

In more-or-less continuous Covid-19 lockdown for nearly a year, **Sabrina Dankel** - a young German woman with close ties to New Zealand - explains why she and others in Europe view Aotearoa with envy:

Germany's pathetic lockdown lyrics

BEFORE Covid-19 reached Germany, I worked as a pastry chef in a high-pressure job with long hours and hard work...then Germany and the rest of the world came to a halt in March 2020 - and so did my life.

I was able to sleep in, enjoy lots of spare time and finally take a rest. It felt good. Germany was determined to battle the virus and I happily stayed at home to do my part.

My hotel employer was confined to 100% reduced working hours, meaning I got to stay at home full-time but get financial short-time compensation.

Like many other Germans, I was positive the dreadful situation would soon be over and by the end of summer I would be able to get back to work. By mid-April 2020, however, I was bored with my new lifestyle and decided to look after my eight-year old nephew, as schools were closed and pupils were forced to do their work from home.

I closely watched what was happening behind the thick walls of the Bundestag, the place of government in Berlin. And one year on, I was confused about where my country was headed.

IN THE midst of a third Covid wave and the prospect of major elections later this year, Germany's pandemic politics seemed out of control. Politicians turned into poets as they invented new well-sounding names for the same annoying thing: lockdown.

When the first wave of Covid infections hit Europe hard in March last year, it was simply called "lockdown" (later "shutdown") and Germany did a good job in dealing with the new pandemic.

With a decent healthcare system based on mandatory insurance and strict quarantine rules, Germany was on a good pathway out of the crisis. Medical masks were short, but Germans took to their sewing machines and made face coverings at home.

Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democrats) called her chief Ministers of the 16 federate states of Germany to regular meetings. They discussed the national and local pandemic situation and imposed restrictions when necessary.



It went well. During that first wave, Germany even accommodated Covid patients from more affected countries such as Italy, France and the Netherlands.

The Government released the Corona Warning app on March 16, 2020. It predicts the user's risk of catching the virus based on the amount of time spent with and physical distance from an infected person who previously entered their positive test result within the app.

Fearing a breach of privacy, rights advocacy groups spoke against a tracing device within the app connected to local health departments. It needed a year and a famous hip-hop band to release another app that can deliver what the official app could not.

German band Die Fantastischen Vier teamed up with Berlin-based company neXenio and Culture4Life and their app, Luca (released in March this year) uses QR codes to check in at public and private places and is connected to local health authorities to make contact tracing easier.

In June 2020, case numbers in Germany fell, but lowered travel restrictions soon resulted in another increase in numbers by the end of summer. German authorities underestimated the risk of a second wave, despite being warned by health experts.

No air filters were installed at schools or workplaces. No plans were made for Covid testing stations. And too little vaccine was pre-ordered, despite having two major vaccine manufacturers, BioNtech and CureVac, based in Germany.

As the 2020 summer holidays ended and travellers flocked back into the country, Covid cases skyrocketed. The end of summer meant the end of freedom for 83 million people in Germany. Office workers were asked to work from home and schools were closed.

A huge problem revealed itself: for years, the German government had failed to promote digitisation. Many school pupils have no access to digital equipment to work on at home. There is no coherent learning software, and fast internet is still inaccessible in some areas. Germany is still waiting for 5G to happen.

IN NOVEMBER, Chancellor Merkel and the chief ministers imposed "lockdown light". It meant further restrictions, but they refrained from calling it "lockdown" as they feared public reaction.

Lockdown light turned into the second lockdown in December 2020. Angela Merkel called on the German public to restrict themselves and to reduce contacts one last time to guarantee a quiet Christmas.

Vaccination for people aged 80 and older was supposed to start at the beginning of 2021, but by the end of January some of the Covid vaccination centres hadn't even opened.

By then, it was clear Germany - along with the European Union - had under-purchased vaccine. While the US and England successfully started their vaccination campaigns, Germany's progress was slow.

Meanwhile, Chancellor Merkerl's influence on decision-making with chief ministers faded. The federal system in Germany allows the 16 federate state chief ministers to implement their own rules and laws in terms of Corona politics, as long as they don't contradicting national standards.

Germany developed into a patchwork of laws, as chief ministers agreed on certain standards at meetings with the Chancellor - and announced otherwise the next day. A new Corona alert level was implemented nationwide. Restrictions were applied as soon as Covid cases exceeded 35 per 100,000 people.

With the elections in the federate states of Rhineland-Palatinate, Baden-Wuerttemberg and Hesse in March 2021, some chief ministers wanting to attract votes started to relax the rules.

The national alert level was raised to 50 again (where it was before) to allow more civil liberties, such as shopping by appointment. Some regions even allowed unrestricted access to all places for people with a negative corona rapid test.

