

PHILIPPINE NATIONAL RAILWAYS CORPORATION, JAPHET ESTRANAS AND BEN SAGA, PETITIONERS, VS. PURIFICACION VIZCARA, MARIVIC VIZCARA, CRESENCIA A. NATIVIDAD, HECTOR VIZCARA, JOEL VIZC...

G.R. No. 190022. February 15, 2012

Ponente: REYES, J.

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REYES, J.:

Nature of the Petition

Before this Court is a petition for review on certiorari under Rule 45 of the 1997 Rules of Civil Procedure, seeking to annul and set aside the Decision[1] dated July 21, 2009 of the Court of Appeals (CA) in CA-G.R. CV No. 90021, which affirmed with modification the Decision[2] dated March 20, 2007 of the Regional Trial Court (RTC), Branch 40, Palayan City, and Resolution[3] dated October 26, 2009, which denied the petitioners' motion for reconsideration.

The Antecedent Facts

On May 14, 2004, at about three o'clock in the morning, Reynaldo Vizcara (Reynaldo) was driving a passenger jeepney headed towards Bicol to deliver onion crops, with his companions, namely, Cresencio Vizcara (Cresencio), Crispin Natividad (Crispin), Samuel Natividad (Samuel), Dominador Antonio (Dominador) and Joel Vizcara (Joel). While crossing the railroad track in Tiaong, Quezon, a Philippine National Railways (PNR) train, then being operated by respondent Japhet Estranas (Estranas), suddenly turned up and rammed the passenger jeepney. The collision resulted to the instantaneous death of Reynaldo, Cresencio, Crispin, and Samuel. On the other hand, Dominador and Joel, sustained serious physical injuries.[4]

At the time of the accident, there was no level crossing installed at the railroad crossing. Additionally, the "Stop, Look and Listen" signage was poorly maintained. The "Stop" signage was already faded while the "Listen" signage was partly blocked by another signboard.[5]

On September 15, 2004, the survivors of the mishap, Joel and Dominador, together with the heirs of the deceased victims, namely, Purificacion Vizcara, Marivic Vizcara, Cresencia Natividad and Hector Vizcara, filed an action for damages against PNR, Estranas and Ben Saga, the alternate driver of the train, before the RTC of Palayan City. The case was raffled to Branch 40 and was docketed as Civil Case No. 0365-P. In their complaint, the respondents alleged that the proximate cause of the fatalities and serious physical injuries sustained by the victims of the accident was the petitioners' gross negligence in not providing adequate safety measures to prevent injury to persons and properties. They pointed out that in the railroad track of Tiaong, Quezon where the accident happened, there was no level crossing bar, lighting equipment or bell installed to warn motorists of the existence of the track and of the approaching train. They concluded their complaint with a prayer for actual, moral and compensatory damages, as well as attorney's fees.[6]

For their part, the petitioners claimed that they exercised due diligence in operating the train and monitoring its roadworthiness. They asseverate that right before the collision, Estranas was driving the train at a moderate speed. Four hundred (400) meters away from the railroad crossing, he started blowing his horn to warn motorists of the approaching train. When the train was only fifty (50) meters away from the intersection, respondent Estranas noticed that all vehicles on both sides of the track were already at a full stop. Thus, he carefully proceeded at a speed of twenty-five (25) kilometers per hour, still blowing the train's horn. However, when the train was already ten (10) meters away from the intersection, the passenger jeepney being driven by Reynaldo suddenly crossed the tracks. Estranas immediately stepped on the brakes to avoid hitting the jeepney but due to the sheer weight of the train, it did not instantly come to a complete stop until the jeepney was dragged 20 to 30 meters away from the point of collision.[7]

The Ruling of the Trial Court

After trial on the merits, the RTC rendered its Decision[8] dated March 20, 2007, ruling in favor of the respondents, the dispositive portion of which reads:

WHEREFORE, premises considered, judgment is hereby rendered ordering defendants Philippine National Railways Corporation (PNR), Japhet Estranas and Ben Saga to, jointly and severally pay the following amounts to:

1. a) PURIFICACION VIZCARA:

- 1) P50,000.00, as indemnity for the death of Reynaldo Vizcara;
- 2) P35,000.00, for funeral expenses;
- 3) P5,000.00 for re-embalming expenses;
- 4) P40,000.00 for wake/interment expenses;
- 5) P300,000.00 as reimbursement for the value of the jeepney with license plate no. DTW-387;
- 6) P200,000.00 as moral damages;
- 7) P100,000.00 as exemplary damages; and
- 8) P20,000.00 for Attorney's fees.

b) MARIVIC VIZCARA:

- 1) P50,000.00, as indemnity for the death of Cresencio Vizcara;
- 2) P200,000.00 as moral damages;
- 3) P100,000.00 as exemplary damages; and
- 4) P20,000.00 for Attorney's fees.

c) HECTOR VIZCARA:

- 1) P50,000.00 as indemnity for the death of Samuel Vizcara;
- 2) P200,000.00 as moral damages;
- 3) P100,000.00 as exemplary damages; and
- 4) P20,000.00 for Attorney's fees.

d) CRESENCIA NATIVIDAD:

- 1) P50,000.00 as indemnity for the death of Crispin Natividad;
- 2) P200,000.00 as moral damages;
- 3) P100,000.00 as exemplary damages; and
- 4) P20,000.00 for Attorney's fees.

e) JOEL VIZCARA

- 1) P9,870.00 as reimbursement for his actual expenses;
- 2) P50,000.00 as moral damages;
- 3) P25,000.00 as exemplary damages; and
- 4) P10,000.00 for Attorney's fees.

f) DOMINADOR ANTONIO

- 1) P63,427.00 as reimbursement for his actual expenses;
- 2) P50,000.00 as moral damages;
- 3) P25,000.00 as exemplary damages; and
- 4) P10,000.00 for Attorney's fees.

and

2. Costs of suit.

SO ORDERED.[9]

The Ruling of the CA

Unyielding, the petitioners appealed the RTC decision to the CA. Subsequently, on July 21, 2009, the CA rendered the assailed decision, affirming the RTC decision with modification with respect to the amount of damages awarded to the respondents. The CA disposed, thus:

WHEREFORE, instant appeal is PARTIALLY GRANTED. The assailed Decision is AFFIRMED WITH MODIFICATION, as follows:

- (1) The award of P5,000.00 for re-embalming expenses and P40,000.00 for wake/interment expenses to PURIFICACION VIZCARA is deleted. In lieu thereof, P25,000.00 as temperate damages is awarded;
- (2) The award of moral damages to PURIFICACION VIZCARA, MARIVIC VIZCARA, HECTOR VIZCARA and CRESENCIA NATIVIDAD is hereby reduced from P200,000.00 to P100,000.00 each while moral damages awarded to JOEL VIZCARA and DOMINADOR ANTONIO are likewise reduced from P50,000.00 to P25,000.00;
- (3) The award of exemplary damages to PURIFICACION VIZCARA, MARIVIC VIZCARA, HECTOR VIZCARA and CRESENCIA NATIVIDAD is hereby reduced from P100,000.00 to P50,000.00 each while exemplary damages awarded to JOEL VIZCARA and DOMINADOR ANTONIO are likewise reduced from P25,000.00 to P12,500.00; and
- (4) The award for attorney's fees in favor of the Appellees as well as the award of P300,000.00 to Appellee PURIFICACION as reimbursement for the value of the jeepney is DELETED.

SO ORDERED.[10]

In the assailed decision, the CA affirmed the RTC's finding of negligence on the part of the petitioners. It concurred with the trial court's conclusion that petitioner PNR's failure to install sufficient safety devices in the area, such as flagbars or safety railroad bars and signage, was the proximate cause of the accident. Nonetheless, in order to conform with established jurisprudence, it modified the monetary awards to the victims and the heirs of those who perished due to the collision.

The petitioners filed a Motion for Reconsideration[11] of the decision of the CA. However, in a Resolution[12] dated October 26, 2009, the CA denied the same.

