

New Westminster man's daughters abducted to radioactive Fukushima

BY BRENT RICHTER, NEW WEST RECORD JUNE 27, 2011

It's been 22 months since Bruce Gherbetti has seen his three children and it would be hard to pick a worse place for them to be: Fukushima, Japan.

The New Westminster man says his is a classic case of international child abduction but with the last known whereabouts of his daughters Rion, Lauren and Julia being about 45 kilometres from the disabled and still deadly nuclear reactor damaged in the March earthquake and tsunami, Gherbetti doesn't just miss his children, he lives in constant anxiety over their safety.

Making the situation worse is the fact that in the world of international child abduction, Japan is referred to as a "black hole," meaning once children go in, they never come out. According to the United States Department of State, of the approximately 400 cases of abduction to Japan since 2000, "no child has been returned to his/her country of habitual residence as a result of any action taken by the government of Japan."

Gherbetti met his wife, Taiko Suzuki, in 2001 when she was visiting Canada on a student visa to study English. The two began dating but neither had plans to continue their relationship after Suzuki returned to Japan.

Then, Suzuki contacted Gherbetti in late 2002 to tell him that she was pregnant with the couple's first child, Rion (Suzuki), who was born in Iwaki, Japan in May of 2003.

"Ultimately I decided at that time that I wanted to be with Taiko and raise our child and be a family and make a go of the traditional husband and father role," Gherbetti said.

Suzuki and Rion moved back to B.C. and Gherbetti and Suzuki married in February 2004. Over the next two years the couple had daughters Lauren, born January 2005, and Julia, born April 2007, both at Royal Columbian Hospital.

During the economic turmoil of the spring of 2009, Gherbetti was laid off from his sales manager position at Sears in Vancouver and the marriage became strained. Gherbetti said Suzuki was depressed and struggling with the separation from her culture and family. Gherbetti said he offered to move the family to Japan but Suzuki dismissed the idea, saying he wouldn't earn enough to support the family.

In September 2009, Gherbetti was blindsided by an accusation that landed him in jail.

"She went to the New West Police and leveled a charge that I had assaulted her and threatened to kill her. Completely fabricated," he said. "Unfortunately, the way our system is set up, if you are accused of domestic violence, you are thrown in jail."

Gherbetti, still in shock, spent six weeks at North Fraser Pretrial Centre, where he was

alone and exposed to violence while awaiting his trial.

"(I was) with murderers, rapists, drug dealers; you name it. The very worst of the worst. I'll admit, I was frightened and cold. I saw a man get stabbed in the face," he said.

Two days before his trial, he was called to court and learned Crown counsel was willing to offer him a deal - no more time in jail in exchange for a guilty plea.

"I was dragged to the New West court two days prior to my trial date, with no notice, very little to eat, not enough to wear, freezing my butt off in the sheriff's cell, two blocks from my apartment and they were saying, 'Just plead guilty and we'll let you go home.'"

Despite maintaining his innocence to himself and his court appointed-lawyer, Gherbetti took the deal.

"I was under duress. Of course, I would have said anything to get out of that prison to go home," he said.

After literally running home, the reality of what had happened set in for Gherbetti. He found the house "cleaned and scoured" of everything belonging to Suzuki and the children.

"Not a photo, not a drawing, nothing. Not a remnant left of my children," he said,

He said his voicemail had 17 messages from Crown counsel attempting to get in touch with Suzuki, indicating she had already left the country.

He did find though, tucked under a chair, a drawing Rion had done and hid for him while he was in jail.

"It's a drawing she made that says, 'Free the rainbows' and it's a bunch of rainbows in the middle of a prison cell," he said breaking into tears. "She knew what was going on. She knew what was going to happen to her."

Gherbetti has only spoken with Suzuki once since they returned to Japan. The next time he called, the number had been disconnected.

"She indicated she wasn't going to let me speak to the children nor ever see them again. It was her intention to 'erase Canada from their memories,' quote," he said.

Hindsight being 20/20, Gherbetti said he should have known what was coming.

"What she wanted was to go back there with the children, without me, which is ultimately what she manufactured," he said. "She didn't want to be married to me anymore, which is alright. These things happen, but to abduct the children in the manner that she did, and to lie to the police... I've been crushed by this whole experience."

