

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Pitz v. Gonzalez

Case No. 25-cv-04454-LJC · No. 25-cv-04454-LJC · Decided August 21, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Northern District of California ruled on Respondent’s second motion in limine in a Hague Convention proceeding. The court excluded evidence and testimony concerning German proceedings to the extent offered on habitual residence or custody rights, but permitted limited evidence concerning German law and potential protective or ameliorative measures upon return. The court denied further deposition discovery of Petitioner’s German attorney, while allowing limited trial questioning subject to the attorney’s asserted obligations under German law.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Northern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Lisa J. Cisneros
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Northern District of California
DECIDED	August 21, 2025
DOCKET	25-cv-04454-LJC
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Order resolving Respondent's second motion in limine in a Hague Convention proceeding concerning the return of children, including requests to exclude evidence about German proceedings and to obtain further discovery concerning attorney-client privilege and work product.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The Court applied relevance and cumulative-evidence principles under Federal Rules of Evidence 401 and 403, the federal privilege rules, the proportionality standard under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 26(b) (1), and the trial court's broad discretion to control trial proceedings.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished

TOPICS

- family law procedure
- motion in limine
- evidence
- privilege
- foreign affairs

PRACTICE AREAS

family law

civil procedure

evidence

privilege

international law

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether testimony and evidence concerning the German proceedings, including testimony about the German court's habitual-residence determination and Dr. Hanke's opinions on habitual residence and custody rights under German law, should be excluded at trial.
2. Whether German-law evidence and evidence concerning potential future German custody proceedings may be admitted to assist the Court in evaluating protective or ameliorative measures if return to Germany is ordered.
3. Whether Petitioner waived attorney-client privilege and work product protection by offering declarations from Dr. Hanke as an expert on German law.
4. Whether Respondent should receive a further deposition of Dr. Hanke concerning the German proceedings and his declarations.
5. Whether Respondent should be permitted to offer her own evidence concerning German law or future German custody proceedings despite not having previously designated that evidence.

HOLDINGS

1. Because habitual residence is for this Court to decide and no deference to the German courts' findings was requested or warranted, the Court excluded testimony about the German proceedings leading to the habitual-residence determination, how the German court reached that decision, and Dr. Hanke's opinions that the children were habitual residents of Germany.
2. The Court allowed documentary evidence concerning the German proceedings and testimony from Dr. Hanke about German law and custody proceedings that would occur if the children were returned, because that evidence could inform the Court's assessment of protective or ameliorative measures.
3. Although Petitioner's use of Dr. Hanke's opinions as a testifying expert could support a subject-matter waiver of privilege as to prior statements on the same legal issues, Respondent was not entitled to a further deposition because the burden of the proposed discovery outweighed its likely benefit under the circumstances.
4. Respondent may ask Dr. Hanke about prior statements to Petitioner concerning the subject matter of his declaration or trial testimony, but the Court will not order Dr. Hanke to answer if he asserts that German law or ethical rules prevent him from doing so, so long as his testimony remains limited to German law and potential future German proceedings.
5. Respondent may present her own witness or other evidence concerning German law or future German custody proceedings despite her earlier failure to designate such evidence, subject to specified notice, disclosure, and deposition conditions.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Both parties agree that habitual residence—the primary issue in dispute in this case—is a matter for this Court to decide.” (at 2)

“Petitioner offers no authority for applying foreign privilege law under similar circumstances.” (at 7)

“the burden . . . of the proposed discovery” (at 9)

“outweighs its likely benefit” (at 9)

“trial court’s power to control the conduct of trial is broad.” (at 9)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

The record included an interim German order concerning parental custody and later correspondence from the same German judge stating that the children had their habitual residence in Berlin. Petitioner sought to use declarations and anticipated testimony from German attorney Dr. Andreas Hanke concerning German law and German proceedings. Respondent sought to exclude that evidence or obtain further discovery based on an asserted waiver of attorney-client privilege and work product protection.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Petitioner filed a conditional motion in limine, and Respondent filed three motions in limine. Petitioner confirmed that his motion was moot; the Court had denied Respondent's first motion at the August 20, 2025 pretrial conference and deferred the third motion. This order grants in part and denies in part Respondent's second motion in limine.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- *Golan v. Saada*, 596 U.S. 666, 678-79 (2022)
- *Cavaco Dias v. Cavaco Dias*, No. 24-cv-04471-EMC, ECF No. 153 at 6-7 (N.D. Cal. Oct. 18, 2024)
- *Herrick Co. v. Vetta Sports*, No. 94 Civ. 0905 (RPP), 1998 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 14544, at *7, *9 (S.D.N.Y. Sept. 14, 1998)
- *United States v. Panza*, 612 F.2d 432, 438 (9th Cir. 1980)
- *Magyar v. United Fire Ins. Co.*, 811 F.2d 1330, 1331 (9th Cir. 1987)

