

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Interview with Jonas Himmelstrand

conducted by Harriet Pattison
University of Birmingham

Introduction *Jonas Himmelstrand is an anomaly in the current world of alternative education; a Swedish home educator. Unfortunately such an identity can only exist with the caveat, in exile. Jonas and his family live in Finland in order to pursue the upbringing of their children in accordance with their educational convictions. He is an active national and international figure in matters pertaining to both home education and civil liberties. This includes holding the presidency of ROHUS, the Swedish Association for Home Education, and speaking widely, including at the United Nations in New York, on family freedoms and educational choice. The interview was conducted following the Global Home Education Conference (GHEC), Berlin, 2012.*

First of all Jonas, how did you personally become involved in home education?

I first heard of home education before I had children myself, and I resented it. I then had the same prejudices as many people have today, people who have never

learned to know home educated children. But a series of events changed this.

Our first child had special needs, and my wife and I, in our entrepreneurial spirit, thought of creating a special school for him when the time came—he was only 2-3 years old at the time. Then an American colleague and friend of my mine, who is a school researcher living in Sweden, told me spontaneously that if his children were younger he would choose to homeschool them. This made me take a more serious look at home education. I read the research, which contradicted many of my prejudices, and gave a much more positive view of both learning and social development in home education. But I was not convinced until my wife and I, in 1998, visited a group of home educating families in southern Sweden. I was so taken by the friendliness and social competency of these home educated children, that I realised that I had to look much more deeply into this, and that clearly home education would be my choice for my children.

A year or so later our first child was given a diagnosis and we realised we had a

real educational challenge. We started working with him intensely at home with support from our local government. The method we used was home-based and we worked with him for six years this way—home education was simply a means. Our results were good and everyone was happy. Through this work we understood home education in a much deeper way and when the time came for our second child to start school we were clear that we would home educate her as well. Our daughter never liked pre-school and it did not seem to do her any good. Once she had recovered fully from the pre-school years, she began to blossom at home in learning and creativity in a way we had never seen before, and which impressed everyone who met her. By this time we were fully convinced home educating parents, being very grateful that we had stumbled upon the idea of home education in our path through life. We felt like true educational pioneers.

With permission, we homeschooled our oldest child for six years, and our second child for three years. We were acknowledged by the authorities as caring and competent parents doing successful home education. But then in the spring of 2008 the local authorities suddenly changed their mind. A new official looked into the matter, didn't like it and decided to try and interpret the school law in a way which could stop us from home education. A three year long nightmare began. It lasted until we left for exile in Finland in early 2012.

During these “nightmare years” our youngest son expressed very clearly that he expected to be home educated when he became of school age. This became one more good reason for exile.

Could you explain to us a little about the situation in Sweden at the moment and the circumstances of your own exile.

Sweden had a rather permissive school law until July 1, 2011. This old school law said that permission for schooling in other ways than in the school law shall be given if it was a fully satisfactory alternative to school and that oversight by the authorities was allowed. Application for permission to home educate had to be given by the local political Board of Children and Education. However, the law was interpreted very differently in different municipalities. Basically some gave permission and others did not. Those who did not, as in our case, would argue that there was no way parents could ever be as good as school. Although we submitted a solid amount of general scientific evidence, plus the personal witness of an internationally acclaimed psychologist who personally knew our child, the board did not care. When appealing the decision the courts would typically decide as the municipality board had decided, with few exceptions. This is common in Swedish administrative jurisdiction. Unless there is a very special situation, the State is typically seen as being right and the individual citizen as being wrong.

In the new school law, from July 1, 2011, one more condition was added for permission to home educate to be granted. There had to be “exceptional circumstances”, a wording which was not clearly defined. The Swedish Minister of Education, Mr. Jan Björklund, made no secret of the fact that he wanted home education completely prohibited in Sweden. Clearly his view was that the 100 home educated children in Sweden at the time was 100 too many. Mr. Björklund is

the leader of the Swedish Liberal Party and has a military background.

