



## Homeschool Leader Flees Swedish Persecution

As the government intensifies its persecution of homeschoolers in Sweden, the president of the Swedish Association for Home Education (ROHUS) has finally been forced into exile with his family in neighboring Finland. The battle for human rights and homeschooling in the Scandinavian kingdom, however, is far from over.



The Swedish Parliament [passed a draconian law](#) in 2010 purporting to ban homeschooling, all school curriculums except the Swedish government's, and all alternative education nationwide. Despite a global outcry, the prohibition went into effect last year. Dozens of families were left wondering what fate might await them. But so far, the [official persecution campaign](#) has backfired in a stunning way.

After fighting a valiant years-long battle for the right to homeschool in his native land, ROHUS chief Jonas Himmelstrand (above left) — probably the most prominent advocate for homeschooling in Scandinavia — decided it was time to join [more than a dozen families that have already fled](#). The persecution was only getting worse, and there was not much cause for optimism about the immediate future.

Until recently, Himmelstrand still held on to some hope. He had decided to stay and keep fighting — at least until the situation deteriorated further. Late last year, however, that time came. It had finally become intolerable.

Local school officials reported the Himmelstrand family to the social services in November when their 7-year-old son did not show up for mandatory schooling. Jonas Himmelstrand — like many other homeschoolers in Sweden — was forced to meet with local “social” officials to explain himself.

“It was just harassment,” he said. “But we were not going to take any chances with anything.... You never know with Swedish social authorities. You never know.”

Another homeschooling family, the Johanssons, was [viciously ripped apart by the authorities in 2009 over the issue of home education](#) as they attempted to leave for India. The traumatic episode still haunts Swedish homeschoolers and is always in the back of their minds when considering their options.

Himmelstrand went to the social services meeting alone — without his son — after making sure that his family was safe on the Aland Islands in Finland. He asked the social services if they would guarantee that his family could remain in Sweden safely. They said no, matter-of-factly stating that to homeschool safely, the family would probably have to leave country.

So they did.

There were huge fines involved, too. Around Christmas, the family received a letter explaining that the authorities had decided to impose a fine of about \$26,000 - \$13,000 per parent. “At that point we kind of felt like, are these people crazy?” Himmelstrand told *The New American* in a telephone interview. “Don’t they realize that would ruin our family?”

The Himmelstrands responded with a strongly worded letter asking officials to clarify whether they



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truly intended to destroy an innocent family based on such a controversial political principle. The family also warned authorities that they would leave as exiles before allowing themselves to be destroyed by the punitive fines.

Incredibly, the local government responded with a letter imposing yet another fine. And that, Himmelstrand said, was the last straw. The family moved promptly thereafter, not making the news public until everyone was safely beyond the grasp of Swedish officials. Himmelstrand did not want to wait around to find out what the local government's next move might be, he explained.

"They've given us a very clear reason to leave the country — they've given us a very strong message," Himmelstrand explained. "It's shameful for Sweden. It's really shameful for Sweden."

Still, he has mixed feelings about having to move to the Aland Islands. For one, the family will hardly be alone in exile. At least a quarter of all Swedish homeschooling families have already fled the nation — [searching for educational freedom in Canada and New Zealand, as well as other Nordic nations](#).

More than a few of those exiles now live on the Aland Islands in the Baltic Sea, Himmelstrand's new home. Despite being under Finnish jurisdiction — which permits homeschooling, like virtually every other Western nation — the local population speaks Swedish.

"On the one hand, it's extremely humiliating to be forced to leave your country," Himmelstrand said, noting that he had to leave his band, his home, his friends, and his elderly mother in Sweden. His wife also had to leave her violin pupils, and the children left behind numerous extra-curricular activities such as dancing and theater.

"That's the painful thing," Himmelstrand noted. "It makes me really angry that a country calling itself democratic can treat its people that way."

He has written to countless officials, and so far, there has been little in the way of an official response. "It's like, do these people have a heart? Don't they realize they're dealing with human beings? It really hurts," he said.

But there is a positive side to exile, too. The Himmelstrands have now joined an active homeschooling community on the Aland Islands — in fact, half of ROHUS' board now lives there in exile. The Finnish islands also have slightly lower taxes and a better environment for private enterprise. Plus, Sweden is only a short distance away.

"We're doing fine, we feel safe now, and I can tell you it's a big relief," Himmelstrand said. After spending a whole day in the Aland Islands, he really began to realize how much pressure his family had lived under for more than three years. "There are many nice things about it, and we're not going to suffer there."