OPINION

1 2 3 4 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT 5 NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA 6 7
CHRISTOPHER PITZ, Case No. 25-cv-04454-LJC 8 Petitioner, ORDER REGARDING
MOTIONS IN 9 v. LIMINE 10 INESSA GONZALEZ, Re: Dkt. No. 97 Respondent. 11 12 The
parties to this Hague Convention proceeding filed four motions in limine: one 13 “conditional”

motion in limine by Petitioner Christopher Pitz, and three motions in limine by 14 Respondent Inessa Gonzalez.

See generally ECF No. 97. Petitioner has now confirmed that his 15 sole motion is moot. ECF No. 118. The Court denied Respondent's first motion in limine for the 16 reasons stated on the record at the August 20, 2025 pretrial conference, and deferred a ruling on 17 her third motion in limine, to be addressed if necessary at trial. See ECF No. 119.

The Court now 18 addresses Respondent's second motion in limine, to exclude testimony and documents related to 19 German court proceedings, or if such matters are not excluded, to find a waiver of privilege as to 20 Petitioner's German lawyer Dr. Andreas Hanke. ECF No. 97 at 12–16.

For the reasons discussed 21 below, that motion is GRANTED in part and DENIED in part.¹ 22 The record includes an "Interim order for parental custody" issued on May 8, 2025. ECF 23 No. 92-9 at 11. That order lists Respondent and her authorized representative, and notes that it 24 was issued without oral proceedings. Later correspondence, produced on August 5, 2025, by the 25 same judge, states, "The children have their habitual residence in Berlin," and goes on to explain 26 custody proceedings that remain to be completed in Berlin.

ECF No. 92-9 at 4. Respondent 27 1 contends that the German proceedings are fundamentally unfair and unreliable, because all rest on 2 an assumption that the parties' children are habitual residents of Germany, which resulted from 3 Respondent's default in responding to documents that she asserts were never properly served on 4 her. *Id.* at 12. 5 Both parties agree that habitual residence—the primary issue in dispute in this case—is a 6 matter for this Court to decide.

Petitioner has not asked the Court to defer to the German courts' 7 findings on that matter, and the Court will not do so. Absent any such deference, the German 8 decisions shed little light on the factual question of where the children habitually resided. Both 9 parties will have the opportunity at trial to offer the sort of evidence and argument on that issue 10 that Respondent asserts she was unable to present to the German courts.

The Court therefore 11 declines to consider the German decisions for that purpose, and will exclude as irrelevant (or in 12 the alternative, as cumulative and a waste of time under Rule 403 of the Federal Rules of 13 Evidence) any testimony from Dr. Hanke about the German proceedings leading up to the court's 14 habitual residence determination, how the German court reached that decision, or Dr. Hanke's 15 own opinions as to whether the children are habitual residents of Germany (which, to the extent 16 offered, would seem to be based on standards of German law rather than the Hague convention as 17 interpreted by U.S. precedent binding on this Court).

18 The Court also excludes from trial Dr. Hanke's opinion that Petitioner "has rights of 19 custody to both children under German law," ECF No. 64, ¶ 17; see also, e.g., *id.* ¶ 21. The Court 20 has separately granted summary adjudication of Petitioner's right to custody under German law, 21 so

that issue is no longer relevant at trial. 22 German law and the German proceedings may, however, be relevant to the question of 23 whether any protective or ameliorative measures are appropriate if the Court determines that 24 Germany was the children's habitual residence and orders their return.

Both parties agreed at the 25 pretrial conference that the Court has discretion to order such measures. See *Golan v. Saada*, 596 U.S. 666, 678–79 (2022). Understanding what proceedings will occur upon any such return to 27 Germany, and what protections would be available under German law, may inform the assessment 1 allow for that purpose the admission of documentary evidence of the German proceedings thus far, 2 as well as testimony from Dr. Hanke about German law and the custody proceedings that would 3 go forward if the Court were to order the children's return.

