

REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES, PETITIONER, VS. HEIRS OF JULIO RAMOS, REPRESENTED BY REYNALDO RAMOS MEDINA, ZENAIDA RAMOS MEDINA, DOLORES RAMOS MEDINA, ROMEO RAMOS AND MEDINA, VIRG...

G.R. No. 169481. February 22, 2010

Ponente: DEL CASTILLO, J.

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DEL CASTILLO, J.:

In petitions for reconstitution of a lost or destroyed Torrens certificate of title, trial courts are duty-bound to examine the records of the case to determine whether the jurisdictional requirements have been strictly complied with. They must also exercise extreme caution in granting the petition, lest they become unwitting accomplices in the reconstitution of questionable titles instead of being instruments in promoting the stability of our land registration system.[1]

This petition[2] for review on certiorari seeks to reverse the August 31, 2005 Decision[3] of the Court of Appeals (CA) in CA-G.R. CV No. 75345. The CA's assailed Decision affirmed the February 19, 2002 Order[4] of the Regional Trial Court (RTC), Branch 3, Balanga City, Bataan, which in turn granted respondents' Petition[5] for Reconstitution of Original Certificate of Title (OCT) No. 3613.

Proceedings before the Regional Trial Court

On February 23, 2001, respondents filed a Petition for Reconstitution of OCT No. 3613, before the RTC of Balanga City containing the following material averments:

That the late Julio Ramos is being represented by herein petitioners who are all of legal age, married, Filipinos and residents of Kaparangan, Orani, Bataan;

That the late Julio Ramos, grandfather of herein petitioners, is the original claimant of Lot No. 54 of the Cadastral Survey of Orani, Bataan, as evidenced by a Relocation Plan of said lot duly approved by the Chief, Regional Surveys Division, Ruperto P. Sawal, and the Regional Technical Director Eriberto V. Almazan, the plan hereto attached as Annex "A" and the technical descriptions as Annex "B";

That the Land Registration Authority issued a Certification to the effect that Lot No. 54 of Orani Cadastre, Bataan was issued Decree No. 190622 on September 29, 1925, hereto attached as Annex "C";

That the Acting Registrar of Deeds of Bataan likewise issued a Certification to the effect that OCT No. 3613 covering Lot No. 54 of Orani Cadastre is not among the salvaged records of the said Registry, copy hereto attached as Annex "D";

That the owner's copy of OCT No. 3613 was lost and all efforts exerted to locate the same are in vain;

That petitioners secured a Lot Data Computation from the Bureau of Lands wherein it is shown that Julio Ramos is the claimant of Lot No. 54 of Orani Cadastre, certified machine copy hereto attached as Annex "E";

That the adjoining owners of said Lot No. 54 are:

NE by Lot 58 & 49 - Jose Peña, et al., Orani, Bataan;
SE by Lot 51 - Pedro de Leon, Orani, Bataan;
SW by Jose Zulueta Street;
NW by Lot 55 - Jose Sioson, Orani, Bataan;

That OCT No. 3613 may be reconstituted on the basis of the approved plan and technical descriptions and the Lot Data Computation;

That said Lot No. 54 is declared for taxation purposes in the name of Julio Ramos and taxes due thereon are fully paid up to the current year;

That the title is necessary to enable petitioners [to] partition said lot among themselves;

That there is no document pending registration with the Registry of Deeds of Bataan affecting said Lot 54.[6]

Respondents prayed for the issuance of an order directing the Registrar of Deeds to reconstitute OCT No. 3613 on the basis of the approved plan and technical description.

On February 28, 2001, the trial court issued a Notice[7] setting the case for initial hearing on August 30, 2001, which was reset to September 27, 2001.[8] During the said hearing, respondents presented several pieces of documentary evidence[9] purportedly to establish compliance with the jurisdictional requirements. Thereafter, trial ensued.

Respondent Reynaldo Ramos Medina (Reynaldo), a 62-year old watch technician, testified on the material allegations of the petition, as well as on the appended annexes. He likewise declared on the witness stand that his mother used to keep the owner's copy of OCT No. 3613. During the Japanese occupation, however, it was buried in a foxhole and since then it could no longer be found. Reynaldo further testified that he and his co-heirs are the present occupants of Lot 54. He was not cross-examined by the public prosecutor, who was then representing the petitioner.

