

Dr. Illya Szilak is a board certified internist and infectious disease doctor at Rikers Island Jail in New York City. Dr. Szilak has provided medical care to people incarcerated at Rikers for over three years, and she is also an award-winning writer and filmmaker whose most recent work, "Queerskins," was awarded a Peabody Futures of Media Award in 2019. In partnership with the John Howard Association of Illinois, Dr. Szilak is contributing weekly blog posts to JHA's website recounting her frontline observations as a doctor treating people incarcerated during the coronavirus pandemic. Reflections from inside correctional settings are essential; right now while external oversight is precluded from shedding light on how facilities are operating and people inside are faring, they are vital.

Past blog posts by Dr. Szilak can also be found online at "Rikers Journal," <https://rikerssite.wordpress.com/about/>.

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## SECURITY

A pandemic is like a horror movie in slow motion. NYC has been on lockdown for a week. In Williamsburg, where I live, I rarely hear human voices outside my window. Mostly, I hear birds and ambulance sirens. I wonder if there are more of either right now, or if I just haven't had time to notice. I have worked as a physician at Rikers for the past three and a half years. I am not some starry-eyed ingénue with expectations that I will change the world. Even so, I drove to Rikers yesterday armed with a magical thought that somehow the urgency of the time would have transformed the institution into something it has never been--reasonable. But, it has only ever been a pagan symbol-- the thickness of the walls, the barbed wire act as a talisman against chaos, cruel indifference, and unsanctioned violence, both manmade and natural, which society purports to order and put in its place. Today, however, things actually are different, at least on the surface. I skitter from my car to the security trailer in the pouring rain, keeping my head down to prevent my blue paper surgical mask from getting wet. The woman officer is pretty, young, and noticeably cheerful. She greets me from behind a Plexiglas window. She is not wearing a mask. She is wearing purple disposable gloves. I apologize for my soggy papers. After writing my name and license number in her big book, she wishes me a safe tour, and passes the laminated Gate 1 parking pass into the drawer.

I run to my car. I reflect that I should probably take down my mask as I drive through the security checkpoints. I feel a little like an old time bank robber with it on. I decide it is better not to make trouble. This is the nature of institutions. They make you preemptively assume you will be punished if you deviate from the rules. I take down my mask to my chin as I drive through. The officer in the second check point is sporting an N-95 --the mask that we health care workers apparently don't need anymore, unless we are doing a bronchoscopy on an infected patient, i.e. never. I'm glad for him. However he has managed to procure one, it is gold.

I am befuddled a little coming into the building. There are new security procedures. I walk in the rain around the side of the jail to the visitor's entrance where a perky civilian woman, who looks like an intern, asks with too much cheer if I have had cough, fever, or sore throat. I say "no" and she has me sign a book with my name, date and time. Then, I put my bag and coat through security. My whole body cringes. It is a conveyor belt for coronavirus. I sigh. There is nothing I can do. I can already see that attempts at social distancing and disinfection are impossible here.

The officer is very nice and helpful. This is unusual for jail. Officers generally have their defenses up, until they get to know you. It occurs to me later, that the gentleness is a result of simply being exhausted. None of us has the energy for vigilance. We are all tired waiting, watching, trying to protect ourselves against this ubiquitous invisible enemy. And, for the first time, all of us: officers, civilian staff and inmates are in this together, all dependent on each other to be careful. The officer kindly leads me through labyrinthine corridors to the front of the building where I usually enter. I go out as if I am leaving, and come back in again. I take off my medical gloves and put my finger on the keypad to try to clock in. I try five times on each of the machines, but it won't recognize me. I look at my wrinkled forefinger and wonder if you can wash your hands enough to erase your fingerprint. Finally, I give up. I exchange my ID, and put my stuff through the conveyor belt again. I try to complain about the risk of infection doing this twice, but the captain standing in a group of three officers shoulder to shoulder just shrugs. There is nothing to do.

All the officers are wearing masks and medical gloves. This is new. Are these doing anything? I wonder. There is no way to keep myself sanitary. To some extent, these items are just magical amulets to ward off evil. Even so, I reach into my coat pocket and put on a fresh pair of gloves.