Respondent may introduce Dr. 4 Hanke's declarations if relevant for impeachment purposes. 5 Finally, Respondent seeks to further depose Dr. Hanke about the German proceedings and 6 his declarations, arguing that Petitioner and Dr. Hanke waived attorney-client privilege and work 7 product protections by offering declarations from Dr. Hanke as an expert on German law.

ECF 8 No. 97 at 14–16. 9 Judge Chen addressed a similar issue in a Hague Convention case last year, where the 10 respondent was represented by the same counsel as Respondent here: 11 Respondent argues that Petitioner should be compelled to produce documents from his expert on Armenian law, Dr. Dashyan.

For 12 purposes of the trial, there are two important topics covered by Dr. Dashyan in her expert report: (1) what protection mechanisms are 13 available in domestic violence cases in Armenia (ameliorative measures) and (2) what happened in the Armenian court proceedings 14 related to the domestic violence incident that led to Respondent fleeing Armenia. According to Respondent, once Petitioner 15 designated Dr. Dashyan his expert on these matters, he waived attorney-client privilege over the same subject matters – which is 16 important because Dr. Dashyan represented Petitioner during the domestic violence proceedings in Armenia and continues to represent 17 him in those proceedings.

In other words, Respondent is taking the position that any advice that Dr. Dashyan gave to Petitioner as part of 18 the domestic violence proceedings in Armenia should be produced. Respondent also takes the position that, if Dr. Dashyan gave 19 Petitioner any advice related to ameliorative measures, that should also be produced and be subject to disclosure.

20 The Court does not find waiver with respect to the topic in (2). The 21 Dashyan expert report does talk about what happened in the Armenian court proceedings (¶¶ 54-57). However, that is simply a factual 22 recounting.

In this regard, Dr. Dashyan is more like a fact witness rather than a legal expert. There is no opinion evidence on this point. 23 Topic (1), however, presents a different issue. Petitioner admits that Dr. Dashyan will not simply identify what legal protections there are 24 for domestic violence victims in Armenia but will also opine on the efficacy of those protections.

Here, she is not a mere fact witness, but 25 is offering an opinion. Because Dr. Dashyan is giving testimony as an expert, Petitioner has an obligation to disclose her opinions as well as 26 what she relied upon or considered to arrive at those opinions. See Fed. R. Civ. P. 26(a)(2)(B) & 1993 advisory committee notes. 27 Moreover, if Dr. Dashyan has made statements to Petitioner that are attorney-client privilege as a shield to prevent disclosure of those 1 statements given that he designated Dr. Dashyan as a testifying expert (i.e., a sword) on the same subject matter.

Waiver may be based on 2 subject matter covered by the opinion and may encompass communications which contradict the expert's stated opinion. See 3 *Herrick Co. v. Vetta Sports*, No. 94 Civ. 0905 (RPP), 1998 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 14544, at *7 (S.D.N.Y. Sept. 14, 1998) ("By designating 4 Wolfram as an expert trial witness [on legal ethics], Skadden has opened the door to such discovery, which covers documents other 5 than those directly considered by Wolfram in forming his opinions.

Prior inconsistent opinions by Wolfram on the same subject matter 6 would be highly relevant material."); *id.* at *9 ("Skadden cannot present Wolfram as an expert on legal ethics and then prevent 7 Wolfram's expert testimony from being effectively impeached by claims of privilege.

To do so would be to use Wolfram's status as an 8 expert on matters of legal ethics as both sword and a shield...."). 9 Notably, at the hearing, Petitioner essentially conceded that he could not claim privilege over communications he had with Dr. Dashyan 10 about ameliorative measures. That being the case, the Court ordered the parties to meet and confer so that any communications about that 11 subject matter will be produced to Respondent.

In that regard, the scope of Respondent's document request must be narrowed 12 accordingly. 13 *Cavaco Dias v. Cavaco Dias*, No. 24-cv-04471-EMC, ECF No. 153 at 6–7 (N.D. Cal. Oct. 18, 14 2024). 15 Petitioner asserted at the pretrial conference that foreign parties in Hague Convention cases 16 routinely offer declarations from their own foreign attorneys as to the nature of foreign law.

17 Perhaps so, but for the reasons addressed by Judge Chen, that approach at least risks a finding of 18 waiver of privilege. Subject to exceptions not applicable here, the common law of the federal 19 courts generally covers privilege in federal court proceedings. Fed. R. Evid. 501. Petitioner offers 20 no authority for applying foreign privilege law under similar circumstances.