On February 19, 2002, the trial court issued an Order[10] granting respondents' petition and disposing as follows:

WHEREFORE, the Petition, being in order, is hereby GRANTED.

The Acting Registrar of Deeds of Bataan is directed, upon payment by petitioners of the corresponding legal fees, to reconstitute Original Certificate of Title No. T-3613 covering Lot No. 54 of the Orani Cadastre based on the approved Relocation Plan and Technical Description.

SO ORDERED.[11]

Proceedings before the Court of Appeals

Believing that the court a quo erred in granting the petition for reconstitution, petitioner Republic of the Philippines appealed to the CA ascribing upon the court a quo the following errors:

THE TRIAL COURT ERRED IN GRANTING THE PETITION FOR RECONSTITUTION OF OCT NO. 3613 DESPITE PETITIONERS-APPELLEES' [sic] FAILURE TO ESTABLISH THAT AT THE TIME OF ITS ALLEGED LOSS, SUBJECT OCT WAS VALID AND SUBSISTING.

THE TRIAL COURT ERRED IN GRANTING THE PETITION FOR RECONSTITUTION OF OCT NO. 3613 DESPITE PETITIONERS-APPELLEES' [sic] FAILURE TO ADDUCE ADEQUATE BASIS OR

SOURCE FOR RECONSTITUTION.[12]

On August 31, 2005, the CA rendered the assailed Decision dismissing the appeal. The appellate court found that the pieces of documentary evidence presented by the respondents are sufficient to grant reconstitution of OCT No. 3613. Besides, the respondents had been paying realty taxes. Moreover, the adjacent lot owners did not oppose the petition despite due notice. The dispositive portion of the CA's Decision reads:

WHEREFORE, premises considered, the instant appeal is hereby DISMISSED for lack of merit. The appealed Order dated February 19, 2002 of the Regional Trial Court of Bataan is AFFIRMED.

SO ORDERED.[13]

Hence, this petition.

Issues

Petitioner interposed the present recourse anchored on the following grounds:

I.

THE COURT OF APPEALS ERRED IN AFFIRMING THE TRIAL COURT'S ORDER GRANTING RECONSTITUTION OF ORIGINAL CERTIFICATE OF TITLE NO. 3613.

II.

THE COURT OF APPEALS ERRED IN ITS APPLICATION OF PARAGRAPH F, SECTION 2 OF REPUBLIC ACT NO. 26.[14]

Petitioner's Allegations

Petitioner contends that the CA erred in affirming the Order of the trial court granting respondents' petition for reconstitution considering that respondents failed to present competent proof to establish their claim. First, respondents anchor their claim on the Certification[15] issued by the Land Registration Authority (LRA) to prove that Decree No. 190622 was issued for Lot 54. However, said Certification did not state that Decree No. 190622 was issued in the name Julio Ramos. Second, when reconstitution is anchored on Section 2(f) of Republic Act (RA) No. 26,[16] just like in this case, the Relocation Survey Plan and Technical Description are mere supporting evidence to the "other document which, in the judgment of the court, is sufficient and proper basis for reconstituting the lost or destroyed certificate of title." Thus, the court a quo erred in ordering reconstitution based on the Relocation Survey Plan and Technical Description presented by the respondents.

Lastly, petitioner insists that respondents failed to present competent proof of loss of OCT No. 3613. It maintains that the non-execution of an affidavit of loss by the grandparents of the heirs of Julio Ramos who, allegedly, were in possession of OCT No. 3613 at the time of its loss, and the failure of the respondents to inform immediately the Registrar of Deeds of such loss, cast doubt on respondents' claim that there existed OCT No. 3613.

Respondents, on the other hand, assert that in a petition for review on certiorari, the only issues that can be raised are limited to pure questions of law. Here, both the trial court and the appellate court found factual bases to grant the reconstitution they prayed for. Hence, the present petition should be denied.