Despite the tactical retreat made by fearful Swedish homeschoolers, the battle against Swedish persecution will go on, Himmelstrand explained. "ROHUS is going to survive — it's going to survive very well — because now we've got almost half of the board on the Aland Islands," he said, noting that board members live closer to each other than before and feel appreciated on their new island home. And with the immediate threats to families' security out of the way, the efforts to restore educational liberty in Sweden will continue to grow.

In addition to leading ROHUS, Himmelstrand has been at the forefront of drawing international scrutiny to the situation in Sweden. He has spoken about the issues at conferences around the world, also serving as the founder of the family-policy oriented think tank, Mireja Institute, and working as the



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family research expert for the Swedish pro-family organization Haro. He is the chairman of the committee organizing the world's first global home education conference, too.

And efforts to expose the injustice to the world will be ramped up from the Aland Islands, he said. "We're not stopping anything, we're just getting ourselves safe so that we can get on with the job and not have to worry about our families," Himmelstrand explained, sounding optimistic.

Of course, ROHUS and Himmelstrand are not alone in the battle either. A global coalition of human rights activists and homeschooling groups has been fighting the persecution for years. The U.S.-based Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), for example, is actively working with the beleaguered Swedes.

"No person in a democratic country should have to choose between their homeland and homeschooling," HSLDA Director of International Affairs Michael Donnelly told *The New American*. "Swedish policy makers and government officials should be ashamed that they are acting in a way to create such fear that families are emigrating from the country for fear of persecution."

According to Donnelly, who has been instrumental in standing up for persecuted Swedish homeschoolers, Sweden's move "towards totalitarianism in education" is a very troubling development — especially for what many still consider to be a "free" Western nation. "Sweden's behavior shows that it cares more about controlling its citizens than protecting their fundamental human rights," he explained.

But Swedish homeschoolers — like homeschooling families anywhere — will not give up. Despite the tragic stories coming out of Sweden, the government's campaign to eradicate home education has backfired in a startling way: Not a single home-schooled child has been enrolled long-term in a government school because of the new ban.

"Homeschoolers all over the world have shown that their conviction to do what is best for their children unshakeable," Donnelly explained. "Parents who have a true conviction that home education is what is best for their children will follow that conviction no matter what — even if they have to emigrate."

And in Sweden, the facts show that to be true. Instead of getting more children enrolled in state schools — which critics have [lambasted](#) in recent years over the controversial content of the government's curriculum — the persecution has created unprecedented interest in homeschooling in Sweden while exposing the government to a tsunami of international criticism.

"There was one family that enrolled their child in school in spring because the government was so heavy on them, but then they moved to Denmark," said ROHUS chief Himmelstrand. "I have not heard of any family whose children are going to school because of the new school law."

Some commentators have even seized on the issue of persecution to call for structural reforms such as a true Constitution that protects individual rights in Sweden. The Nordic kingdom — which prides itself on its reputation — has also attracted fierce global condemnation for its half-baked campaign to abolish homeschooling and alternative education. Such schemes have not been attempted in a Western nation since Hitler's Nazi Germany tried to eradicate home education.

Of course, even before home education [officially became "illegal"](#) in Sweden, it was severely restricted. And when parents attempted to educate their children without government permission, Swedish authorities often responded with brute force.

The now-infamous case of Domenic Johansson — [abducted by the government](#) when he was seven



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because his parents decided to homeschool — showed the world the lengths to which Swedish officials were willing to go in their quest to quash alternative education. The Johanssons are [still](#) in the [spotlight](#) as [authorities](#) have so far [refused to reunite the family](#).

But despite the government's efforts and all the hardship homeschoolers have been forced to endure, the campaign to ensure that all Swedish children are educated according to political dictates failed. Miserably. Himmelstrand's exile is only the most recent example.

"I'm sure they believed that if they just tell us it's illegal, we'll do it [give in]," Himmelstrand explained. "But they did not understand at all — in any way — the power behind homeschooling parents. They miscalculated completely because they never tried to understand the reasons why we were doing it."

Some politicians in Sweden have responded to the criticism and civil disobedience with demands for intensified persecution. Lotta Edholm with the "Liberal" Party, for instance, even wrote a piece for a major newspaper recently [calling for changes in the law to facilitate further state abductions](#) of homeschooled children.

But some political leaders have started to realize the barbarity of what is going on. "I do not understand why homeschooling cannot work in Sweden and why people are so afraid that parents will take power into their own hands," [noted](#) Annelie Enochson, a Member of Parliament with the Christian Democrats, pointing out that even the UN recognizes the right to homeschool. "Where is Sweden going?"

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