

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

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Internal Revenue Disservice

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Seeking Refuge

The Romeike family is appealing a unique case to the U.S. Supreme Court.

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LAND OF OPPORTUNITY? The Romeike family have faced recent setbacks in their effort to stay in the United States. But they remain upbeat as they appeal their case to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Challenging Lessons

As public support swells for a homeschooling family from Germany, pressure on the federal government is mounting.

by Matt Kaufman

For you, little time has passed since you read about the Romeikes, the Christian family that came to the United States because homeschooling is banned in their native Germany (“Modern-Day Pilgrims,” June/July *Citizen*).

But for them, a lot has happened since then.

To recap: Uwe and Hannalore Romeike (pronounced oo-vay and hah-nuh-lore ro-my-kuh), along

with their seven children, have waged an extended legal struggle with the Obama administration, which seeks to deport them despite evidence that they faced persecution in Germany—where homeschooling is punishable by heavy fines, jail and loss of child custody.

Aided by the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), the Romeikes have won some battles and lost others. In April, they ar-

gued their case before a three-judge panel of the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals—the last stop before the Supreme Court. The panel was expected to study the case carefully and at length, then to issue a ruling much later, probably next year.

Instead, a mere three weeks later, the panel denied the Romeikes’ appeal and sided with the Obama administration. Unanimously.

No one on Team Romeike despaired, though—least of all the family.

“We were disappointed, of course,” Uwe Romeike told *Citizen*. “But the whole time we were very calm and trusted the Lord. We knew God was still in control.”

The ruling had so many gaps that it begged to be challenged, said HSLDA Founder and Chairman Michael Farris, who argued the case.

“The panel ignored the evidence of religious persecution,” he told *Citizen*. “We consistently pointed out that Germany had repeatedly, explicitly stated its purpose for banning homeschooling: to crack down on religious people who might become a ‘parallel society.’ But the panel basically shrugged and said, ‘They’re just enforcing a mandatory-education law.’”

So after the full 6th Circuit refused in mid-July to rehear the case, Farris made it clear that he’ll take this decision all the way to the top.

“This is not over yet,” he said. “We are taking this case to the Supreme Court because we firmly believe this family deserves the freedom this country was founded on. We are hopeful that the Supreme Court will see what the original immigration judge saw: that this family and other religious homeschoolers in Germany are being persecuted for what they believe is the right way to raise their children.”

But whatever happens in the

For the Sake of the Children



FAMILY TRADITION: The Romeike children, including Daniel (16), share their music-teacher parents' knack for playing the piano. The family has seven kids.

When Uwe and Hannalore Romeike started their homeschooling journey in 2006, it was for the sake of their children—especially the school-age ones at the time, Daniel and Lydia, who faced disruptive and bullying classmates, as well as teachings that conflicted with the family's Christian faith.

When they came to the United States in 2008, that too, was for the sake of the children.

So how are the children—all seven of them, with the birth of daughter Rebecca in June—doing now?

They got off to a great start, according to father Uwe—aided, in no small part, by the network of homeschooling families in Morristown, Tenn.

"For the children, adjusting was quite easy," he said. "They made many friends within a few weeks. It was an adventure for them."

And the oldest children—who remember their days in German public school—are especially grateful for their new life.

"I learn better at home," Daniel, now 16, told *Citizen*. "There's more flexibility, more time with people older than me, not just kids my own age. And I can study the Bible, learn a Christian viewpoint."

Lydia, 15, also appreciates the flexible schedules and the chance to study without distraction from peers—and with the soothing sounds of classical music in her ear.

"I like living here and it's a

beautiful country," she told *Citizen*, while admitting that the English language, with its inconsistent rules, can be challenging. "I still have to work on that sometimes," she said—though both she and her brother speak the language clearly, with only light accents.

Both, too, are grateful for all their parents have done—and are doing—to give them this new life.

"They're very concerned about our education and beliefs," Daniel said. "I'm very thankful they're teaching us from the Bible, especially when we're studying science."



Lydia Romeike (15) is thankful for the sacrifices her parents have made for their children.

"I can really see that they're doing their best for us," Lydia said. "Leaving their country and their family, learning a new language—it makes me feel very special."

— Matt Kaufman

courts, the cavalry may be coming in Congress—where a growing number of legislators are taking an interest in the Romeikes' plight.

In May, 27 members of the U.S. House of Representatives urged Attorney General Eric Holder to grant asylum to the family—adding their voices to 127,000-plus Americans who have signed a petition on the White House website.

“A decision to deny the Romeikes the opportunity to educate their children freely is a decision to abandon our commitment to freedom,” Rep. Marlin Stutzman, R-Ind., wrote in a letter to Holder. “Doing so would put America alongside those countries that believe children belong to the community or state. ... The Romeike family should find a welcoming home in the United States.”

And in July, Rep. Daniel Webster, R-Fla., introduced legislation that would recognize persecution of homeschoolers as grounds for seeking political asylum in the U.S.

“This is an issue of liberty,” Webster told *Citizen*. “We have a right to raise our children as we see fit. It’s a fundamental human right, and we ought to recognize that.”

Land of the Not-so-Free

The principle proclaimed by Webster has deep roots in American history and has been upheld by the Supreme Court. In *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925), the Court wrote:

The fundamental theory of liberty upon which all governments in this Union repose excludes any general power of the State to standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public teachers only. The child is not the mere creature of the State; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations.

Similar statements can be found in international law. The United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights, for example, says parents have a “prior right” over government to direct their children’s education.

In Germany, however, it’s a different story.