Petitioner counter argues that this case falls under the numerous exceptions to the rule cited by the respondents.

Our Ruling

The petition is meritorious. Before delving into the arguments advanced by the petitioner, we shall first tackle some procedural and jurisdictional matters involved in this case.

The instant petition falls under the exceptions to the general rule that factual findings of the appellate court are binding on this Court.

Ordinarily, this Court will not review, much less reverse, the factual findings of the CA, especially where such findings coincide with those of the trial court.[17] The findings of facts of the CA are, as a general rule, conclusive and binding upon this Court, since this Court is not a trier of facts and does not routinely undertake the re-examination of the evidence presented by the contending parties during the trial of the case.[18]

The above rule, however, is subject to a number of exceptions, such as (1) when the inference made is manifestly mistaken, absurd or impossible; (2) when there is grave abuse of discretion; (3) when the finding is grounded entirely on speculations, surmises, or conjectures; (4) when the judgment of the CA is based on misapprehension of facts; (5) when the findings of fact are conflicting; (6) when the CA, in making its findings, went beyond the issues of the case and the same is contrary to the admissions of both parties; (7) when the findings of the CA are contrary to those of the trial court; (8) when the findings of fact are conclusions without citation of specific evidence on which they are based; (9) when the CA manifestly overlooked certain relevant facts not disputed by the parties and which, if properly considered, would justify a different conclusion; and (10) when the findings of fact of the CA are premised on the absence of evidence and are contradicted by the evidence on record.

As will be discussed later, this case falls under the last three exceptions and, hence, we opt to take cognizance of the questions brought to us by petitioner. But first, we shall address a jurisdictional question although not raised in the petition.

The trial court did not acquire jurisdiction over the petition for reconstitution.

RA 26 lays down the specific procedure for the reconstitution of lost or destroyed Torrens certificates of title. It confers jurisdiction upon trial courts to hear and decide petitions for judicial reconstitution. However, before said courts can assume jurisdiction over the petition and grant the reconstitution prayed for, the petitioner must observe certain special requirements and mode of procedure prescribed by law. Some of these requirements are enumerated in Sections 12 and 13 of RA 26, viz:

SEC. 12. Petitions for reconstitution from sources enumerated in Sections 2(c), 2(d), 2(e), 2(f), 3(c), 3(d), 3(e), and/or 3(f) of this Act, shall be filed with the [Regional Trial Court], by the registered owner, his assigns, or any person having an interest in the property. The petition shall state or contain, among other things, the following: (a) that the owner's duplicate of the certificate of title had been lost or destroyed; (b) that no co-owner's, mortgagee's, or lessee's duplicate had been issued, or, if any had been issued, the same had been lost or destroyed; (c) the location area and boundaries of the property (d) the nature and description of the building or improvements, if any, which do not belong to the owner of the land, and the names and addresses of the owners of such buildings or improvements; (e) the names and addresses of the occupants or persons in possession of the property, of the owners of the adjoining properties and of all persons who may have any interest in the property; (f) a detailed description of the encumbrances, if any, affecting the property; and (g) a statement that no deeds or other instruments affecting the property have been presented for registration, or if there be any, the registration thereof has not been accomplished, as yet. All the documents, or authenticated copies thereof, to be introduced in evidence in support of the petition for reconstitution shall be attached thereto and filed with the same: Provided, That in case the reconstitution is to be made exclusively from sources enumerated in Section 2(f) or 3(f) of this Act, the petition shall be further accompanied with a plan and technical description of the property duly approved by the Chief of the General Land Registration Office or

with a certified copy of the description taken from a prior certificate of title covering the same property.