The Swedish municipalities took in the message from the new law and began to refuse to give permission for home education already a year before the law was actually passed. This resulted in the wave of home educators going into exile during 2010-2011. Twelve families in exile may not sound much, but they represented at least 25% of the Swedish home educating population at the time. In December 2012 there are still a handful of families holding out and home educating “illegally”, but they live in municipalities in which the legal repercussions are bearable.

“Illegal” home education in Sweden is typically threatened with fines, and one family who have been in exile for nearly two years had to pay a 3,800 GBP fine by the Swedish Enforcement Agency in November 2012. Fortunately the ROHUS Fine Fund had the money and could pay the full amount.

The biggest fear, however, is the Swedish Social Authorities. They are known to take children into custody for erratic reasons, not seldom pertaining to ideological issues. The whole Swedish home educating movement was shocked to the core when home educated Dominic Johansson, a then seven-year-old boy, was seized by the Social Authorities, assisted by the police, onboard an airplane and in the act of departing with his parents to his mother’s homeland of India. This incident took place in 2009; the boy is still in custody and his parents are still fighting for him to be returned to them. This terrible act shows how brutal the Swedish authorities can be towards those who have another view of child raising and

education than the State. Dominic Johansson is not the only child in custody for home education. The same year also another child was taken by the Social Authorities.

Still the situation is not completely dark. ROHUS knows of two families who have been given permission to home educate under the new school law. However, one of these families face a court appeal by the authorities. So basically home education is banned in Sweden today, and the punishments involve threats of fines of up to 17,000 GBP, and a very real threat of having your children taken away from you by the authorities. All of which makes exile look like a good solution, especially as all of Sweden’s Nordic neighbours, Finland, Norway and Denmark, allow home education.

My family was first threatened with fines of up to 22,000 GBP for the school year 2010-2011—still under the old school law. But that was not what made us move. We felt we could deal with a fine issue somehow, but not with the “trigger-happy” Swedish Social Authorities. We had an action plan of what to do if the Social Authorities got involved, which included a quick exile from Sweden.

Our youngest child came of school age in autumn of 2011. We applied to home educate, were turned down and appealed to court as we usually do while continuing to home educate during the process. But for the first time the Social Authorities got involved. My wife and I were called to a meeting to which we were to bring our son. Although we deemed the risks were small, we were not even taking a small risk with the safety of our children. With my family in safety outside Sweden I went

to the meeting on my own. I explained that it was a conflict about home education with local authorities. They seemed to understand this. I asked if they could guarantee the safety of my children in Sweden. They said that they could never give such guarantees. When they had understood that we were a good family in a political conflict with the local government I asked if it now would be safe for us to home educate in Sweden. They answered that they held no opinion per se about home education, but that if we wanted to home educate safely it was best to leave the country.

Eventually the Social Authorities made the decision not to intervene with a full-fledged four-month investigation this time, but they had given no guarantees about the future. They told me we could be reported again, which by law would require a new meeting. I understood that with every meeting the gruelling four month social investigation came nearer. In such investigation no family is safe, and we had the clear intent to avoid it.

We had tried to start a dialogue with the local government. Early in 2011 I tried to arrange a meeting with the political chairman of the Board of Children and Education, Ms Cecilia Forss, but she always refused to meet us, saying there was nothing to talk about as she claimed to understand the situation very well.

About a week after the Social Authorities event we received a letter from the local court saying that the municipality had now decided on a specific amount for the fine. It would be 8,500 GBP for each of us parents, a total of a 17,000 GBP fine for one year of home educating one child. I then wrote to the chairman of the board, Ms Forss, and said that I perceived this

fine as being our expulsion from Sweden, as we had no means of paying it, and because a good family cannot live under such hostilities from their local government for a prolonged period of time. I received no answer, but two weeks later came a new decision from the board chaired by Ms Forss with a new fine threat for the school year 2011-2012 with an additional 7,500 GBP.

Given that the local government refused to talk to us, that the Social Authorities could give us no safety guarantees and even advised us to go into exile, and the 17,000 GBP fine demand plus a possible additional 7,500 GBP, all together we knew that the time for exile had come. There was no immediate urgency, but we realised the situation was impossible and that we should leave while we could.

