

SECOND DIVISION

[G.R. NO. 155733, January 27, 2006]

IN THE MATTER OF THE INTESTATE ESTATES OF THE DECEASED JOSEFA DELGADO AND GUILLERMO RUSTIA CARLOTA DELGADO VDA. DE DE LA ROSA AND OTHER HEIRS OF LUIS DELGADO, NAMELY, HEIRS OF CONCHA VDA. DE AREVALO, HEIRS OF LUISA DELGADO VDA. DE DANA, ANGELA DELGADO ARESPACOCCHAGA, TERESA DELGADO PERLAS, CAROLINA DELGADO-ARESPACOCCHAGA, RODOLFO DELGADO, BENJAMIN DELGADO, GLICERIA DELGADO AND CLEOFAS DELGADO; AND HEIRS OF GORGONIO DELGADO, NAMELY, RAMON DELGADO CAMPO, CARLOS DELGADO CAMPO, CLARITA DELGADO CAMPO-REIZA, YOLANDA DELGADO ENCINAS, FELISA DELGADO CAMPO-ENCINAS AND MELINDA DELGADO CAMPO-MADARANG, PETITIONERS, VS. HEIRS OF MARCIANA RUSTIA VDA. DE DAMIAN, NAMELY, GUILLERMO R. DAMIAN AND JOSE R. DAMIAN; HEIRS OF HORTENCIA RUSTIA CRUZ, NAMELY, TERESITA CRUZ-SISON, HORACIO R. CRUZ, JOSEFINA CRUZ-RODIL, AMELIA CRUZ-ENRIQUEZ AND FIDEL R. CRUZ, JR.; HEIRS OF ROMAN RUSTIA, SR., NAMELY, JOSEFINA RUSTIA ALBANO, VIRGINIA RUSTIA PARAISO, ROMAN RUSTIA, JR., SERGIO RUSTIA, FRANCISCO RUSTIA, LETICIA RUSTIA-MIRANDA; AND GUILLERMINA RUSTIA, AS OPPOSITORS;^[1] AND GUILLERMA RUSTIA, AS INTERVENOR,^[2] RESPONDENTS.^[3]

DECISION

CORONA, J.:

In this petition for review on certiorari, petitioners seek to reinstate the May 11, 1990 decision of the Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Manila, Branch 55,^[4] in SP Case No. 97668, which was reversed and set aside by the Court of Appeals in its decision^[5] dated October 24, 2002.

FACTS OF THE CASE

This case concerns the settlement of the intestate estates of Guillermo Rustia and Josefa Delgado.^[6] The main issue in this case is relatively simple: who, between petitioners and respondents, are the lawful heirs of the decedents. However, it is attended by several collateral issues that complicate its resolution.

The claimants to the estates of Guillermo Rustia and Josefa Delgado may be divided into two groups: (1) the alleged heirs of Josefa Delgado, consisting of her half- and full-blood siblings, nephews and nieces, and grandnephews and grandnieces, and (2) the alleged heirs of Guillermo Rustia, particularly, his sisters,^[7] his nephews and

nieces,^[8] his illegitimate child,^[9] and the *de facto* adopted child^[10] (ampun-ampunan) of the decedents.

THE ALLEGED HEIRS OF JOSEFA DELGADO

The deceased Josefa Delgado was the daughter of Felisa^[11] Delgado by one Lucio Campo. Aside from Josefa, five other children were born to the couple, namely, Nazario, Edilberta, Jose, Jacoba, and Gorgonio, all surnamed Delgado. Felisa Delgado was never married to Lucio Campo, hence, Josefa and her full-blood siblings were all natural children of Felisa Delgado.

However, Lucio Campo was not the first and only man in Felisa Delgado's life. Before him was Ramon Osorio^[12] with whom Felisa had a son, Luis Delgado. But, unlike her relationship with Lucio Campo which was admittedly one without the benefit of marriage, the legal status of Ramon Osorio's and Felisa Delgado's union is in dispute.

The question of whether Felisa Delgado and Ramon Osorio ever got married is crucial to the claimants because the answer will determine whether their successional rights fall within the ambit of the rule against reciprocal intestate succession between legitimate and illegitimate relatives.^[13] If Ramon Osorio and Felisa Delgado had been validly married, then their only child Luis Delgado was a legitimate half-blood brother of Josefa Delgado and therefore excluded from the latter's intestate estate. He and his heirs would be barred by the principle of absolute separation between the legitimate and illegitimate families. Conversely, if the couple were never married, Luis Delgado and his heirs would be entitled to inherit from Josefa Delgado's intestate estate, as they would all be within the illegitimate line.