SEC. 13. The court shall cause a notice of the petition, filed under the preceding section, to be published, at the expense of the petitioner, twice in successive issues of the Official Gazette, and to be posted on the main entrance of the provincial building and of the municipal building of the municipality or city in which the land is situated, at least thirty days prior to the date of hearing. The court shall likewise cause a copy of the notice to be sent, by registered mail or otherwise, at the expense of the petitioner, to every person named therein whose address is known, at least thirty days prior to the date of hearing. Said notice shall state, among other things, the number of the lost or destroyed certificate of title, if known, the name of the registered owner, the names of the occupants or persons in possession of the property, the owners of the adjoining properties and all other interested parties, the location area and boundaries of the property, and the date on which all persons having any interest therein must appear and file their claim or objections to the petition. The petitioner shall, at the hearing, submit proof of the publication, posting and service of the notice as directed by the court. (Emphasis supplied)

Perusal of respondents' Petition for Reconstitution, for the purpose of verifying whether the strict and mandatory requirements of RA 26, particularly Section 12 (b) and (e) thereof, have been faithfully complied with, would reveal that it did not contain an allegation that no co-owner's, mortgagee's or lessees duplicate had been issued or, if any had been issued, the same had been lost or destroyed. The petition also failed to state the names and addresses of the present occupants of Lot 54. Correspondingly, the Notice of Hearing issued by the court a quo did not also indicate the names of the occupants or persons in possession of Lot 54, in gross violation of Section 13 of RA 26. Because of these fatal omissions, the trial court never acquired jurisdiction over respondents' petition. Consequently, the proceedings it conducted, as well as those of the CA, are null and void.

It is unfortunate that despite the mandatory nature of the above requirements^[19] and our constant reminder to courts to scrutinize and verify carefully all supporting documents in petitions for reconstitution,^[20] the same still escaped the attention of the trial court and the CA. And while petitioner also overlooked those jurisdictional infirmities and failed to incorporate them as additional issues in its petition, this Court has sufficient authority to pass upon and resolve the same since they affect jurisdiction.^[21]

Respondents failed to present competent source of reconstitution.

Our disquisition could end here. Briefly though, and to explain why this case falls under the exceptions to the general rule that this Court will not review the CA's finding of facts, we shall examine the probative weight of the pieces of evidence presented by the respondents in support of their Petition for Reconstitution.

Section 2 of RA 26 enumerates in the following order the sources from which reconstitution of lost or destroyed original certificates of title may be based:

SEC. 2. Original certificates of title shall be reconstituted from such of the sources hereunder enumerated as may be available in the following order:

- (a) The owner's duplicate of the certificate of title;
- (b) The co-owner's, mortgagee's, or lessee's duplicate of the certificate of title;
- (c) A certified copy of the certificate of title, previously issued by the register of deeds or by a legal custodian thereof;
- (d) An authenticated copy of the decree of registration or patent, as the case may be, pursuant to which the original certificate of title was issued;

(e) A document, on file in the Registry of Deeds by which the property, the description of which is given in said document, is mortgaged, leased or encumbered, or an authenticated copy of said document showing that its original has been registered; and

(f) Any other document which, in the judgment of the court, is sufficient and proper basis for reconstituting the lost or destroyed certificate of title.

Respondents predicate their Petition for Reconstitution on Section 2(f) of RA 26. And to avail of its benefits, respondents presented survey plan,[22] technical description,[23] Certification issued by the Land Registration Authority,[24] Lot Data Computation,[25] and tax declarations.[26] Unfortunately, these pieces of documentary evidence are not similar to those mentioned in subparagraphs (a) to (e) of Section 2 of RA 26, which all pertain to documents issued or are on file with the Registry of Deeds. Hence, respondents' documentary evidence cannot be considered to fall under subparagraph (f). Under the principle of ejusdem generis, where general words follow an enumeration of persons or things by words of a particular and specific meaning, such general words are not to be construed in their widest extent, but are to be held as applying only to persons or things of the same kind or class as those specifically mentioned.[27] Thus, in *Republic of the Philippines v. Santua*,[28] we held that when Section 2(f) of RA 26 speaks of "any other document," the same must refer to similar documents previously enumerated therein, that is, those mentioned in Sections 2(a), (b), (c), (d), and (e).

Also, the survey plan and technical description are not competent and sufficient sources of reconstitution when the petition is based on Section 2(f) of RA 26. They are mere additional documentary requirements.[29] This is the clear import of the last sentence of Section 12, RA 26 earlier quoted. Thus, in *Lee v. Republic of the Philippines*,[30] where the trial court ordered reconstitution on the basis of the survey plan and technical description, we declared the order of reconstitution void for want of factual support.

