German Federal Court of Justice on Surrogacy and German Public Policy

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In its ruling of 10 December 2014 (Case XII ZB 463/13), the German Federal Court of Justice (Bundesgerichtshof – BGH) had to decide whether, despite the domestic prohibition of surrogacy, a foreign judgment granting legal parenthood to the intended parents of a child born as a result of a surrogacy arrangement should be recognized.

The appellants, a same-sex couple habitually resident in Berlin, are German citizens and live in a registered partnership. In August 2010, they concluded a surrogacy contract with a woman in California. The surrogate mother, a citizen of the United States, is habitually resident in California and was not married during the surrogacy process. In accordance with the contract, the child was conceived by way of assisted reproduction technology using appellant no. 1's sperm and an anonymously donated egg. Prior to the child's birth, appellant no. 1 acknowledged paternity at the German Consulate General in San Francisco with the surrogate mother's consent, and by judgment of the Superior Court of the State of California, County of Placer, legal parenthood was assigned exclusively to the appellants. In May 2011, the surrogate mother gave birth in California; thereafter, the appellants travelled with the child to Berlin where they have been living since. After the civil registry office had refused to record the appellants as the joint legal parents of their child, they brought proceedings for an order requiring the civil registry office to do so, which was denied by the lower courts.

The BGH held that recognition of the Californian judgment could not be refused on the grounds of violation of public policy and ordered the civil registry office to register the child's birth and state the appellants as the joint legal parents. The Court found that German public policy was not violated by the mere fact that legal parenthood in a case of surrogacy treatment was assigned to the intended parents, if one intended parent was also the child's biological father while the surrogate mother had no genetic relation to the child.

Public policy exception within the scope of 'procedural' recognition

First, the Court outlined that, contrary to a mere registration or certification, the Californian judgment could be subject to a 'procedural' recognition laid down in §§ 108,109 of the German Act on the Procedure in Family Matters and Matters of Non-contentious Jurisdiction (FamFG), which enumerate limited grounds for denying recognition. The Court noted that the Californian decision was based on a substantive examination of the validity of the surrogacy agreement and the resulting status issues, which was not to be reviewed (prohibiton of '*révision au fond*'). According to § 109(1) No. 4 FamFG, recognition of a judgment will be refused where it leads to a result which is manifestly incompatible with essential principles of German law, notably fundamental rights (public policy exception). The Court stated that, in order to achieve an international harmony of decisions and to avoid limping status relationships, the public policy exception was to be interpreted restrictively. For this reason, a mere difference of legislation did not imply a violation of domestic public policy; the contradiction between the fundamental values of domestic law and the result of the application of foreign law in the case at hand had to be intolerable.

Paternity of one intended parent

With regard to the legal parenthood status of appellant no. 1, the Court pointed out that no violation of public policy could be found because the application of German law would produce the same result as the decision of the Superior Court of the State of California: Due to the fact that the surrogate mother was not married at the time of the child's birth and appellant no. 1 had acknowledged paternity with her prior consent, German substantial law (§§ 1592 No. 2, 1594(2) German Civil Code) would also regard appellant no. 1 as the legal father of the child.

Assigning legal parenthood to the registered partner of the biological father not contrary to public policy

With regard to the legal parenthood status of appellant no. 2, the Court argued that the outcome of the Californian judgment in fact deviated from the domestic determination of parenthood. However, this divergence would not violate public policy if one of the intended parents, unlike the surrogate mother, was genetically related to the child.

Deviation from German substantive law

Commercial as well as altruistic surrogacy are prohibited under § 1(1) No. 7 German Embryo Protection Act and § 14b Adoption Placement Act, which penalize the undertaking of surrogacy and commercial activities promoting surrogacy such as placement of surrogate mothers. However, the surrogate mother and the intended parents are not punished. The scope of the provisions is limited to acts committed within German territory (§ 7 German Criminal Code).

In addition to the penal aspects, § 1591 German Civil Code defines the woman who gives birth as the mother of a child and excludes the motherhood of another woman even if the latter is the child's genetic mother. The provision respects the social and biological bond between child and birth mother and aims at avoiding 'split' motherhood resulting from surrogacy treatment, including cases where the latter is performed abroad. The BGH outlined that German law provided neither for joint legal parenthood of two men acknowledging paternity nor for assigning legal parenthood to the registered partner of a parent by operation of law; same-sex partners could establish joint legal parenthood solely by means of adoption.

Then the Court held, first, that assigning joint legal parenthood to same-sex partners did, in itself, not violate public policy because, according to the ruling of the German Federal Constitutional Court on so-called 'successive adoption' – a practice granting a person the right to adopt a child already adopted by their registered partner -, married couples and couples living in a registered partnership were considered as equally suited to provide conditions beneficial to the child's upbringing [German Federal Constitutional Court 19.02.2013, Case 1 BvL 1/11 and 1 BvR 3247/09, para 80 with further references = FamRZ 2013, 521, 527].

Secondly, the Court pointed out that the general preventive aims underlying the provisions mentioned above needed to be distinguished from the situation where surrogacy had been nevertheless – lawfully – carried out abroad, because now the welfare of the child as a legal subject with independent rights had to be taken into account. A child, however, could not be held responsible for the circumstances of his or her conception. And while on the one hand a violation of the fundamental rights of the surrogate mother or the child could imply a public policy infringement, the Court stressed that, on the other hand, fundamental rights could also argue for a recognition of the foreign judgment.

