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## **Claiming persecution, german home-schoolers seek asylum in Canada**

They hid from German authorities, fled to Denmark and sought safety in Canada. All this for a chance to freely educate their children at home.

**JAMIE McDONALD/GETTY IMAGES Brian McKeever skis to his third gold in the 1-km sprint. McKeever, Lauren Woolstencroft and Viviane Forest have led Canada to a record haul of winter gold at the Paralympics.**

Now the German family will take their cause one step further when they appear before the Immigration and Refugee board in Alberta tomorrow to request asylum on the grounds that they would be persecuted for home-schooling their children, and risk being locked up and losing their children if they return to their homeland. The hearing is closed, and a decision could take weeks or even months.

Such a case is believed to be rare, if not unique in Canada, and comes on the heels of a U.S. immigration judge granting political asylum earlier this year to a German family who claimed they were being persecuted for teaching their children at home. There have been reports of parents being fined in Germany for home-schooling their children and being threatened with loss of child custody.

"It's a very unusual case, to be claiming protection against Germany, a democratic country that is internationally renowned for protecting its citizens. But not in this case," said the family's lawyer, Jean Munn.

Home-schooling is not permitted in Germany, with rare exceptions. These were the Games that may have changed Canada, with an unprecedented outpouring of national pride and unparalleled Olympic success. But the glow didn't stop when the puck fired by Sidney Crosby found the back of the American net on that epic Sunday three weeks ago.

Lauren Woolstencroft, Brian McKeever and Viviane Forest are the country's new athletic heroes, emulating the nation's Olympians by leading Canada to a record harvest of winter gold at the Paralympics, as well.

The celebrated trio iced the cake with one last, inspiring flourish during the Games' final weekend.

Ms. Forest won her fifth medal of the Games, Mr. McKeever took his third gold and Ms. Woolstencroft, now known as the country's golden girl, made her fifth trip to the top of the podium with another powerful run down the slopes of Whistler.

Yesterday, Ms. Woolstencroft, the 28-year-old electrical engineer from North Vancouver, was chosen to carry Canada's flag in the parade of Paralympians to the wet, chilly, special plaza for last night's stirring closing ceremonies that brought down the curtain on the country's six-week turn on the global stage

Many parents who home-school are Christians seeking a more religious education.

But the family, who doesn't want to be identified because they fear their two teenage boys will be taken away by German authorities, say it's not about religion. "In this case, religion plays a role less important than reasons of conscience and reasons with respect to the medical well-being of these children," Ms. Munn said.

The boys were born four months premature. One suffers from lung problems and is prone to infection. The other is highly gifted, but suffers from Lyme disease, which can cause chronic arthritis and neurological symptoms.

The boys' mother said their eldest daughter attended school in Germany, but the unruly behaviour of students and the lax rules left a lot to be desired. The government told them that their boys would be placed in a school for children with both physical and cognitive disabilities. "The children would not have an education that they might have needed," the mother said.

The parents taught their children at home as they fought with German education officials to continue a home-based education. At one point, one of the boys was sent to a special school, but his parents removed him. In 2006, the government relented, and, because of their illnesses, both children were home-schooled with the support of a state teacher, the mother said. But as the teacher was leaving when the school year ended, she told the family to leave the country, the mother said. Two days later, police came by the house with a registered letter from the government that informed the parents that they must either enroll both their children in school the following year or their boys would be taken away, the mother said.

The family packed their belongings and hid in Germany for three months, before making their way into Denmark. From there, they made contact with the Home School Legal Defense Association, a nonprofit advocacy group in the United States that also has an office in Canada, who helped them travel to North America in April, 2007.

Ms. Munn will argue tomorrow the family needs protection to avoid persecution based on their membership in a particular social group, and if they return, they will be persecuted and punished. In 2007, the German federal supreme court ruled that parents can lose custody of their children if they home-school them.

“The consequences for other families have included significant fines, incarceration and threats to have children put into the care of the state,” Ms. Munn said. “It’s a strong case for protection, because of the consequences that would occur if this family were required to return to Germany. The fact that it’s the state imposing those consequences means there’s no alternative for them in Germany.”

The German embassy declined comment on homeschooling in Germany. In Canada, children have been taught at home for generations. But in the 1980s, home instruction also started attracting families concerned about the quality of classroom instruction and the impact of peer pressure on learning.

The boys’ mother said she fears the worst if they are sent back. “The first thing that could happen is [my husband] has to go to jail. I have to go to jail. Because we are both in jail, they are free to serve the children. The children will be put in the psychiatric.”

The boys, she said, are thriving while being home-schooled in Alberta. “For us, it’s a gift, a real gift to be able to home school our children,” she said.