Our long prepared plan was to move the Aland Islands, a Swedish-speaking self-governing province of Finland in the Baltic Sea. Being well-prepared we moved swiftly. The journey to the Aland Islands involved a 75 minutes drive from our now former Swedish home along small roads to the ferry which takes two hours to the island. On one of the first days of February I went there for the day to sign up for an apartment. Then I went another day with a truck with our most important furniture and belongings. Then an early winter morning a few days later the whole family went to our new home, a home which they had never seen. Nobody in Sweden knew we were leaving. Safely in our new home we sent out the message to our friends and relatives that we were now living in exile on the Aland Islands.

The Aland Islands is under Finnish law which has an outspoken support for home

education. Like most democracies, Finland has an *educational obligation* by law, differing from Sweden and Germany which have a *school obligation*. Furthermore, in Finland education is a parental responsibility, whereas in Sweden it is a State responsibility.

Having now lived on the Aland Islands for about ten months it must be said to be a very nice exile. The Swedish language makes all communication easy, and the family culture is in many ways distinctly and positively different from Sweden. Finland has a much greater appreciation for family, and for respect for minorities, as also mainland Finland has a Swedish speaking minority, and therefore two official languages. The Finnish culture is exciting and we very quickly felt at home.

By now our fine has moved a bit more through the legal system. The lower court decided to reduce the fine from 17,000 GBP to 9,400 GBP. We will appeal this, of course. Our home education application associated with this fine is already in the process of appeal to the European Court.

The Aland Island locals refer, with a smile, to the now eight Swedish home educating families in exile on the island as “the Swedish school refugees.” The warmth in their smiles makes you feel fully at home and accepted. At times it fills you with tears.

As for myself the process of exile felt complete when I was invited with mainland Finnish home educators to a meeting with the new Director General of the Finnish School Board in Helsinki, the Finnish capital on mainland Finland. Several issues were shared at the meeting, and I was asked to present my story. The Director General listened to my story and then said, in Swedish with a heavy Finnish

accent and with a clear sense of national pride: “Welcome to Finland.” I managed to hide my tears. I began to understand how emotionally devastating the three years of nightmare in Sweden had been, and that I was welcome as a home educator in Finland. I was deeply touched.

Home education is not the only kind of alternative education. Why is living in exile preferable to staying at home and working for greater choice within the system, rather than outside it?

This may be difficult to understand for people who have no experience with home education. But most home educating parents, regardless of what got them into home education, will quickly become aware of the enormous benefits for both children and family with home education. Your children become calmer, learn better, read more, communicate better, mature faster and get a whole other depth in their learning. At the same time the influence from peers comes down to reasonable levels making parenthood possible. School issues like conformism, peer-orientation, bullying and an inability to handle many children with special needs are gone. Other adults who meet your children will be touched by these mature children who communicate so easily and well with adults. The children’s interests and passions shape up more clearly and in their teens they quickly find the subjects of their personal choice. Once the discovery of home education is made, most parents will not accept school again if it can be in anyway be avoided.

We certainly tried to “change the system from within” but this is not possible when you feel the safety of your children is threatened by the very authorities who are supposed to give you

safety. The stress is simply too great, and you cannot function creatively under such circumstances. Life becomes all about surviving day by day, and every letter from the authorities brings sleepless nights. As a family you are in fact living in a totalitarian society where you fear the authorities. Nor do you dare to speak up too clearly in the media when you feel your children's safety is under threat. Now living safely in exile I am clearly a lot more efficient and outspoken in family and home education matters.

The fact is that home educators in Sweden are living in a more or less totalitarian society, with all the stress and fears associated with this, depending on which Swedish municipality you live in.

In the future do you see hopes for greater educational freedoms or is what has happened in Sweden the setting of a trend which other countries are now likely to follow?

Home education can never be defeated. The power of child-parent relationships and parenthood are so strong that no outer power can ever crush it for any prolonged period of time. It is one of the deepest human instincts to care for your offspring. It is a human right you can feel in your guts. It is just like you can't stop a plant from growing. That does not mean, however, that it might not get worse before it gets better in countries like Sweden.