In March, North-Rhine-Westphalia chief minister Armin Laschet suggested imposing yet more restrictions. He called it a “bridge lockdown“ - a lockdown to “build a bridge until we have reached the time when the majority of people are fully vaccinated“.

Chancellor Merkel and chief ministers decided on April 16 to impose a “national emergency break“ that came into effect on April 24 to stop all model testings¹ and reduce the Corona alert levels to 100/100,000 for opening/closing shops and 165 for schools.

Most Germans prefer a strict shutdown of all activities to finally overcome the third wave and get a chance to get their normal lives back.

But while they were waiting for their government representatives to decide, the leading party (Christian Democrats) was fighting a dirty war for days on end to decide whether Armin Laschet or Bavarian chief minister Markus Söder would be their chancellor candidate in the general elections on September 26.

People working in health care had been crying out for help since the beginning of the pandemic. Nursing staff capabilities were maxed out, many of them quitting their jobs because of low pay and hard labour conditions.

But other community sectors were affected as well. Restaurants had been closed for six months and small businesses had run out of credit to support themselves with decreasing numbers of customers.

Meanwhile, Germans listen enviously to reports of New Zealand’s Covid management, where life (to us Germans) seems to be almost back at normal.

A YEAR later, I was still at home, waiting for the pandemic to pass. I still got short-time compensation from my employer, but money has been tight and I took up a side job as a driver for a bakery.

On the weekends, I got up at an ungodly hour to load an e-car with boxes full of bread and buns, then deliver them to the shops. This earned me a little extra money, but more importantly, I finally got something like a work routine back and met people other than my family.

¹ Some regions opened their shops and businesses to people with negative rapid tests. In Germany, they’re called “model regions” and until the “national emergency break” was implemented, they had privileges (in some areas even tourism was allowed)..

Each Monday, school work with my nephew started again and I did my best to teach him German grammar, maths and English vocabulary.

In general, I am a positive person, but this dreadful situation of constant lockdown pulled me down. My main job is on a fix-term contract and in a situation where hotels have been closed for business for six months straight with no opening perspective, I can't be sure whether it will be continued in July. Many of my fellow citizens are in a similar situation.

Besides the shocking number of deaths world-wide, COVID-19 is a major threat to German society. People are increasingly stressed, irritated and inconsiderate. Our social climate is at risk of being poisoned for a long time.

Why Sabrina Dankel knows us so well

I first came to New Zealand in December 2005 for a six-week homestay programme with the German and New Zealand ministries of education. After finishing secondary school (Gymnasium in Germany), I came back in 2008 for a year of work and travel. My host family in Lower Hutt and I stayed in touch (still do today - they visited me in Germany).

During my second stay, I intended to do an internship at a news desk but couldn't find a place. Then early in the year I contacted Whitireia Journalism School in Wellington's Cuba St and head of journalism Jim Tucker invited me to spend a week with them.

He asked me to write something for the school's news website, *Newswire*, so my first story was about New Zealand electoral law compared to the German model. After that first week, he encouraged me to stay on as a guest student.

I continued until I left NZ in June 2009 - only to come back a few weeks later to enrol in Whitireia's one-year Diploma of Journalism course. I graduated in March 2010, passing with distinction. Since I couldn't get a job in New Zealand on my visa, I went back to Germany.

A couple of months later, I joined a news agency in London, specialising in tabloid news for German magazines. One day, I did an interview with Billy Connolly and Emily Blunt, using Teeline shorthand (learned at Whitireia) to take notes. The chief editor insisted on writing the story himself using my notes - but couldn't because he wasn't able to read Teeline (as I was the only fully trained journalist at that agency).

I returned to Germany, disillusioned and with no prospects in journalism. German newspapers didn't offer jobs at that time, especially not to someone who didn't take the traditional route of two years of internships and studies in politics/science/law before applying for a job as a writer.

My brother, an acclaimed chef, suggested I start a job in the food industry, so I took an apprenticeship at a local bakery, spent two years working hard, and once again passed the qualification with distinction.

Then I moved to Munich to work as a pastry cook at a five-star hotel. I kept writing the odd article in my spare time, but spare time was rare, as shifts were often 12-16 hours.

In 2014-2015, I did further job training as a chocolatier and confectioner, and today I'm a pastry chef, the head of the pastry department at a four-star hotel near my hometown, Lauffen, in the south of Germany. I'm waiting for the pandemic to pass so I can go back to work, after staying home for almost a year. And hopefully travel to New Zealand again one day.

Sabine Dankel lives in her hometown, Lauffen am Neckar in the federate state of Baden-Wuerttemberg