

Nova Scotia

German immigrants afraid after Cape Breton man handed extortion, weapons charges



Couple allege Frank Eckhardt threatened to have their visas revoked unless they paid him \$25K

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Frank Eckhardt of Grand River, N.S., is seen in this still from a 2018 German TV show. Eckhardt faces extortion and weapons charges after a dispute with a couple who immigrated to Cape Breton. (ZDF/YouTube)

A German couple who recently immigrated to Cape Breton say they are afraid for themselves and their young son after a complaint to RCMP resulted in extortion and weapons charges against the man who helped them move to Canada.

However, Sandra Schmid and Dirk Westerhoff also say they are not about to be driven away from their new home near Cape George, N.S.

"I'm happy to be here in Canada because the Canadian, for me, is to live free and tolerant," Schmid said in an interview outside her home in rural Richmond County, north of St. Peter's.

"I don't want to live in fear here, and I don't come to Canada to get trouble with a German. I have so many Canadian friends and they are all so friendly. They say, 'Hello' and 'Welcome,' and so I'm here and I have trouble with a German guy."

Frank Eckhardt of Grand River, a small rural community east of St. Peter's, is charged with one count of extortion and 13 weapons offences, including unsafe storage and transportation of firearms and possessing unlicensed handguns.

The allegations have not been proven in court.

Eckhardt did not respond to emails or phone calls from CBC News seeking comment.

Seller has made headlines before

Eckhardt is a controversial property seller who has been in the news for offering to help Europeans settle in Cape Breton, selling them overpriced land and offering advice to "new settlers," and in at least one case, sending out Second World War-era Nazi propaganda. Eckhardt, a German immigrant, has lived in Cape Breton for about two decades.

Schmid and Westerhoff said they bought land from Eckhardt a little over a year ago and lived on his home property for three months while getting their new home set up.

They said they also rented a building from Eckhardt in St. Peter's to run a gym.

But after moving to Canada, Schmid said they found out that Eckhardt's prices were too steep and they asked to get out of the lease.



Dirk Westerhoff and Sandra Schmid say they are afraid of Eckhardt, but have no intention of leaving their new home in rural Richmond County. (Tom Ayers/CBC)

They said that's when Eckhardt threatened to have their visas revoked and have them sent back to Germany, unless they paid him around \$25,000 or handed over the gym equipment, resulting in an extortion charge.

"That's the reason why we are going to the police," said Schmid, adding she and Westerhoff were "very shocked" by Eckhardt's alleged demands.

RCMP said they investigated a report of shots fired near the Schmid property in December, not long after the extortion charge was laid.

Schmid said the couple were out on their property looking for a Christmas tree with their five-year-old when they heard two shots coming from the property next door, which is owned by Eckhardt.

Schmid said the family did not see anyone in the woods. RCMP said they were unable to find any witnesses who could confirm Eckhardt's involvement.

However, after talking with Schmid, Westerhoff and others, RCMP executed a search warrant at Eckhardt's home property in Grand River.

RCMP seized unregistered guns

Court documents show RCMP seized five handguns, four rifles and two shotguns, thousands of rounds of ammunition and \$137,250 in cash.

According to RCMP, Eckhardt's handguns included three registered, restricted firearms, for which he has a licence, and two muzzleloader percussion pistols that were unregistered and did not belong to him.



Eckhardt's company, F.E. Property Sales, markets land in Cape Breton and 'new settler advice' to European immigrants. (Tom Ayers/CBC)

They said his firearms licence is under automatic review due to the extortion charge. That means Eckhardt cannot buy any new guns and cannot make any purchases that require a firearms licence.

In court documents, RCMP said they have statements from witnesses that Eckhardt transported loaded weapons to a property near Loch Lomond, also in Richmond County.

They said the property owner picked up one of Eckhardt's rifles and it accidentally went off, but no one was injured.

"He told Eckhardt that he was crazy for transporting loaded guns. Eckhardt replied 'Oh,'" police said in the documents.

Previous police investigations

RCMP also said Eckhardt has been the subject of eight prior police investigations, including one involving firearms on his home property last year.

In that incident, police said a woman reported being confronted by a man with a long gun at Eckhardt's home address.

They said the woman drove off and filed a complaint, but was unable to identify the man. No charges were laid.

The documents also list a number of other allegations against Eckhardt that have not resulted in charges.

In one incident, Schmid said while living on Eckhardt's home property, the land seller showed off loaded weapons in his home and carried a loaded handgun in a shoulder holster that he said was necessary to protect the farm from coyotes.

In addition, a mutual friend of Schmid and Eckhardt told RCMP that Eckhardt said he needed weapons to defend himself because there are people who don't like him.

'Pattern of contravening the Firearms Act'

In the court documents, Schmid also said last summer, she ran into Eckhardt at Point Michaud Beach near his home. She said it was warm, but Eckhardt declined to remove his coat, patting his body and implying he was wearing the shoulder holster with a handgun.

According to the documents, RCMP said Eckhardt "has displayed a pattern of contravening the Firearms Act on multiple occasions in the past year in a manner that has put public safety in jeopardy."



Cpl. Chris Marshall says the public does not need to be alarmed, because the dispute is really between two parties who are known to each other. (Matthew Moore/CBC)

However, Cpl. Chris Marshall said the public does not need to be alarmed.

"People see firearms charges and they begin to become concerned, but I would just say that these are all regulation-based charges that have to do with properly transporting, properly storing and having the proper licences to own these firearms," said Marshall, a spokesperson for the RCMP.

"Obviously, if you live in the community, you want to be aware of what's going on in your community and keep yourself aware. But ... I don't think you need to be concerned if you're out and about in downtown St. Peter's or anywhere in Richmond County. These are two isolated incidents to a group of people known to each other."

Eckhardt released on conditions

After the arrests, Eckhardt was released on conditions, including the requirement to stay away from Schmid and Westerhoff.

Schmid said Eckhardt has breached those conditions twice, and RCMP said they are looking into those allegations.

Schmid, a naturopath, said she and Westerhoff have leased a building for their gym closer to Sydney. Despite "a hard first year," Schmid said she and Westerhoff are still happy with their decision to immigrate.

"We came to Canada because it's our dream and we want to live a better life here and to see our son grow up in nature and in peace, and we also open our business here," she said.

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