Interesting Case at the Confluence of Choice of Law, Comity and the Hague Abduction Convention

"At the heart of this sad case, which raises questions of international and federal law under the Hague [Abduction] Convention, is a custody battle over a young girl who has not seen either of her parents in years." That was the lead-in from Judge Jordan to the recent decision by a three-judge panel of the Third Circuit. *Carrascosa v. McGuire*, No. 07-1748/4130 (3rd Cir., March 20, 2008), involved a Spanish mother, once married to an American father, whose child was habitually resident in New Jersey. Upon their divorce, the couple signed a "Parenting Agreement" that established an "interim resolution" of the custody issue and prohibited either of them from traveling outside the country with their daughter. Shortly thereafter, the mother took the daughter to Spain.

A judge in New Jersey issued several orders for the daughter's return, and when each went unanswered, issued a warrant for the mother's arrest. In the meantime, however, purporting to follow the Hague Abduction Convention, the Spanish Courts had decided that the Parenting Agreement violated Article 19 of the Spanish Constitution (regarding the freedom to chose one's place of residence), determined that the removal to that country was not "wrongful" within the meaning of the Convention, and ordered that the daughter remain. When the mother returned to the United States to attend to the divorce proceedings, she was arrested. She challenged her detention as "in violation of the laws and treaties of the United States" through a writ of habeas corpus. In essence, she argued that a decision of the Spanish Court that the Parenting Agreement was null and void should be afforded comity, and void the charges of contempt against her.

The Federal District Court for the District of New Jersey denied the writ, and the Third Circuit affirmed. Applying the Hague Convention and its implementing legislation, the Court recognized that "[t]here is no dispute that [the daughter's] place of habitual residence, prior to . . . her [removal] to Spain, was the United States, in particular New Jersey." As to whether her removal to Spain was wrongful under Article 3 of the Hague Convention, the District Court examined

whether the father's custody rights were breached by Victoria's removal. Because, under New Jersey law, the father had custody rights by virtue of a valid Parenting Agreement, and the mother breached those rights by removing the daughter to Spain without his consent, the removal was "wrongful" within the meaning of Article 3 of the Hague Convention.

The Spanish court, however, in nullifying the Parenting Agreement, never applied New Jersey law, despite their explicit recognition that the daughter's habitual place of residence was New Jersey. They instead based their decision on the "wrongfulness" of the removal solely on Spanish law, while paying only "lip-service" to the Convention. According to the U.S. Court, this "glaring departure . . . from the mandate of the Hague Convention"—i.e. the "total failure to determine [the father's] rights of custody under [the law of the child's habitual residence]"—the decision of the Spanish court was given no weight. The removal was wrongful under the Convention, and the mother's detention was held to be not "in violation of the law or treaties of the United States."