Aggrieved, the petitioners filed the present petition for review on certiorari, raising the following grounds:

I

THE CA ERRED IN FINDING THAT THE PROXIMATE CAUSE OF THE ACCIDENT WAS THE NEGLIGENCE OF THE PETITIONERS;II

THE CA ERRED IN HOLDING THAT THE DOCTRINE OF LAST CLEAR CHANCE FINDS NO APPLICATION IN THE INSTANT CASE;III

THE CA ERRED IN FINDING NEGLIGENCE ON THE PART OF THE PETITIONERS OR ERRED IN NOT FINDING AT THE LEAST, CONTRIBUTORY NEGLIGENCE ON THE PART OF THE RESPONDENTS.[13]

The petitioners maintain that the proximate cause of the collision was the negligence and recklessness of the driver of the jeepney. They argue that as a professional driver, Reynaldo is presumed to be familiar with traffic rules and regulations, including the right of way accorded to trains at railroad crossing and the precautionary measures to observe in traversing the same. However, in utter disregard of the right of way enjoyed by PNR trains, he failed to bring his jeepney to a full stop before crossing the railroad track and thoughtlessly followed the ten-wheeler truck ahead of them. His failure to maintain a safe distance between the jeepney he was driving and the truck ahead of the same prevented him from seeing the PNR signage displayed along the crossing.[14]

In their Comment,[15] the respondents reiterate the findings of the RTC and the CA that the petitioners' negligence in maintaining adequate and necessary public safety devices in the area of the accident was the proximate cause of the mishap. They asseverate that if there was only a level crossing bar, warning light or sound, or flagman in the intersection, the accident would not have happened. Thus, there is no other party to blame but the petitioners for their failure to ensure that adequate warning devices are installed along the railroad crossing.[16]

This Court's Ruling

The petition lacks merit.

The petitioners' negligence was the proximate cause of the accident.

Article 2176 of the New Civil Code prescribes a civil liability for damages caused by a person's act or omission constituting fault or negligence. It states:

Article 2176. Whoever by act or omission causes damage to another, there being fault or negligence, is obliged to pay for the damage done. Such fault or negligence, if there was no pre-existing contractual relation between the parties, is called quasi-delict and is governed by the provisions of this chapter.

In *Layugan v. Intermediate Appellate Court*,[17] negligence was defined as the omission to do something which a reasonable man, guided by considerations which ordinarily regulate the conduct of human affairs, would do, or the doing of something which a prudent and reasonable man would not do. It is the failure to observe for the protection of the interests of another person, that degree of care, precaution, and vigilance which the circumstances justly demand, whereby such other person suffers injury.[18] To determine the existence of negligence, the time-honored test was: Did the defendant in doing the alleged negligent act use that reasonable care and caution which an ordinarily prudent person would have used in the same situation? If not, then he is guilty of negligence. The law here in effect adopts the standard supposed to be supplied by the imaginary conduct of the discreet paterfamilias of the Roman law. The existence of negligence in a given case is not determined by reference to the personal judgment of the actor in the situation before him. The law considers what would be reckless, blameworthy, or negligent in the man of ordinary intelligence and prudence and determines liability by that.[19]

In the instant petition, this Court is called upon to determine whose negligence occasioned the ill-fated incident. The records however reveal that this issue had been rigorously discussed by both the RTC and the CA. To emphasize, the RTC ruled that it was the petitioners' failure to install adequate safety devices at the railroad crossing which proximately caused the collision. This finding was affirmed by the CA in its July 21, 2009 Decision. It is a well-established rule that factual findings by the CA are conclusive on the parties and are not reviewable by this Court. They are entitled to great weight and respect, even finality, especially when, as in this case, the CA affirmed the factual findings arrived at by the trial court.[20]

Furthermore, in petitions for review on certiorari, only questions of law may be put into issue. Questions of fact cannot be entertained.[21] To distinguish one from the other, a question of law exists when the doubt or difference centers on what the law is on a certain state of facts. A question of fact, on the other hand, exists if the doubt centers on the truth or falsity of the alleged facts.[22] Certainly, the finding of negligence by the RTC, which was affirmed by the CA, is a question of fact which this Court cannot pass upon as this would entail going into the factual matters on which the negligence was based.[23] Moreover, it was not shown that the present case falls under any of the recognized exceptions[24] to the oft repeated principle according great weight and respect to the factual findings of the trial court and the CA.