Moreover, the Certification[31] issued by the LRA stating that Decree No. 190622 was issued for Lot 54 means nothing. The Land Registration Act expressly recognizes two classes of decrees in land registration proceedings, namely, (i) decrees dismissing the application and (ii) decrees of confirmation and registration.[32] In the case at bench, we cannot ascertain from said Certification whether the decree alluded to by the respondents granted or denied Julio Ramos' claim. Moreover, the LRA's Certification did not state to whom Lot 54 was decreed. Thus, assuming that Decree No. 190622 is a decree of confirmation, it would be too presumptuous to further assume that the same was issued in the name and in favor of Julio Ramos. Furthermore, said Certification did not indicate the number of the original certificate of title and the date said title was issued. In *Tahanan Development Corporation v. Court of Appeals*,[33] we held that the absence of any document, private or official, mentioning the number of the certificate of title and date when the certificate of title was issued, does not warrant the granting of such petition.

With regard to the other Certification[34] issued by the Registry of Deeds of Balanga City, it cannot be deduced therefrom that OCT No. 3613 was actually issued and kept on file with said office. The Certification of said Registry of Deeds that said title "is not among those salvaged records of this Registry as a consequence of the last World War," did not necessarily mean that OCT No. 3613 once formed part of its records.

Anent the tax declaration submitted, the same covered only taxable year 1998. Obviously, it had no bearing with what occurred before or during the last world war. Besides, a tax declaration is not a reliable source of reconstitution of a certificate of title. As we held in *Republic of the Philippines v. Santua*,[35] a tax declaration can only be prima facie evidence of claim of ownership, which, however, is not the issue in a reconstitution proceeding. A reconstitution of title does not pass upon the ownership of land covered by the lost or destroyed title but merely determines whether a re-issuance of such title is proper.

We also share the observation of petitioner that the non-submission of an affidavit of loss by the person who was allegedly in actual possession of OCT No. 3613 at the time of its loss, casts doubt on respondents' claim that OCT No. 3613 once existed and subsequently got lost. Under Section 109[36] of Presidential Decree No. 1529,[37] the owner must file with the proper Registry of Deeds a notice of loss executed under oath. Here, despite the lapse of a considerable length of time, the alleged owners of Lot 54 or the persons who were in possession of the same, i.e., respondents' grandparents, never executed an affidavit relative to the loss of OCT No. 3613.

The presentation of such affidavit becomes even more important considering the doubtful testimony of Reynaldo. When he testified on November 29, 2001, he was only 62 years old and, therefore, he was barely six years old during the Japanese occupation until the Liberation. Also, his testimony consisted only of his declaration that his unnamed grandmother used to keep said copy of OCT No. 3613; that it was buried in a foxhole during the Japanese occupation; and, subsequently, got lost. He did not testify on how he obtained knowledge of the alleged facts and circumstances surrounding the loss of the owner's copy of OCT No. 3613. In fact, he neither named the person responsible for the burying or hiding of the title in a foxhole nor mentioned the place where that foxhole was located. Reynaldo's testimony was also lacking in details as to how he participated in searching for the title's whereabouts. Indeed, Reynaldo's testimony is highly suspect and cannot be given the expected probative weight.

In fine, we are not convinced that respondents had adduced competent evidence to warrant reconstitution of the allegedly lost original certificate of title.

WHEREFORE, the instant petition is hereby GRANTED. The August 31, 2005 Decision of the Court of Appeals in CA-G.R. CV No. 75345 is hereby REVERSED and SET ASIDE. The Petition for Reconstitution filed by the respondents is DISMISSED.

SO ORDERED.

Carpio, (Chairperson), Leonardo-De Castro[*], Abad, and Perez, JJ., concur.

[*] Per Raffle dated September 8, 2009.

[1] Republic v. Planes, 430 Phil. 848, 851, 869 (2002).

[2] Rollo, pp. 18-42.

