

INTERNATIONAL CHILD ABDUCTION:  
THE USES AND ABUSES OF THE HAGUE CONVENTION  
A PERSONAL COMMENTARY  
PAPER FOR A HEARING BEFORE THE SENATE  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

My paper is drawn from my personal tragedy and my knowledge of the situation in Britain and in Germany.

In 1984, I married a German doctor, Hans-Peter Volkmann, in London and our first son, Alexander, was born a year later. Volkmann then decided that we should move to Germany for two years. I abandoned my City career to follow my husband, and our second son, Constantin, was born in 1987. But our marriage broke up and in 1992 we legally separated: the children would live with their mother in London and visit their father during their school holidays.

At first, all worked well. The children adapted quickly to their London life. They continued their schooling at the French Lycee and spent holidays with their father in Germany. I struggled to rebuild my career in the City of London so that I could support my children. By 1994 I had managed to obtain a senior position in a Bank and to buy a comfortable apartment for the three of us.

On 6 July 1994, the children left for their summer holidays. Without warning, four days before they were due to return to London, their father announced that he was not sending them back to England. He then disappeared with the boys.

I had no choice but to apply to the English courts. The High Court of England & Wales ruled that the “retention of the children is illegal” and ordered their “immediate return” to Britain under the terms of the Hague Convention. Initially, a local German court upheld the English decision. But Volkmann requested half an hour to say good-bye to the boys. My lawyers naively agreed. Taking advantage of this, and in defiance of the court order, Volkmann bundled the boys into a car and vanished. The local police were unwilling to help and by the time Court bailiffs were located, it was too late.

The following day, Volkmann lodged an “ex-parte” (i.e. the judges did not inform my side) appeal in the higher court of Lower Saxony, in the nearby town of Celle. Astonishingly, the judges made a provisional ruling in his favour. The children should remain in Germany until the appeal was heard.

When this took place, in October 1994, the Celle court reversed the earlier English and German decisions on the grounds that it was the children’s wish to remain in Germany, and that they had been suffering in a “foreign environment...especially since German is not spoken at home or at school”... The judges ruled that the children had attained an age at which it was appropriate to take their view into account, ...since “a 7 year old child faced with the decision to play judo or football, generally knows which decision to make”...

At the time of the hearing, I had not seen or spoken to my children in over four months and they had been under the sole influence and control of their father.

The Celle court decision also meant that all further legal proceedings on custody and access took place -and are still taking place, four years later- on the abductor's home territory. The second consequence was that despite numerous applications to the German court since 1994, I have never been able to see my children alone.

In November 1995, several applications were rejected on the basis that I might re-abduct the boys and that they no longer wanted to see me. In December 1995 a further hearing was held in Verden: access was again denied on the grounds that I could re-abduct the children if we were to spend Christmas together. In January 1996, following a desperate attempt to see my boys in Germany, I was falsely accused by my ex-husband of trying to abduct the children. Despite a police report confirming this was untrue, immediately thereafter and in my absence the court transferred the residence of the children to Germany. Despite every guarantee on my part, including the support of the British Consul General in Hamburg, the fear of abduction was consistently used, over the next few years, to deny me and my parents normal access rights.

In September 1997, Volkmann divorced me. In exchange for giving him custody, it was agreed in court that I should have access to the children on "neutral territory". But when the moment finally came, six long months later, for me to meet my sons in Hamburg, Volkmann backed out at the last moment, stating that it was the wishes of the children not to see me. The judge refused to enforce the access agreement. It was only then that I discovered that while the custody arrangement was enforceable, access was not. (In the UK it is not possible to get a divorce or a custody order without - enforceable access arrangements).

This took place in February of this year. Since then a further application to see my children has been denied on the grounds of "lack of urgency ". Now, I am awaiting another hearing in Germany to which I have been summoned on 25 November.

In the last four and a half years, not only have I never been alone with my children, but I still have no enforceable access rights. In this period, I have been able to spend only 11 hours in the company of my children. (2 visits in December 1994; 1 in October 1995 and 5 more by May 1996 and 1 in February 1998). All were held under the most harrowing conditions: locked in my ex-husband's secluded house and under the supervision of a third party. All were broken off after less than two hours.

So the months pass, the years pass, and my children are growing up without a mother. Before my ex-husband abducted our children, they were allowed to see and love both their parents. Now, they are not.

If anything is trans-national, it is the interests of the children. Sadly, children's issues remain an area where national interest is too often allowed to assert itself. Cooperation between some Hague Convention countries is practically non-existent. Judges often do not know the treaty well enough

to enforce it and nationalism takes precedence over the Hague Convention rules.

