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Sergio Karas built an immigration law practice and stayed close to his roots

Immigrant to immigration lawyer and advocate for Holocaust survivors and victims of anti-Semitism

Soviet Jewish woman granted refugee status

By
BEN ROSE

TORONTO —

An Immigration Refugee Board has ruled that a Soviet Jewish woman can remain in Canada because of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union.

The woman in question, a professional person in her 30s who came to Canada last October, does not wish to be identified.

Her lawyer, Sergio Karas, told The CJN that it is the first low profile case in which anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union has been cited as the reason for granting conventional refugee status.

"This is a precedent of critical importance to the many other cases of Soviet Jews still before the boards," Karas said.

In its decision handed down orally from the bench two weeks ago the board said it recognized that the Soviet Union is "traditionally" anti-Semitic, that discrimination and harassment against Jews lead to persecution, and, prophetically, that collapse of the central authority in the Soviet

meant authorities were unable or unwilling to combat anti-Semitism.

Karas said the Russian woman is "overjoyed" with the decision. She has relatives in Canada. Before she left Moscow, a swastika had appeared on her apartment door. She had telephone calls telling her "All the Jews are going to Israel, when are you leaving?"

In her career in the Soviet Union, she was the only Jew employed in a large industry in Moscow. She suffered harassment because she was Jewish and was forced to resign, he said. She was previously on the staff of state agencies, and at one time, the first secretary of the Communist Party hassled her because of her faith.



Sergio Karas

BY Annabel Oromoni / 25 Aug 2021 / Share

Born in a country governed by a military dictatorship, it's natural to admire countries with stable legal systems, says Sergio Karas, certified immigration and citizenship law specialist and founder of Karas Immigration Law Professional Corp.

A child of Polish Jews forced to flee the Holocaust, Karas' legal practice has been supplemented with advocacy on behalf of Holocaust survivors and victims of anti-Semitism. His

immigration practice was inspired and has been fuelled by an admiration for a system proven reliable and which upholds the rights of citizens.

Karas and his family migrated to Canada when he was 19 years old, and he was determined to go to law school, notwithstanding the odds. Since obtaining his law degree from Osgoode Hall and beginning his legal career in municipal law and legal aid, Karas has built a reputation in Canadian immigration law.

Karas says he was always interested in the rule of law and individual rights, after experiencing "various military dictatorships or chaotic civilian rule," during his youth. Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Karas was a child during the authoritarian rule of Carlos Ongani, which was followed by the tenure of Isabel Peron, a time marked by terrorism carried out by militant groups such as the Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo. Then came the 1976 military coup and the dictatorship of Jorge Rafael Videla, who died in in prison in 2013 while serving a life sentence for crimes against humanity.

Karas' legal career has also had its share of ups and downs, he says.

"When you are an immigrant and you go straight to university, you don't have the same type of network and social connections. It was interesting, you know, because I had to kind of carve my own path."

Karas lived with his parents during law school while working at an immigration firm during the summer. He was determined to practice corporate law but was alarmed when he remained unemployed and with substantial student debt after articling.

He finally began practicing municipal law at Goodman and Carr LLP. But it only took a couple of years before Karas took a break and "retooled" his legal career.

"I quickly realized that field did not appeal to me because it lacked the human contact that I craved," he says.

Changing his career focus to immigration was a familiar path. Karas' father fled to Argentina from Poland during the Holocaust and, years later, moved his family to Canada. He is no stranger to the realities of immigration and the barriers immigrants face, he says.

With immigration work experience under his belt, a fluency in six languages and a friend's advice, Karas began his immigration practice, Karas Immigration Law Professional Corp, working exclusively legal aid cases.

"When I started doing legal aid, the word got around somehow that I spoke Spanish, and I was doing a pretty good job for clients. So I had a lot of Spanish speaking clients from various countries."

The conflicts that plagued Central and South America in the 1980s led to an increase in clientele and got things rolling for his firm, Karas says. With the drug war in Colombia, death squads in Guatemala and civil war in El Salvador, he says many of his clients came from these and other Latin American countries.

"I did over 1,000 refugee cases over a period of 10 years."

In 1991, Karas was recognized in the Globe and Mail after he helped obtain refugee status for a Russian-Jewish woman persecuted after the fall of the Soviet Union for researching antisemitism in Russia. "She was not doing anything sensitive, just regular research," Karas says. The case set a precedent as the first in which "antisemitism in the Soviet Union was cited as [the] reason for granting conventional refugee status."

However, Karas says his finest achievement was his involvement helping the descendents of Jews killed in the Holocaust to recover property from Swiss bank accounts they had opened before the War.

He heard about the issue while on a trip to Switzerland. Suspecting that North American relatives of Holocaust victims would be interested in what happened with these accounts, he took an interest in the case, representing 25 Canadians seeking compensation.

"The problem was that the Swiss banking secrecy laws prevented the Swiss banks from revealing any kind of information, and so the money was sitting there for decades."

Some families received significant compensation in a \$1.25 billion settlement, Karas says. [The legal victory made the front page of the Globe and Mail](#), garnering the attention of investigative journalist Isabel Vincent, who was working on a book called "Hitler's Silent Partners."

"My clients agreed to be interviewed by Isabel, and I was interviewed extensively. My father was interviewed extensively, and my mother was also interviewed," Karas says. "There are about 15 pages about my family and me, and the book gained international attention. So, I think that's one of my greatest achievements. It was not part of my practice, but sometimes you're at the right place at the right time."

Now specializing almost exclusively in corporate immigration, Karas clients include corporations, multinationals, scientists, computer programmers and engineers.

He prepares work permits, permanent residence applications, sponsorship applications and criminal rehabilitation for people with criminal convictions who are prohibited entering Canada.

"I like to make a difference," he says. "As an immigrant myself, who have come here legally, I'm very passionate about assisting people who are trying to come to Canada by following all the rules and complying with the law, rather than looking for a shortcut."

He says it is vital that Canada prioritizes STEM graduates for entry into the country as there are high demands for these occupations in Canada's labour force. He says it's deplorable when people take advantage of Canada's immigration policies because immigration is an economic tool used to build Canada and attract individuals in demand in the labour markets.

"I believe that immigration should be used for the betterment of the Canadian economy and to provide employers with the talent that the labour force requires."

Karas is past chair of the Citizenship and Immigration Section of the Ontario Bar Association, past chair of the Immigration and Nationality Committee of the International Bar Association and past chair of the Canada Committee of the American Bar Association Section of International Law.

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Soviet Jewish woman granted refugee status

BY BEN BLOOM
A 70-year-old woman who fled the Soviet Union for Canada in 1978, Sergio Karas has spent the last 40 years helping her and other refugees. Karas, who founded the firm Karas & Karas in 1980, has been instrumental in the lives of many refugees, including a woman who fled the Soviet Union in 1978. Karas, who has been instrumental in the lives of many refugees, including a woman who fled the Soviet Union in 1978. Karas, who has been instrumental in the lives of many refugees, including a woman who fled the Soviet Union in 1978.

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