There, homeschooling is legal only if its purpose is not religious or philosophical—if, for example, parents’ jobs require the family to travel. But the highest judicial body, the Federal Constitutional Court, has ruled twice in the past decade that the government may ban homeschooling because it could lead to “religious or philosophical parallel societies.”

“The idea is that pluralism is dangerous—even though they invoke pluralism in defense of the policy,” Michael Donnelly, HSLDA’s director of international relations, told *Citizen*.

“They call it ‘lived tolerance.’ But what they mean is that people don’t have the right to be outside the mainstream. They must be forcibly integrated together—both for society’s sake and for their own.

“When you peel back their reasoning, you get this paternalistic, state-centric view of society. They say the state has the ‘superior role’ to parents in shaping children’s values.”

It was rulings like these that led HSLDA to seek a political-asylum case to highlight the German system’s injustice.

“German courts were part of the problem, and legislatures respond to public pressure,” Donnelly said. “There weren’t enough German homeschoolers to do that—only a few hundred—and the media painted them as fundamentalist nuts or granola-chomping hippies.”

The Romeike case started to change all that.

“There’s been lots of publicity

in Germany,” Donnelly said. “A lot of attention was negative at first, but documentaries and interviews across the country began a lot of conversations.”

Donnelly said it’s a steep uphill climb in Germany’s legislature, and he won’t predict eventual success. But he noted that homeschooling in America was a tiny movement once, too.

“Now there are some German legislators saying, ‘We’ve got to find a way to allow for this somehow.’ Norbert Blum”—who was minister for labor and social affairs under former Chancellor Helmut Kohl—“has spoken out in support. It’s a start.”

Intolerant ‘Tolerance’

Germany’s policy is disturbing enough to the staff at HSLDA. But what’s even more disturbing to them is that the Obama administration sees nothing wrong with it.

“Teaching tolerance to children of all backgrounds helps to develop the ability to interact as a fully functioning citizen in Germany,” the Justice Department told the 6th Circuit, arguing that it’s “scarcely feasible” to interpret that policy as stemming from a “persecutory motive” on Germany’s part.

Donnelly’s response: That’s nonsense.

“If facing outrageous fines, unending criminal prosecution and the threat of having your children taken from you isn’t persecution, I don’t know what is,” he said. “The German supreme court itself acknowledges that parents who homeschool for religious or philosophical reasons are targeted for unequal treatment. What more do you need?”

In their written arguments to the 6th Circuit, Farris and HSLDA Senior Counsel Jim Mason shredded the idea that Germany’s policy has any place in a free society.

“Neither this country nor the

principles of international human rights law were built on this kind of ‘tolerance,’ ” they wrote. “True tolerance embraces liberty for all. A government committed to true tolerance does not seek to use its power to force religious individuals to give up their beliefs or their desire to remain distinct from all other belief systems. It is government that must be tolerant of religious differences. When a

force that teaching on their children,” he added. “It’s syncretism: Make people believe that all roads lead to God and that no one can challenge that. It’s a really dangerous idea.”

‘No Stone Unturned’

Seven years into HSLDA’s campaign to help the Romeikes, Farris says his group will keep going as long as it takes.

“I’ve promised this family that I’ll leave no stone unturned,” he said. “I don’t want them sent back to Germany under any circumstances, even if Germany would promise to leave them alone. I don’t think we could trust that.



SPREADING THE WORD: The Home School Legal Defense Association uses ads like these to call attention to the plight of the Romeike family.

government seeks to prohibit the development of ‘parallel societies’ that are defined by religion and philosophy, it has become a state which embraces the repression of the mind, even if it pursues that repression in the name of ‘tolerance.’ ”

Farris is concerned about what the Obama administration’s position means—not only for Germans, but also for Americans.

“I’m glad Obama wasn’t in charge in 1620,” he said. “I really wonder what would have happened to the Pilgrims under this administration.

“Both the U.S. Justice Department and the German government want to force people of faith to accept that ‘other people’s ideas are just as good as yours’—and to



“We’re not just fighting for this family. It’s a very short step from this to saying that every family must agree to accept, say, homosexuality,” he added. “Once this kind of coercion of conscience begins, it knows no bounds.”

But Farris sees more than storm clouds gathering. He also sees rays of hope in the outpouring of public support for the Romeikes.

“It’s very encouraging to see the reaction,” he said. “I’ve been defending homeschoolers for over 30 years now, and the response this case has gotten is in the top one or two.

“In this country, we have a pas-

sion for religious liberty—and compassion for people who’ve been denied that liberty. I’ve heard from about 50 people who want to adopt this family. That’s not how it works legally, but it tells you how strongly people feel.”

Uwe Romeike feels the love, too, beginning with the people at HSLDA—including the Donnelly family, with whom the Romeikes have become good friends.

“We’ve visited them several times over the years,” Uwe said. “We are friends with them, and our children are friends with their children. We wish we lived closer so we could visit more often.”

Donnelly returns the affection, describing the Romeikes as just the sort of people Americans should want in this country—and just the sort who came to our shores to begin with.

“This is a normal homeschooling family like the ones you’d find down the street,” he said. “They’re just nice, genuine Christian people. They’re inspirational. They did it for all the right reasons. They were following their conscience, following a call from God.

“They put our national situation in perspective. As many problems as we have in this country, it’s still a place where people want to come.”

Uwe, meanwhile, keeps his family’s own situation in perspective.

“Just knowing that we’ve had so many prayers, from our friends and from people who don’t even know us—it means so much,” he said. “God is doing something, and we are very thankful.” ■

Take Action

To sign the petition urging the White House to let the Romeikes stay in America, go to www.hsllda.org/legal/cases/romeike/petition.asp.

For updates on their case, visit www.hsllda.org/legal/cases/romeike.asp.