Birth mother's human dignity not *per se* violated by surrogacy: drawing a parallel to adoption

With regard to the surrogate mother, the Court argued that the mere fact that surrogacy had been undertaken was, in itself, not sufficient to ascertain an infringement of human dignity. That applied, *a fortiori*, in respect of the child who owed his or her existence to the surrogacy process. The Court emphasized that the surrogate mother's human dignity could be violated if it was subject to doubt whether her decision to carry the child and hand it over to the intended parents after birth had been made on a voluntary basis. However, the Court found that if the law applied by the foreign court imposed requirements to ensure a voluntary participation of the surrogate mother and the surrogacy agreement as well as the circumstances under which the surrogacy treatment was performed had been examined in proceedings that complied with the standards of the rule of law, then, in the absence of any contrary indications, the foreign judgment provided reasonable assurance of the surrogate mother's voluntary participation. According to the surrogate mother's declaration before the Superior Court of the State of California, she was not willing to assume parental responsibilities for the child. The Court held that in this case, the surrogate mother's situation after childbirth was comparable to that of a mother giving her child up for adoption.

Focus on the best interests of the child

Given those findings, the Court concluded that the decision whether to grant recognition to the foreign judgment should be guided primarily by the best interests of the child. For this purpose, the Court referred to the guarantee of parental care laid down in Art. 2(1) in conjunction with Art. 6(2) first sentence of the German Constitution, which grants the child a right to be assigned two legal parents [cf. German Federal Constitutional Court 19.02.2013, Case 1 BvL 1/11 and 1 BvR 3247/09, paras 44, 73 = FamRZ 2013, 521, 523, 526], and the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights on Art. 8(1) ECHR concerning the child's right to respect for his or her private life: The European Court of Human Rights had ruled that the latter encompassed the right of the child to establish a legal parent-child-relationship which was regarded as part of the child's identity within domestic society [ECtHR of 26.06.2014, No. 65192/11 – Mennesson v. France, para 96].

Here, the Court stressed that not only was the surrogate mother not willing to

assume parental responsibilities, but she was, in fact, also not available as a parent on a legal basis: An assignment of legal motherhood to the surrogate mother, which could only be established under German law, would have no effect in the surrogate mother's home state because of the opposing foreign judgment.

Under those circumstances, the Court found that depriving the child of a legal parent-child-relationship with the second intended parent who – unlike the surrogate mother – was willing to assume parental responsibilies for the child, violated the child's right laid down in Art. 8(1) ECHR. According to the Court's view, the limping status relationship between the surrogate mother and the child failed to fulfill the requirements laid down in Art. 2(1) in conjunction with Art. 6(2) of the German Constitution and Art. 8(1) ECHR.

The Court agreed with the opinion of the previous instance that adoption would be an appropriate instrument in the case at hand because, unlike a judgment based on the foreign legislature's general assessment of surrogacy cases, the adoption procedure included an individual examination of the child's best interests. However, the Court pointed out that in cases of stepchild adoption, the outcome of this individual evaluation would usually be favourable and thus coincide with the Californian decision, leading to legal parenthood of the biological parent's registered partner. The consistent results clearly argued against a violation of public policy. Moreover, the Court observed that adoption would not only encounter practical difficulties in the child's country of birth, where the appellants were already considered the legal parents, it would also pose additional risks for the child: It would be left to the discretion of the intended parents whether they assumed parental responsibilities for the child or changed their minds and refrained from adoption; for example, if the child was born with a disability.

Conclusion

The Court's decision has been received with approval within German academia and legal practice [see the notes by *Helms*, FamRZ 2015, 245; *Heiderhoff* NJW 2015, 485; *Mayer*, StAZ 2015, 33; *Schwonberg*, FamRB 2/2015, 55; *Zwißler*, NZFam 2015, 118]. Before this judgment, lower courts had shown a tendency to regard public policy as violated by the mere fact that surrogacy had been performed [cf. Higher Regional Court Berlin 01.08.2013, Case 1 W 413/12, paras 26 *et seqq.* = IPRax 2014, 72, 74 *et seq.*; Administrative Court of Berlin

05.09.2012, Case 23 L 283.12, paras 10 *et seq.* = IPRax 2014, 80 *et seq.*]. In recent years, however, some scholars had advocated a more cautious and methodical handling of the public policy exception [see especially *Heiderhoff*, NJW 2014, 2673, 2674 and *Dethloff*, JZ 2014, 922, 926 *et seq.* with further references]. Instead of resorting to a diffuse disapproval of surrogacy as a whole, the ruling of the BGH is essentially based on an accurate analysis of the concrete alternatives at hand and a critical evaluation of the possible outcomes in the present case.

However, it has rightly been pointed out that, within the complex field of surrogacy, the situation in the case at hand was fairly straightforward: The surrogate mother was not married so that the biological father could acknowledge paternity without complications, there was no conflict between the intended parents and the surrogate mother because the latter did not want to keep the child, and the legal parenthood of the intended parents had been established in a judicial procedure where the rights of the child and the surrogate mother, especially her voluntary participation, had been subject to review [cf. *Heiderhoff*, NJW 2015, 485].

The BGH expressly left open whether a different finding would have been appropriate if neither of the intended parents had been the child's biological parent or if the surrogate mother had been also the genetic mother [para 53]. Neither did the court discuss the issue of 'recognition' of civil status situations and documents. Furthermore, surrogacy arrangements that are undertaken in countries with poor human rights standards and a lower degree of trust in the administration of justice may not fulfill the requirements for a recognition established by the BGH. Insofar, the judgment could have a deterrent effect as regards seeking surrogacy treatment in countries that do not meet the required standards [*Heiderhoff*, NJW 2015, 485].