

Covidian*

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By Kegham Balian and Nanar Nakashian

uhan virus, pandemic, lockdowns; which came first, the hand sanitiser or the toilet paper? Paradox. Then again,

we are living in antiminous times in which misinformation and disinformation are running riot.

Various studies have focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of those most vulnerable, the children. Among them was a study conducted by Khan et al. (2020), “The Mental Health Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic Across Different Cohorts” that demonstrated that “Spacial distancing, self-isolation, quarantine, social and economic, and misinformation (particularly on social media) are among the major contributing factors towards unusual sadness, fear, frustration, feelings of helplessness, loneliness and nervousness.”

While we acknowledge that this paper is insightful, we could also inundate this essay with opposing studies. Supportive studies, tangential studies – studies, studies, studies. “A study shows” or “According to science” have become so prevalent on our newsfeeds that most of us, through no fault of our own, don’t have the time to read or assess them: duration? sample size? relevance? possibility of media-manipulated data? No one has the time! A study shows (damn it!) that eight out of ten people merely read the headlines.

In order to associate a study, any study, with the Armenian Quarter – particularly the convent – of Jerusalem, would be akin to handing a dapper suit (possibly navy, no stripes, with a matching pair of mahogany-brown shoes, a sky-blue shirt, and an emerald green silk tie for contrast) to a pronouncedly proud nudist waltzing around Bab-il-Khaleel. It might fit, but the discomfort would irk even the

savviest of “Shopping! shopping!” chanting surrounding shop-owners. The extravagance of such a scenario might border on the fantastical, but so too is the reality of Jerusalemite Armenians who live within the microcosmic enclave that is the St. James Convent: insulated yet connected, free yet bound.

Because external access to the inner social-workings of our community is very limited, nigh impossible, we decided that an internal and more personal, rather than an evidence-based clinical approach, was the way to go. Talking face-to-face was the

the proto-intifada that is currently ongoing. The walls of the convent might create a physical barrier to the outside world, but the internet is borderless. And with the ubiquitous usage of social media and smart phones – usage feels like the wrong word; we might as well classify phones as appendages and add them to anatomy classes – a cascading collective trauma weighed down on all Armenians within the diaspora, arguably more so in Jerusalem: pandemic, lockdowns, a war, and another war, first delocalized then local.

■ Inside the Armenian Convent in Jerusalem. Photo by Vince Kahkejian.



solution. Not texting, Zooming, Face-Timing, beep, boop, nor bap. Actual, in person, talking.

A series of interviews with ages that range from 16 to 19 and a simple premise: how did the pandemic affect you?

To contextualize the setting, the interviews were conducted post-lockdowns, post-Artsakh war, amidst

How can we go to Armenia to help? We can’t: lockdown. Click, “send money”!

How can we work? We can’t: lockdown. Zoom, if you can!

How can we study? We can’t: lockdown. Zoom, if you can!

How can we breathe? We can’t: double curfew. Volleyball! Volleyball!



■ Volleyball: a daily form of release for Jerusalemite Armenians within the walls of the St. James Convent.

dwindling community such as our own. Add a national Armenian cataclysm, a local existential crisis, and a big gate to tuna-can a population, and please do tell which inherent risk seems more dangerous?

In terms of education, a resounding revulsion was expressed by the current/former students vis-a-vis the direction the Sts. Tarkmanchatz School has taken under the patronage of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Granted, these weren't the best of times to reinforce pedagogy, given that the worldwide introduction of "virtual teaching" effectively stifled any discipline-based teaching. Add the bouleversement of routine, morning and night effaced, and you have the perfect recipe for apathy.

"We would wake up five minutes before class, exhausted, and join the (virtual) session."

Ambition? Aspiration? Guidance? Null. Some of the harder-working students took it upon themselves to

"If it weren't for volleyball, I would've lost my mind."

"Volleyball was the only reason I left the house."

"Volleyball saved us."

Grand statements by nearly all the interviewees. You might be wondering how exactly could they leave their homes, let alone play sports during lockdown? Context, again: at the entrance of the convent is a gate that is normally shut come midnight; normally. During the lockdowns, the curfew was moved to 8 pm. In a country, and indeed world, where mobility came to an abrupt halt, a curfew within a curfew, led to release. The daily activity of playing volleyball in the evenings became a source of rejuvenation. Poetically nestled between the Calouste Gulbenkian Library and the St. James Armenian Printing House, on the grounds of the Armenian Youth Society, volleyball

became an agora of hope in a time of misery, a mesh of generations sprung out of necessity.

"We talked about everything. Artsakh, school, corona. We made new friends and reconnected with old ones too."

"Talking with the older generation gave us perspective, and we asked them questions about their prospects for the future, which we wouldn't have been able to do had there not been volleyball."

Was there an inherent risk due to this behavior? Yes.

Was there an inherent risk due to the lockdowns? Yes.

Since the start of the pandemic and its subsequent lockdowns, there has been an increase in teen suicides, substance abuse, alcoholism, and delinquency, a study shows... Again, a global estimate that cannot be tied to the peculiarities of a small,

research different universities (Cyprus, Canada, Jerusalem) or other career paths (tourism, jewelry-making); whilst others retreated into their respective hobbies that ranged from online gaming to setting up their own online store. Forget doctor-lawyer-engineer-accountant, the four horsemen of parental approval.

When the restrictions were loosened and a semblance of normality resumed, students and teachers were welcomed into a draconian premise, with surveillance, both visual and auditory, introduced in all the classrooms, the teacher's lounge, and even the lavatories, which added to the collective malaise.

Our school isn't your typical institution packed with 2000 (and more) students, it is a small communal entity which ought to reinforce Armenian history and Western Armenian language and literature with a balanced but equally important approach to STEM subjects and related fields. Our cultural survival hinges on this pedagogical adaptability.

"I've wanted to be a heart doctor, a cardiologist, ever since I was a child. But the scientific curriculum of the sixth to the tenth grades has been reduced, which makes me wonder whether I can embark on this career."

"When I have children, I won't bring them here, for sure!"

In Armenian, the word for caring is *hokal*, which literally means "to give soul." Now, maybe that's too much to ask, when there is a visible cleavage between clergy and civilians. Maybe, the welfare-state nature of day-to-day proceedings has bred complacency, maybe we're both wrong. But one solution, however simple, is tragically within reach yet bereft of much needed common sense: dialogue.



■ Main entrance hallway of the Armenian Convent. Photo by Neshan Balian.

To paraphrase Hagop Oshagan, the Armenian literary giant who lived in Jerusalem yet today is unbeknownst to Non-Armenians and Armenians alike (shamefully): “The problem with our Armenian consciousness is that every Armenian feels entitled.”

A recourse in thought from thoughts of ordure, for the sake of our children. Then, and only then, we might still be here tomorrow.

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* Most Armenian family names end with the suffix *ian*; the title is a play on words, referring to COVID and Jerusalemite Armenians.



Vankin Tur - the convent gate that closes shut come midnight. Photo by Neshan Balian.