It appears likely that 21 the Court could properly find a waiver of privilege as to prior statements Dr. Hanke made to 22 Petitioner on the issues of law he has addressed in his declaration. 23

Respondent has not, however, rebutted Dr. Hanke's statements that disclosing 24 communications with Petitioner and other details about his representation of Petitioner would 25 violate Dr. Hanke's ethical obligations under German ethical rules, notwithstanding Petitioner's 26 litigation conduct and use of Dr. Hanke's opinions in this Court.

See, e.g., ECF No. 97-5 at 16, 27 19, 20 (Hanke Dep. at 54:22–57:20, 66:5–69:5, 71:22–72:13). Though German law does not 1 violation of the laws or professional rules of his country would impose a significant burden on the 2 attorney. Setting aside any opinion that Dr. Hanke might have on the issue of habitual residence 3 and custody rights, which the Court will not allow at trial, Dr. Hanke's declarations and 4 anticipated testimony at trial are limited (in relevant part) to explanations of German court 5 proceedings and German laws.

His declarations and anticipated testimony on those matters do not 6 appear to be meaningfully in dispute. Any possibility that Dr. Hanke might have made prior 7 inconsistent statements on those topics to Petitioner is wholly speculative.

Under the 8 circumstances of this case, “the burden... of the proposed discovery” into Dr. Hanke's attorney- 9 client communications and interactions, in violation of his obligations in Germany, “outweighs its 10 likely benefit,” even assuming for the sake of argument that U.S. law of privilege waiver applies 11 here and would support a finding of waiver. See Fed.

R. Civ. P. 26(b)(1). Respondent's request 12 for a further deposition of Dr. Hanke is therefore DENIED. 13 Rule 26 does not govern testimony at trial. But a “trial court's power to control the 14 conduct of trial is broad.” *United States v. Panza*, 612 F.2d 432, 438 (9th Cir. 1979). “In 15 performing that function, a trial judge must necessarily have the discretion to order a witness to 16 answer a question....” *Magyar v. United Fire Ins.*

Co., 811 F.2d 1330, 1331 (9th Cir. 1987) 17 (emphasis added). Such discretion is supported by the Federal Rules of Evidence, which 18 recognize the Court's authority to “protect witnesses from harassment or undue embarrassment.” 19 Fed. R. Evid. 611(a)(3); see also Fed. R. Evid. 403. So long as Respondent's questions do not 20 reach the point of harassment, the Court will not prevent Respondent from asking Dr. Hanke about 21 prior statements to Petitioner on the subject matter addressed in his declaration or trial testimony.

22 As a matter of discretion, however, the Court will not order Dr. Hanke to answer such questions if 23 he asserts that his obligations under German law or ethical rules prevent him from doing so—at 24 least so long as his testimony elicited by Petitioner is limited to the issues of German law and 25 potential future German proceedings that, as discussed above, may be relevant to this Court's 26 consideration of protective or ameliorative measures.

27 The Court's holdings above limit, to some degree, Respondent's ability to test Dr. Hanke's 1 issue or offering other forms of evidence of German law if she disputes Dr. Hanke's opinions. See

2 Fed. R. Civ. P. 44.1.

In an abundance of caution, however, the Court will allow Respondent to 3 || present her own witness or other evidence on issues of German law or future German custody 4 || proceedings, notwithstanding her failure to designate such a witness or evidence earlier. If 5 Respondent intends to exercise this option, she must notify Petitioner and the Court that she 6 intends to do so no later than noon on Friday, August 22, 2025, and must disclose any such 7 witness and expert declaration? to Petitioner and the Court no later than noon on Sunday, August 8 24, 2025.

If Respondent discloses a new witness, Petitioner may depose that witness for no more 9 than two hours before the witness testifies at trial, and the parties shall meet and confer to 10 || determine an appropriate date and time for the deposition (which could potentially occur on a trial 11 day after other regularly scheduled trial testimony has concluded).

12 IT IS SO ORDERED. 13 Dated: August 21, 2025 El: B15 (An, | Aart — AJ. CISNEROS = 16 ited States Magistrate Judge = 17 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 > Because these disclosures will be made on the eve of trial, if Respondent advances her own 2g || expert, the expert's declaration shall not exceed fourteen pages (the total number of pages contained in Dr. Hanke's two declarations), not including attached exhibits.