[3] CA rollo, pp 50-55; penned by Associate Justice Eliezer R. De Los Santos and concurred in by Associate Justices Eugenio S. Labitoria and Arturo D. Brion.

[4] Records, pp. 41-43; penned by Judge Remigio M. Escalada, Jr.

[5] Id. at 2-4.

[6] Id. at 2-3.

[7] Id. at 15-16.

[8] See Order dated August 30, 2001, id. at 19.

[9] Exhibit "A", Notice dated February 28, 2001, id. at 15; Exhibit "B", Certificate of Publication dated April 18, 2001 issued by the National Printing Office, id. at 18; Exhibit "C", Certificate of Posting dated March 1, 2001, id. at 17; Exhibit "D", Relocation Plan, id. at 4; Exhibit "E", Technical Description, id. at 5; Exhibit "F", Certification dated February 17, 1997 issued by the Land Registration Authority, id. at 8; Exhibit "G", Certification dated July 21, 1997 issued by the Registry of Deeds of Balanga, Bataan, id. at 9; Exhibit "H", Lot Data Computation, id. at

10; Exhibit "I", Tax Declaration of Real Property, id. at 11.

[10] Id. at 41-43.

[11] Id. at 43.

[12] CA rollo, pp. 32-33.

[13] Id. at 54.

[14] Rollo, p. 25.

[15] Records, p. 8.

[16] AN ACT PROVIDING A SPECIAL PROCEDURE FOR THE RECONSTITUTION OF TORRENS CERTIFICATE OF TITLE LOST OR DESTROYED.

[17] Ledonio v. Capitol Development Corporation, G.R. No. 149040, July 4, 2007, 526 SCRA 379, 392.

[18] Cosmos Bottling Corporation v. Nagrama, Jr., G.R. No. 164403, March 4, 2008, 547 SCRA 571, 584-585.

[19] Supra note 1.

[20] Republic of the Philippines v. El Gobierno de las Islas Filipinas, 498 Phil. 570, 585 (2005).

[21] Hi-Tone Marketing Corporation v. Baikal Realty Corporation, 480 Phil. 545, 561 (2004).

[22] Exhibit "D", Records, p. 5.

[23] Exhibit "E", id. at 6.

[24] Exhibit "F", id. at 8.

[25] Exhibit "H", id. at 10.

[26] Exhibit "I", id. at 11.

[27] Parayno v. Jovellanos, G.R. No. 148408, July 14, 2006, 495 SCRA 85, 92.

[28] G.R. No. 155703, September 8, 2008, 564 SCRA 331, 338-339; see also Heirs of Felicidad Dizon v. Hon. Discaya, 362 Phil. 536, 545 (1999).

[29] Supra note 27.

[30] 418 Phil. 793, 802-803 (2001).

[31] Records, p. 8. It reads:

This is to certify that after due verification of our "Record Book of Cadastral Lots," it was found that Lot No. 54 of the Cadastral Survey of Orani, Province of Bataan, Cadastral Case No. 10, LRC Cadastral Record No. 315, was issued Decree No. 190622, on Sept. 29, 1925 pursuant to the decision rendered thereon. Said lot is subject of annotation to quote: RA 26, Sec. 12, (LRC) PR-6581.

This certification is issued upon the request of Felix S. Peña (of) Tapulao, Orani, Bataan.

[32] De los Reyes v. De Villa, 48 Phil. 227, 231 (1925).

[33] 203 Phil. 652 (1982).

[34] Records, p. 9.

[35] Supra note 27 at 340.

[36] SECTION 109. Notice and replacement of lost duplicate certificate. - In case of loss or theft of an owner's duplicate certificate of title, due notice under oath shall be sent by the owner or by someone in his behalf to the Register of Deeds of the province or city where the land lies as soon as the loss or theft is discovered. If a duplicate certificate is lost or destroyed, or cannot be produced by a person applying for the entry of a new certificate to him or for the registration of any instrument, a sworn statement of the fact of such loss or destruction may be filed by the registered owner or other person in interest and registered.

[37] AMENDING AND CODIFYING THE LAWS RELATIVE TO REGISTRATION OF PROPERTY AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES

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