



Homeschoolers Flee Persecution in Germany and Sweden

BERLIN — Two leaders in the European home education movement, a father from Sweden and a German mother, drew tears from the audience as they told a packed conference room about life in exile and the heart-rending decision to flee abroad. While each of their stories was unique, both parents were forced to escape from their homelands due to relentless government persecution when they refused to stop homeschooling.



**Global
Home Education
Conference 2012**

The presentations were made during a Friday workshop at the first-ever [Global Home Education Conference](#) (GHEC), held in Berlin, Germany, bringing together around 200 homeschooling leaders, policy makers, parents, human rights activists, and pro-family forces from every corner of the world. Meeting here this weekend, they say the plan is to join forces in the battle to protect the right of parents to direct the education and upbringing of children.

Today, parental rights over the education of children are almost universally recognized. Even the controversial United Nations' so-called "[Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)" concedes that "parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children," as more than a few activists at the conference have pointed out. But under certain totalitarian regimes, as well as in [Sweden](#) and [Germany](#), that is not always the case.

Jonas Himmelstrand, the chairman of the GHEC, is the president of the Swedish Home Education Association (ROHUS). He also lives in exile, having fled to Finland as a "homeschooling refugee" after the Uppsala municipality adopted a restrictive view on homeschooling — a process that began even before the national government passed a law purporting to ban home education in 2010.

As *The New American* [reported](#) earlier this year, Himmelstrand was forced to flee from Sweden when officials threatened his family with massive fines and potentially even retaliation by social services. There finally came a point where the pressure became too much to bear.

"We cannot live with the fear of the threat that our children will be taken away," Himmelstrand told GHEC attendees, explaining his decision to escape from Sweden after the family received a letter from social authorities calling the parents and child to a meeting. "The moment we got that letter, we knew the move was close."

After moving to the Swedish-speaking Aland Islands in Finland and leaving the vicious persecution behind, his homeschooled kids are doing great, Himmelstrand explained, saying it was a huge relief. When the head of a Finnish government education organization and residents of his new island home welcomed the family to Finland, "I nearly had tears in my eyes," he said, adding that they are referred to as "Swedish school refugees." Conference attendees sought to keep their own tears in, but not all succeeded.

At least a dozen other families Himmelstrand knows personally have already fled abroad, too, he said. Many of them, including other members of the ROHUS board, now live on the semi-autonomous Finnish



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on November 3, 2012

Aland Islands as well. Still, some brave homeschooling families have decided to risk the fines and even the threat of having their children seized to stay in Sweden and defy the ban — for now at least.

The situation in Germany is similar: Many persecuted homeschooling families have already escaped abroad, but some have not left yet for various reasons. Himmelstrand had some advice for the victims of the persecution who have not thus far fled to more liberty-minded countries. He told the 50 or so workshop attendees to plan beforehand, decide what the final line in the sand is, and make escape plans to be kept between the parents. If and when the line is crossed, act on the plan and run.

Before closing, Himmelstrand also mentioned a recent [appeals court victory by a Jewish homeschooling family in the Swedish city of Gothenburg](#). Unfortunately for that family as well as for other homeschoolers and advocates of religious freedom in Sweden, however, authorities decided this week to appeal to the Supreme Administrative Court in an effort to prevent the Rabbi and his wife from educating their four children.

“If the Supreme Administrative Court agrees with this permission, that’s going to create a conflict within Sweden where at least the politicians are going to have to start thinking about it,” Himmelstrand explained, careful not to sound too optimistic. “If not, we’re back to square one.”

While the Jewish family’s victory was celebrated by homeschooling advocates and Jews all over the world, in Sweden, politicians have been fuming. In recent days, for example, the state-run and government-subsidized Swedish media unleashed a series of screeds against the family, its religious beliefs, homeschooling, freedom of religion, and more.

“The critical views that some top Swedish politicians express about the victory of the Jewish family is about more than only homeschooling,” Himmelstrand told *The New American* after the session. “It is about the generally hostile view on family in Sweden, and families choosing their own way of life.”

Also at the workshop on homeschooling in exile was Dagmar Neubronner, a German home educator and civil rights activist who became the face of the secular home-education movement in Germany’s press. When she took the microphone and began talking, it took her a few moments to stop sobbing. But her story of standing up for her children and their education despite having to flee her homeland clearly inspired the attendees.

After another German family lost a key court battle, Neubronner’s family finally left Germany in 2008, largely to avoid crippling fines and the possible loss of custody over her children. The family now lives just across the border in France, she sobbed, explaining how hard it is for a person to be forced to leave their own country.

“Once you’re in a new country, with a new language and a new culture, you realize how big the sacrifice is,” Neubronner said. “We risked everything we could risk — fines, jail. But we left at the moment where we couldn’t be sure about keeping custody of the children.... My very first responsibility as a mother is for the well-being of my children — not any political goal. I can fight for political goals until it comes to the point where I can’t assure the well-being of my children.”

Fortunately for persecuted homeschooling families, it is possible to legally homeschool in all of the countries bordering Germany — some families have even registered in neighboring nations while still spending much of the time in their homeland. Among the primary refuges for German homeschooling refugees, she said, are Austria, Switzerland, France, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Poland, Belgium, Denmark, and Sweden — at least before the Swedish Parliament passed its own draconian prohibition.



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Some exiles even fled to Canada and the United States, where a U.S. immigration judge slammed the German government persecution when granting a family asylum. “We can’t expect every country to follow our Constitution. The world might be a better place if it did. However, the rights being violated here are basic human rights that no country has a right to violate,” [explained](#) federal U.S. Judge Lawrence Burman in his decision.

With the wave of exiles continuing to grow, authorities in places such as Austria are starting to get nervous. At the same time, homeschooling families in those countries — especially in Austria and some Swiss cantons — are also expressing fear about the extra scrutiny placed on them due to the growing tide of German home educators fleeing across the border.

After the talk about home education in exile, two persecuted homeschooling parents in the audience also spoke out briefly about their own situations. One father explained how he was forced to flee to Switzerland from Germany a day before officials were planning to seize his daughter. Following his comments, a mother who fled to Italy with her family said the “government is being so irrational,” brutally seeking to quash homeschooling even when it clearly works so well.

“It reminds me of the situation faced by other refugees throughout history,” Neubronner, the German homeschooling leader living in France, said of the hesitation of nearby countries and homeschooling advocates to fully accept the fleeing homeschoolers with wide-open arms. “It is very important that we connect with each other, and don’t lose our loyalty to each other, and not split into groups. This is very, very important.” The global home education movement must emphasize what it has in common and support its persecuted members, she concluded.

Opponents of educational freedom and the human rights of parents and families never argue on facts and logic because they know homeschoolers will win, Neubronner added. The key to securing the right to home education, then, is not so much government and policy, but changing public opinion in hostile countries. That way, local authorities — who often fear trouble with higher-level officials — would feel more comfortable coming up with solutions other than persecution, helping to accommodate homeschoolers.

“We are just pioneers — pioneers get dirty, get in the mud,” she said, noting that the explosion in homeschooling around the world, while wildly successful as an educational strategy, was a relatively recent phenomenon. Neubronner concluded by urging fellow persecuted homeschoolers and leaders from around the world not to fear, but rather prepare.

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