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Poles back estranged father in language ban row

By Tony Paterson in Berlin

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A Polish father has become embroiled in a row with Germany's welfare authorities after they banned him from talking to his daughters in his native language.

In a case that has outraged public opinion in Poland, Wojciech Pormorski, 36, has been told by the Hamburg city authorities that regular dialogue in Polish with his daughters, aged seven and four, would hinder their integration into German society.

Mr Pormorski separated from his German wife 18 months ago and has been denied access to their daughters after refusing to guarantee that he would speak to them only in German.

A well-known refugee from Poland's former communist dictatorship, Mr Pormorski has said he will take the issue to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. "I cannot and will not accept this kind of discrimination. I have spoken Polish to my daughters ever since they were born. This is humiliating treatment," Mr Pormorski told The Telegraph last week.

Given the sensitive nature of Polish-German relations, Mr Pormorski's predicament has captured the imagination of the Polish media. One Warsaw news magazine suggested that the German authorities' approach was reminiscent of the Nazi era. The affair has been drawn to the attention of the Polish government, which is expected to back Mr Pormorski's right to pass on his linguistic heritage to his two girls.

The Polish consulate in Hamburg has pointed out that in 1991 the German government signed a friendship and co-operation agreement with Poland, stipulating that the "linguistic identity" of Poles living in Germany should be protected.

Mr Pormorski fled to Germany in the 1980s after his father, Vaclav, a prominent member of the Solidarity movement, was jailed for opposing Poland's communist regime. At a meeting last year with officials from Hamburg's child welfare department, he was told that he would be allowed to see his daughters only twice a month. The visits would be supervised by a social worker and speaking Polish was forbidden.

An official said: "From an educational standpoint, we do not accept that it would be in the children's interests that these supervised meetings should take place in the Polish language. Speaking German can only be of advantage to the children as they are growing up in this country and go to school here."

The eccentric reason given for insisting on German-only visits is said to have mystified many social workers.

The department also said that the father's visits had to be supervised because both Mr Pormorski and his wife claimed that they "came to blows" during their frequent arguments, but Andrej Kremer, the Polish consul in Hamburg, said that the authorities had turned down an "easy solution" to that problem, which would be to have a Polish-speaking social worker present at Mr Pormorski's visits.

Mr Pormorski, a teacher of German literature, insists that he will continue to fight for his right to speak Polish to his children.

Even a favourable verdict at Strasbourg, however, may be of little help to him. Last week Germany's Constitutional Court decreed for the first time that European Human Rights' Court judgments were not binding in German domestic courts.