At any rate, the records bear out that the factual circumstances of the case were meticulously scrutinized by both the RTC and the CA before arriving at the same finding of negligence on the part of the petitioners, and we found no compelling reason to disturb the same. Both courts ruled that the petitioners fell short of the diligence expected of it, taking into consideration the nature of its business, to forestall any untoward incident. In particular, the petitioners failed to install safety railroad bars to prevent motorists from crossing the tracks in order to give way to an approaching train. Aside from the absence of a crossing bar, the "Stop, Look and Listen" signage installed in the area was poorly maintained, hence, inadequate to alert the public of the impending danger. A reliable signaling device in good condition, not just a dilapidated "Stop, Look and Listen" signage, is needed to give notice to the public. It is the responsibility of the railroad company to use reasonable care to keep the signal devices in working order. Failure to do so would be an indication of negligence.[25] Having established the fact of negligence on the part of the petitioners, they were rightfully held liable for damages.

There was no contributory negligence on the part of the respondents.

As to whether there was contributory negligence on the part of the respondents, this court rule in the negative. Contributory negligence is conduct on the part of the injured party, contributing as a legal cause to the harm he has suffered, which falls below the standard which he is required to conform for his own protection. It is an act or omission amounting to want of ordinary care on the part of the person injured which, concurring with the defendant's negligence, is the proximate cause of the injury.[26] Here, we cannot see how the respondents could have contributed to their injury when they were not even aware of the forthcoming danger. It was established during the trial that the jeepney carrying the respondents was following a ten-wheeler truck which was only about three to five meters ahead. When the truck proceeded to traverse the railroad track, Reynaldo, the driver of the jeepney, simply followed through. He did so under the impression that it was safe to proceed. It bears noting that the prevailing circumstances immediately before the collision did not manifest even the slightest indication of an imminent harm. To begin with, the truck they were trailing was able to safely cross the track. Likewise, there was no crossing bar to prevent them from proceeding or, at least, a stoplight or signage to forewarn them of the approaching peril. Thus, relying on his faculties of sight and hearing, Reynaldo had no reason to anticipate the impending danger.[27] He proceeded to cross the track and, all of a sudden, his jeepney was rammed by the train being operated by the petitioners. Even then, the circumstances before the collision negate the imputation of

contributory negligence on the part of the respondents. What clearly appears is that the accident would not have happened had the petitioners installed reliable and adequate safety devices along the crossing to ensure the safety of all those who may utilize the same.

At this age of modern transportation, it behooves the PNR to exert serious efforts to catch up with the trend, including the contemporary standards in railroad safety. As an institution established to alleviate public transportation, it is the duty of the PNR to promote the safety and security of the general riding public and provide for their convenience, which to a considerable degree may be accomplished by the installation of precautionary warning devices. Every railroad crossing must be installed with barriers on each side of the track to block the full width of the road until after the train runs past the crossing. To even draw closer attention, the railroad crossing may be equipped with a device which rings a bell or turns on a signal light to signify the danger or risk of crossing. It is similarly beneficial to mount advance warning signs at the railroad crossing, such as a reflectorized crossbuck sign to inform motorists of the existence of the track, and a stop, look and listen signage to prompt the public to take caution. These warning signs must be erected in a place where they will have ample lighting and unobstructed visibility both day and night. If only these safety devices were installed at the Tiaong railroad crossing and the accident nevertheless occurred, we could have reached a different disposition in the extent of the petitioner's liability.