I do not think other countries generally will follow Sweden on this path. There are some pretty specific Swedish historical and cultural reasons that make the rather family-phobic nature of Swedish politics possible, just as there are historical reasons for the German prohibition to home education with their school law from 1938. Still, just like every generation has to work

for democracy, I am convinced that every generation of home educating parents will have to work to defend home education in their country.

You have spoken of home education as heralding a whole new understanding of childhood learning and child development. Could you tell us what you mean by this?

Our numerous court cases in Sweden have made me look deeply into the research of home education and the psychology of learning and social development. After much reading and some reflection a new vision of learning has emerged. School is a phenomenon of the industrial society using industrial society concepts in education: mass education, one curriculum fits all, big buildings away from home—there are many similarities. But the knowledge society requires something different, although also national cultures play an important role here. For instance Finnish schools have a much better success than Swedish schools, probably partly because of the stronger Finnish family culture which creates more mature pupils and teachers with better authority. Also parents in the really wealthy countries in Europe and North America seem to be asking themselves if working full-time and having children in school full-time is their ideal life. In the post-industrial society parental instincts seem to emerge making parents all over the world question this industrial society social model. This was very clear during the world's first Global Home Education Conference 2012 in Berlin, which gathered 187 participants from 26 countries and five continents. Through all the cultural, political and religious differences, these parents instantly understood one another and their

decision to home educate. All over the world parental instincts are waking up, perhaps after being asleep during industrial society.

Modern attachment based developmental psychology helps us understand why home education can achieve such good academic and social results. The most powerful force for learning and maturation is the emotional attachment of a child to the adult responsible for them, typically the parents. Schools today seldom make child-teacher attachments possible, the groups are too big, the family cultures too heterogeneous and peer culture all too tempting when children are separated from parents for so many hours a day. Emotional attachment is the key to learning, social development and maturation for many children, and this is best provided in the child's home, probably more so today than ever before in the modern world. Once this is acknowledged, we will reinvent how children are taught, and home education will be an acknowledged form together with others. Most likely we will still have schools for many years to come, but it will be only one out of many different educational choices with the parents making the decision.

Issues about the duties of states to provide certain kinds of education and the rights of citizens to reject such provision are pressing political matters in a number of countries now, not just the countries, Sweden and Germany, in which home education is banned. In your opinion, what role is the state justified in playing in the education of children?

I think the UN Declaration of Human Rights is very clear, and is supported by a

host of other international conventions, it says in Article 26.3: "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children." The former UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of education explicitly expressed that this included home education.

In the Berlin Declaration presented at the Global Home Education Conference 2012 in Berlin, nearly a dozen other international conventions with a similar wording are quoted.

The State can never be emotionally nurturing in the way that parents can be. This means that all activities involving emotional attachment of children must be delegated to the parents, and for normally healthy parents this means that the decisions about the education of children is a parental decision, and not a state decision, which again is clearly expressed in a number of international conventions.

The State only has a role with seriously dysfunctional families or abusive families who clearly cannot care for their children's basic needs. However, these families are often discovered long before the children come of school age. And even in these cases the State needs to understand emotional attachment. This means first trying to find support among mature adults close to the child, and, as much as possible, avoiding separation from the biological parents.

Awareness is also needed of the proven fact that home educating parents need no higher education in order to successfully home educate their own children. They simply need a working relationship where the child is attached to the parents and the parents can supply the basic needs for the child and take responsibility for their education.

It is also important to understand that the very nature of home education—being present for your children pretty much 24 /7 /365—strongly discourages dysfunctional families to take on such an undertaking. Home education is powerfully and

positively self-selecting. Typically home educating parents, for this very reason, are parents whose children have the strong and healthy child-parent attachments which is the key to making home education successful.

© Copyright 2013. The author, Harriet Pattison, assigns to *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives*, and to educational and non-profit institutions a non-exclusive license to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction, provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author also grants a non-exclusive right to *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives* to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the author.