemic, is greatly reduced. I see the children slowly coming back to themselves. I know I am, too.