The exacting nature of the responsibility of railroad companies to secure public safety by the installation of warning devices was emphasized in *Philippine National Railways v. Court of Appeals*,^[28] thus:

[I]t may broadly be stated that railroad companies owe to the public a duty of exercising a reasonable degree of care to avoid injury to persons and property at railroad crossings, which duties pertain both to the operation of trains and to the maintenance of the crossings. Moreover, every corporation constructing or operating a railway shall make and construct at all points where such railway crosses any public road, good, sufficient, and safe crossings, and erect at such points, at sufficient elevation from such road as to admit a free passage of vehicles of every kind, a sign with large and distinct letters placed thereon, to give notice of the proximity of the railway, and warn persons of the necessity of looking out for trains. The failure of the PNR to put a cross bar, or signal light, flagman or switchman, or semaphore is evidence of negligence and disregard of the safety of the public, even if there is no law or ordinance requiring it, because public safety demands that said device or equipment be installed.^[29]

The responsibility of the PNR to secure public safety does not end with the installation of safety equipment and signages but, with equal measure of accountability, with the upkeep and repair of the same. Thus, in *Cusi v. Philippine National Railways*,^[30] we held:

Jurisprudence recognizes that if warning devices are installed in railroad crossings, the travelling public has the right to rely on such warning devices to put them on their guard and take the necessary precautions before crossing the tracks. A need, therefore, exists for the railroad company to use reasonable care to keep such devices in good condition and in working order, or to give notice that they are not operating, since if such a signal is misunderstood it is a menace. Thus, it has been held that if a railroad company maintains a signalling device at a crossing to give warning of the approach of a train, the failure of the device to operate is generally held to be evidence of negligence, which maybe considered with all the circumstances of the case in determining whether the railroad company was negligent as a matter of fact. ^[31]

The maintenance of safety equipment and warning signals at railroad crossings is equally important as their installation since poorly maintained safety warning devices court as much danger as when none was installed at all. The presence of safety warning signals at railroad crossing carries with it the presumption that they are in good working condition and that the public may depend on them for assistance. If they happen to be neglected and inoperative, the public may be misled into relying on the impression of safety they normally convey and

eventually bring injury to themselves in doing so.

The doctrine of last clear chance is not applicable.

Finally, the CA correctly ruled that the doctrine of last clear chance is not applicable in the instant case. The doctrine of last clear chance provides that where both parties are negligent but the negligent act of one is appreciably later in point of time than that of the other, or where it is impossible to determine whose fault or negligence brought about the occurrence of the incident, the one who had the last clear opportunity to avoid the impending harm but failed to do so, is chargeable with the consequences arising therefrom. Stated differently, the rule is that the antecedent negligence of a person does not preclude recovery of damages caused by the supervening negligence of the latter, who had the last fair chance to prevent the impending harm by the exercise of due diligence.^[32] To reiterate, the proximate cause of the collision was the petitioners' negligence in ensuring that motorists and pedestrians alike may safely cross the railroad track. The unsuspecting driver and passengers of the jeepney did not have any participation in the occurrence of the unfortunate incident which befell them. Likewise, they did not exhibit any overt act manifesting disregard for their own safety. Thus, absent preceding negligence on the part of the respondents, the doctrine of last clear chance cannot be applied.

WHEREFORE, premises considered, the petition is DENIED. The Decision of the Court of Appeals dated July 21, 2009 in CA-G.R. CV No. 90021 is hereby AFFIRMED.

SO ORDERED.

Carpio, (Chairperson), Villarama, Jr.,[*] Perez, and Sereno, JJ., concur.

[*] Additional Member in lieu of Associate Justice Arturo D. Brion per Special Order No. 1195 dated February 15, 2012.

[1] Penned by Associate Justice Myrna Dimaranan Vidal, with Associate Justices Portia Aliño-Hormachuelos and Magdangal De Leon, concurring; rollo, pp. 31-46.

[2] Id. at 81-97.

[3] Id. at 52-54.

[4] Id. at 82.

[5] Id. at 38-39.

[6] Id. at 81-83.

[7] Id. at 8-9.

[8] Supra note 2.

[9] Id. at 95-97.

[10] Id. at 44-45.

[11] Id. at 47-51.

[12] Supra note 3.

[13] Id. at 12.

[14] Id. at 13-14.

[15] Id. at 68-80.

[16] Id. at 79.

[17] 249 Phil. 363 (1988).