Petitioners allege that Ramon Osorio and Felisa Delgado were never married. In support thereof, they assert that no evidence was ever presented to establish it, not even so much as an allegation of the date or place of the alleged marriage. What is clear, however, is that Felisa retained the surname Delgado. So did Luis, her son with Ramon Osorio. Later on, when Luis got married, his *Partida de Casamiento*^[14] stated that he was "*hijo natural de Felisa Delgado*" (the natural child of Felisa Delgado),^[15] significantly omitting any mention of the name and other circumstances of his father.^[16] Nevertheless, oppositors (now respondents) insist that the absence of a record of the alleged marriage did not necessarily mean that no marriage ever took place.

Josefa Delgado died on September 8, 1972 without a will. She was survived by Guillermo Rustia and some collateral relatives, the petitioners herein. Several months later, on June 15, 1973, Guillermo Rustia executed an affidavit of self-adjudication of the remaining properties comprising her estate.

THE MARRIAGE OF GUILLERMO RUSTIA AND JOSEFA DELGADO

Sometime in 1917, Guillermo Rustia proposed marriage to Josefa Delgado^[17] but whether a marriage in fact took place is disputed. According to petitioners, the two eventually lived together as husband and wife but were never married. To prove

their assertion, petitioners point out that no record of the contested marriage existed in the civil registry. Moreover, a baptismal certificate naming Josefa Delgado as one of the sponsors referred to her as "*Señorita*" or unmarried woman.

The oppositors (respondents here), on the other hand, insist that the absence of a marriage certificate did not of necessity mean that no marriage transpired. They maintain that Guillermo Rustia and Josefa Delgado were married on June 3, 1919 and from then on lived together as husband and wife until the death of Josefa on September 8, 1972. During this period spanning more than half a century, they were known among their relatives and friends to have in fact been married. To support their proposition, oppositors presented the following pieces of evidence:

1. Certificate of Identity No. 9592 dated [December 1, 1944] issued to Mrs. Guillermo J. Rustia by Carlos P. Romulo, then Resident Commissioner to the United States of the Commonwealth of the Philippines;
2. Philippine Passport No. 4767 issued to Josefa D. Rustia on June 25, 1947;
3. Veterans Application for Pension or Compensation for Disability Resulting from Service in the Active Military or Naval Forces of the United States- Claim No. C-4, 004, 503 (VA Form 526) filed with the Veterans Administration of the United States of America by Dr. Guillermo J. Rustia wherein Dr. Guillermo J. Rustia himself [swore] to his marriage to Josefa Delgado in Manila on 3 June 1919;^[18]
4. Titles to real properties in the name of Guillermo Rustia indicated that he was married to Josefa Delgado.

THE ALLEGED HEIRS OF GUILLERMO RUSTIA

Guillermo Rustia and Josefa Delgado never had any children. With no children of their own, they took into their home the youngsters Guillermina Rustia Rustia and Nanie Rustia. These children, never legally adopted by the couple, were what was known in the local dialect as *ampun-ampunan*.

During his life with Josefa, however, Guillermo Rustia did manage to father an illegitimate child,^[19] the intervenor-respondent Guillerma Rustia, with one Amparo Sagarbarria. According to Guillerma, Guillermo Rustia treated her as his daughter, his own flesh and blood, and she enjoyed open and continuous possession of that status from her birth in 1920 until her father's demise. In fact, Josefa Delgado's obituary which was prepared by Guillermo Rustia, named the intervenor-respondent as one of their children. Also, her report card from the University of Santo Tomas identified Guillermo Rustia as her parent/guardian.^[20]

Oppositors (respondents here) nonetheless posit that Guillerma Rustia has no interest in the intestate estate of Guillermo Rustia as she was never duly acknowledged as an illegitimate child. They contend that her right to compulsory acknowledgement prescribed when Guillermo died in 1974 and that she cannot claim voluntary acknowledgement since the documents she presented were not the

authentic writings prescribed by the new Civil Code.^[21]

On January 7, 1974, more than a year after the death of Josefa Delgado, Guillermo Rustia filed a petition for the adoption^[22] of their *ampun-ampunan* Guillermina Rustia. He stated under oath "[t]hat he ha[d] no legitimate, legitimated, acknowledged natural children or natural children by legal fiction."^[23] The petition was overtaken by his death on February 28, 1974.

