

Home-school Germans flee to UK

A 1938 law designed to ensure state control of all children has provoked a family exodus to Britain

by Charlie Francis-Pape
and Allan Hall Berlin

FAMILIES ARE fleeing to the UK from Germany to escape a law introduced by Hitler that could lead to their children being taken into care if educated at home. One father, who arrived in Britain with his wife and five children last month, has told *The Observer* that his family had no choice after being warned that their children would be taken into foster care unless they enrolled them at local schools. Another, who fled in October, said he believed the 70-year-old law was creating hundreds of refugees and forcing families into hiding to protect their children.

Home-schooling has been illegal in Germany since it was outlawed in 1938. Hitler wanted the Nazi state to have complete control of young minds. Today there are rare exemptions, such as for children suffering serious illnesses or psychological problems. Legal attempts through the courts – including the European Court of Human Rights – have so far failed to overturn the ban.

Klaus Landahl, 41, who moved in January from the Black Forest in Germany to the Isle of Wight with his wife, Kathrin, 39, said they had no option but to leave their home, friends and belongings in order to educate their five children, aged between three and 12, legally and without fear. 'It feels like persecution,' he said. 'We had to get to safety to protect our family. We can never go back. If we do, our children will be removed,

as the German government says they are the property of the state now.'

The family now live in Shanklin, surviving off savings while Landahl seeks work to support them. His wife said they chose home-schooling to spare their children from bullying and to allow them to focus on their individual interests. 'In school in Germany they expect you to be like everybody else; you cannot be different,' she said. 'If you don't have the correct clothes, like Nike and Adidas, or if you wear the wrong colour, other children will not accept you.'

Jonathan Skeet, who is British-born, said that he, his wife and five children, aged between two and 11, were driven from Lüdenscheid after the authorities froze their bank account, removed money from it and confiscated their car. The former aid worker fled in October and chose the Isle of Wight because of its large home-education network. In Germany, he said, the family were blackmailed and threatened with the loss of their children in an attempt to force them back into mainstream school education.

'It was crippling,' he said. 'When we lived in Germany we wanted to live a very inconspicuous and quiet life. But instead we ended up in direct confrontation with a very powerful state.'

The 43-year-old nursing home worker said they wanted to home-school because they were worried about the state of the Ger-



The Landahls, above, are educating their children in Shanklin on the Isle of Wight after rebelling against a schooling law introduced by Hitler.
Main photograph by Andrew Hasson



man education system. 'We were concerned that the atmosphere in schools in Germany had become very rough and ready. We thought our children were too young to deal with that.'

About 800 families are believed to educate their children at home illegally. Stephanie Edel, who runs the Schulbildung in Familieninitiative, a German organisation that aims to support those who educate at home, said that last year some 78 home-schooled children fled Germany with their parents. 'It is very dangerous to home-educate here,' she said. 'Home-educators have to learn to expect anything and have to be ready to leave overnight.'

In 2006 the UN sent a special rapporteur to assess Germany's education system. He reported

that necessary measures should be adopted to uphold parents' rights to educate children at home where necessary and appropriate.

Last year, in an extreme example, 15-year-old Melissa Busekros was removed from her family. Her mother, Gudrun, said more than 15 policemen took her to a psychiatric unit for psychological tests. After refusing to be tested, Melissa was placed in a foster home. She escaped on her 16th birthday and has since been left alone by the authorities.

Her mother said: 'All of the supposed independent experts are paid by the government, so they say what the social workers tell them to say in court.'

Both domestic and EU courts have ruled in the German state's favour on numerous occasions in recent years.