[18] Id. at 373, citing Blacks Law Dictionary, Fifth Edition, 930; Cooley on Torts, Fourth Edition, Vol. 3, 265.

[19] *Picart v. Smith*, 37 Phil. 809, 813 (1918).

[20] *Cebu Shipyard & Eng'g Works, Inc. v. William Lines, Inc.*, 366 Phil. 439, 451 (1999), citing *Meneses v. Court of Appeals*, 316 Phil. 210, 222 (1995); *Tay Chun Suy v. Court of Appeals*, G.R. No. 93640, January 7, 1994, 229 SCRA 151, 156; *First Philippine International Bank v. CA*, 322 Phil. 280, 319 (1996); *Fortune Motors (Phils.) Corp. v. CA*, 335 Phil. 315, 330 (1997).

[21] Id. at 452.

[22] *Westmont Investment Corporation v. Francia, Jr.*, G.R. No. 194128, December 7, 2011, citing *Microsoft Corp. v. Maxicorp, Inc.*, 481 Phil. 550, 561 (2004).

[23] *Philippine National Railways v. Brunty*, G.R. No. 169891, November 2, 2006, 506 SCRA 685, 697, citing *Estacion v. Bernardo*, 518 Phil. 388, 398 (2006); *Lambert v. Heirs of Ray Castillon*, 492 Phil. 384, 389 (2005); *Pestaño v. Sps. Sumayang*, 400 Phil. 740, 748 (2000).

[24] Instances when the findings of fact of the trial court and/or Court of Appeals may be reviewed by the Supreme Court are: (1) when the conclusion is a finding grounded entirely on speculation, surmises or conjectures; (2) when the inference made is manifestly mistaken, absurd or impossible; (3) where there is a grave abuse of discretion; (4) when the judgment is based on a misapprehension of facts; (5) when the findings of fact are conflicting; (6) when the Court of Appeals, in making its findings, went beyond the issues of the case and the same is contrary to the admissions of both appellant and appellee; (7) the findings of the Court of Appeals 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 facts set forth in the petition as well as in the petitioners' main and reply briefs are not disputed by the respondents; and (10) the finding of fact of the Court of Appeals is premised on the supposed absence of evidence and is contradicted by the evidence on record. (*Misa v. Court of Appeals*, G.R. No. 97291, August 5, 1992, 212 SCRA 217, 221-222)

[25] *Philippine National Railways v. Court of Appeals*, G.R. No. 157658, October 15, 2007, 536 SCRA 147, 155.

[26] See *National Power Corporation v. Heirs of Noble Casionan*, G.R. No. 165969, November 27, 2008, 572 SCRA 71, 81-82, citing *Estacion v. Bernardo*, 518 Phil. 388, 401 (2006); *Ma-ao Sugar Central Co., Inc. v. Court of Appeals*, G.R. No. 83491, August 27, 1990, 189 SCRA 88, 93.

[27] See *Cusi v. Philippine National Railways*, 179 Phil. 284, 294 (1979).

[28] *Philippine National Railways v. Court of Appeals*, G.R. No. 157658, October 15, 2007, 536 SCRA 147.

[29] Id. at 155-156, citing *Philippine National Railway v. Brunty*, G.R. No. 169891, November 2, 2006, 506 SCRA 685, 699.

[30] *Cusi v. Philippine National Railways*, 179 Phil. 284, 294 (1979).

[31] Id. at 292, citing 74 C.J.S., 1347, 1348 and 44 Am Jur. 766, pp. 8-9.

[32] Canlas v. Court of Appeals, 383 Phil. 315, 324 (2000), citing Philippine Bank of Commerce v. CA, 336 Phil. 667, 680 (1997), citing LBC Air Cargo, Inc. v. CA, 311 Phil. 715, 722-724 (1995); Picart v. Smith, 37 Phil. 809, 814 (1915); Pantranco North Express, Inc. v. Baesa, 258-A Phil. 975, 980 (1989); Glan People's Lumber and Hardware v. Intermediate Appellate Court, 255 Phil. 447 (1989).

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