Like Josefa Delgado, Guillermo Rustia died without a will. He was survived by his sisters Marciana Rustia vda. de Damian and Hortencia Rustia-Cruz, and by the children of his predeceased brother Roman Rustia Sr., namely, Josefina Rustia Albano, Virginia Rustia Paraiso, Roman Rustia, Jr., Sergio Rustia, Francisco Rustia and Leticia Rustia Miranda.^[24]

ANTECEDENT PROCEEDINGS

On May 8, 1975, Luisa Delgado vda. de Danao, the daughter of Luis Delgado, filed the original petition for letters of administration of the intestate estates of the "spouses Josefa Delgado and Guillermo Rustia" with the RTC of Manila, Branch 55.^[25] This petition was opposed by the following: (1) the sisters of Guillermo Rustia, namely, Marciana Rustia vda. de Damian and Hortencia Rustia-Cruz;^[26] (2) the heirs of Guillermo Rustia's late brother, Roman Rustia, Sr., and (3) the *ampun-ampunan* Guillermina Rustia Rustia. The opposition was grounded on the theory that Luisa Delgado vda. de Danao and the other claimants were barred under the law from inheriting from their illegitimate half-blood relative Josefa Delgado.

In November of 1975, Guillerma Rustia filed a motion to intervene in the proceedings, claiming she was the only surviving descendant in the direct line of Guillermo Rustia. Despite the objections of the oppositors (respondents herein), the motion was granted.

On April 3, 1978, the original petition for letters of administration was amended to state that Josefa Delgado and Guillermo Rustia were *never* married but had merely lived together as husband and wife.

On January 24, 1980, oppositors (respondents herein) filed a motion to dismiss the petition in the RTC insofar as the estate of Guillermo Rustia was concerned. The motion was denied on the ground that the interests of the petitioners and the other claimants remained in issue and should be properly threshed out upon submission of evidence.

On March 14, 1988, Carlota Delgado vda. de de la Rosa substituted for her sister, Luisa Delgado vda. de Danao, who had died on May 18, 1987.

On May 11, 1990, the RTC appointed Carlota Delgado vda. de de la Rosa as administratrix of both estates.^[27] The dispositive portion of the decision read:

WHEREFORE, in view of all the foregoing, petitioner and her co-claimants to the estate of the late Josefa Delgado listed in the Petitions, and enumerated elsewhere in this Decision, are hereby declared as the only legal heirs of the said Josefa Delgado who died intestate in the City

of Manila on September 8, 1972, and entitled to partition the same among themselves in accordance with the proportions referred to in this Decision.

Similarly, the intervenor Guillerma S. Rustia is hereby declared as the sole and only surviving heir of the late Dr. Guillermo Rustia, and thus, entitled to the entire estate of the said decedent, to the exclusion of the oppositors and the other parties hereto.

The Affidavit of Self-Adjudication of the estate of Josefa Delgado executed by the late Guillermo J. Rustia on June 15, 1973 is hereby SET ASIDE and declared of no force and effect.

As the estates of both dece[d]ents have not as yet been settled, and their settlement [is] considered consolidated in this proceeding in accordance with law, a single administrator therefor is both proper and necessary, and, as the petitioner Carlota Delgado Vda. de dela Rosa has established her right to the appointment as administratrix of the estates, the Court hereby APPOINTS her as the ADMINISTRATRIX of the intestate estate of the decedent JOSEFA DELGADO in relation to the estate of DR. GUILLERMO J. RUSTIA.

Accordingly, let the corresponding LETTERS OF ADMINISTRATION issue to the petitioner CARLOTA DELGADO VDA. DE DE LA ROSA upon her filing of the requisite bond in the sum of FIVE HUNDRED THOUSAND PESOS (P500,000.00).

Finally, oppositor GUILLERMINA RUSTIA RUSTIA is hereby ordered to cease and desist from her acts of administration of the subject estates, and is likewise ordered to turn over to the appointed administratrix all her collections of the rentals and income due on the assets of the estates in question, including all documents, papers, records and titles pertaining to such estates to the petitioner and appointed administratrix CARLOTA DELGADO VDA. DE DE LA ROSA, immediately upon receipt of this Decision. The same oppositor is hereby required to render an accounting of her actual administration of the estates in controversy within a period of sixty (60) days from receipt hereof.

SO ORDERED.^[28]

On May 20, 1990, oppositors filed an appeal which was denied on the ground that the record on appeal was not filed on time.^[29] They then filed a petition for certiorari and mandamus^[30] which was dismissed by the Court of Appeals.^[31] However, on motion for reconsideration and after hearing the parties' oral arguments, the Court of Appeals reversed itself and gave due course to oppositors' appeal in the interest of substantial justice.^[32]

In a petition for review to this Court, petitioners assailed the resolution of the Court of Appeals, on the ground that oppositors' failure to file the record on appeal within the reglementary period was a jurisdictional defect which nullified the appeal. On