Since then Gherbetti has become depressed and been treated for post-traumatic stress disorder, which he said was helpful, but he's run out of cash to continue paying for counselling. While looking for work, he has also taken to the Internet where there is a support network for mothers and fathers of abducted children. With them, he has found some badly needed support but more is always welcome, he said.

Then came the "triple tragedy" on March 11. Gherbetti was at home watching TV when news broke that a massive earthquake and tsunami had struck the coast of Japan.

"I saw it live. The next 18 hours were really the worst," he said, struggling to hold back tears.

Gherbetti played the only card left in his hand to learn about his daughters' fate.

"I had a phone number for my wife's brother, which I saved and had not used because I did not want it to get disconnected. I had my brother phone her brother and he was able to tell us that they survived the tsunami and the earthquake. In his words, they were 'fine'. That's all he would say," Gherbetti said.

Suzuki's family home in Iwaki is just 500 metres from where the tsunami's devastation stopped. An elevated highway slowed the waves from reaching Rion, Lauren and Julia.

But within days of the earthquake, it was learned that the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant was heavily damaged and leaking radiation several times higher than what is safe for humans. And as the weeks and months have rolled on, the news about the radiation leak has become worse, not better. In April, the International Atomic Energy Agency had rated the disaster at Fukushima as a seven, the same as Chernobyl. By June, it was revealed that all three reactors at the plant were in meltdown and there was no plan in place to deal with the hundreds of thousands of tonnes of radioactive water being pumped in to cool the reactors. The Canadian government's official position on Fukushima is that all Canadians should stay at least 80 kilometres away from the nuclear plant.

Gherbetti contacted Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, which was able to contact Suzuki's brother to offer evacuation for the girls and Suzuki's family, but so far, the family has not responded.

"What my contact there tells me is, 'We can offer assistance but that's it. That's all we can do.' If they choose not to accept, there's nothing they can do for me," he said. "The last thing foreign affairs did for me is send Taiko a registered letter requesting information about the children's well-being and photographs."

Today, Gherbetti cannot even be sure if Suzuki's family is still in Iwaki but he suspects they are. That uncertainty, he said, makes matters worse.

Gherbetti has since taken to social media to raise the issues of international child abduction and the growing radiation crisis, and to post messages calling for an evacuation of all children and young mothers from Fukushima prefecture

Gherbetti, like most other "left behind" parents, now does what he can, which isn't much. The one hope he has of seeing his children, short of hiring a recovery agent to "re-kidnap" and transport them back to Canada, is the faint hope of gaining access to them under the Hague Convention on Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction, article 21, which states parents of children taken across borders without permission, must have access to their children.

The trouble is, Japan is the only industrialized country that has refused to sign the convention.

But that chance, albeit slim, remains. The government of Japan announced in June that it would begin a legislative process this fall to sign the convention.

William Storey, a family lawyer and international child abduction expert who Gherbetti retained in 2010, said Japan is one of the toughest countries to deal with.

"I've had several cases over the years of children being taken to Japan and it can be an extremely difficult situation," he said.

Storey said Japan's announcement regarding the Hague Convention sounds good, but it is far too soon to say if will help any mothers or fathers outside Japan to see their children again.

"In theory, it should change the playing field a lot. Whether it will in practice or not, is another matter," Storey said. "It's one thing to sign the treaty and it's something else to put the legislation in place and to put the judicial authorities and the bureaucracy in place to have the treaty enforced in a practical way."

Despite Japan's announcement, Gherbetti remains skeptical. Should Japan sign the convention, Gherbetti will need to go through a family court process in Japan just to see his daughters and given his previous experience and witnessing the Japanese government's response to the Fukushima disaster, he has little faith. Because the abduction pre-dates any signing of the convention, Gherbetti will not be able to use the convention to bring the girls back to Canada.

Gherbetti has requested help from the Prime Minister's Office as well as former and current foreign affairs ministers Laurence Cannon and John Baird but only received form letters in response.

Nevertheless, Gherbetti said he'll pursue any chance he gets to be reunited with Rion, Lauren and Julia.

"I'm fighting this fight on my own, and I'm prepared to just continue because I'll never stop fighting for them," he said.

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