Has anyone proved that I am an unfit mother? No. Has anyone proved that I do not love my children? No. But, I am nonetheless denied the rights that even women in prison are allowed. My parents have been denied all access as well. My 86-year old father may never live to see to see Alexander and Constantin again.

My children will be scarred for life and they may never recover from this experience. They have become confused and angry with me, because they have been told that I have abandoned them. On two occasions, when I saw my sons and told them how happy I was to see them, Alexander replied: "you lie. Daddy told us that you could come and see us whenever you wanted - but you never did".

My children, as thousands of others, do not deserve to have their lives destroyed in this way.

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Most people associate child abduction with countries where laws and customs are very different from ours. But, child abduction within western societies is much more common than supposed and there has been an explosion in the number of incidents since the mid-1970s.

There is an obvious link between this phenomenon and the decline in marriage as a stabilizing factor in our societies. The sharp rise in divorce rates and children born outside marriage provide fertile ground for disputes about custody and access.

At the same time, the problem of child abduction has over the last two decades acquired a new and sometimes insoluble dimension. Statistics point to an increase in marriage between people of different nationality. This is hardly surprising. With the explosion of international travel and tourism, the social consequences of a global economy, and the increasing irrelevance of national frontiers, especially in Europe, traditional impediments to trans-national marriages have fallen away. But those unions are no less prone to divorce and to quarrels about children.

Whenever marriages break down, a decision has to be taken on where and with whom the children will live. This can be a bitter and contentious business. But when parents of different nationalities are involved, disputes over custody and access can be further exacerbated by differences in culture and in the legal systems of the two countries involved. Some of these situations result in cross-frontier abductions by one of the parents. When this happens - in contrast to abduction within a single national jurisdiction - experience shows how difficult it is to secure the safe return of children and to protect them from the psychological damage inflicted by abduction.

Judicial cooperation between states can be a highly contentious area as the recent negotiations on an International Criminal Court have shown. One of the reasons is that judicial systems lie at the heart of national sovereignty. This often inhibits cross-border cooperation, which requires the competence of national courts to be limited by international obligations. The issue of child abduction is a prime example of the limitations of international cooperation in the judicial area.

There are no international conventions regulating custody matters. Every country has its own judicial system. Custody orders made in one country are not necessarily recognized in another. When non-custodial parents abduct their children from the state in which custody has been given (usually heading to their home country), the chances of recovering them through judicial process can be slim. Every year, more and more children find themselves separated in the most harrowing circumstances from one of their parents.

The effect on children can be devastating. But the victim parents themselves are also plunged into a bewildering world where helplessness, despair and disorientation compete. The emotional trauma is compounded by the daunting practical obstacles to retrieving the children, or even to gaining access to them. Simply finding out where to get help can be very difficult. Parents often face unfamiliar legal, cultural and linguistic barriers. Their emotional and financial resources can be stretched to the limit. In the meantime, the abducted child is often led to believe that the victim parent has abandoned it, so leading the child, in its anger and hurt, to assert that it does not want contact with the victim parent. This vicious circle complicates still further a resolution, and will continue to do so until courts recognize that there is such a thing as Parental Alienation Syndrome, PAS. As the years pass, the chances of recovering children before their adulthood become progressively more remote. Many victim parents feel that it would be easier to come to terms with the shock of bereavement than with a situation marked by prolonged uncertainty and anxiety.

Some parents may believe that their actions have an objective justification (e.g. to rescue their children from domestic violence). But a common thread in all too many cases is the sustained, vengeful effort of the abductor to deprive the other parent of contact with the child to the maximum degree possible. The aim is to flee one judicial system, in favor of another - in order to permanently reverse previous custody decisions and destroy the other parent's relationship with the child.

The International Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction of 1980 was designed to ensure "the protection of children from the harmful effects of their wrongful removal or retention". Should one parent break a custody agreement either by illegally retaining (on an access visit) or abducting a child, the Hague Convention requires its immediate return to the country where the original custody agreement was made.

The purpose of the Hague Convention was to provide a simple and straightforward procedure. In this, it has largely failed. Different national approaches to implementing the Hague Convention, the slowness of procedures, the lack of legal aid in some countries, and the excessive recourse to the loop-hole clause, has meant that most cases of international child abduction remain unresolved. Some children are never located. Others are simply not returned to their country of origin.

The exact figures for trans-national child abduction are not known. Many parents are reluctant to go to the central authorities. Others are not even aware of the existence of the Hague Convention. The official figures could well understate the problem. Even so they are alarmingly high. In the United States alone, the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children reports over 1,000 American cases (on average two children per case) of cross-border abduction every year and the

number is growing sharply. In England, Reunite, the National Council for Abducted Children, has recorded a 50% increase since 1995 in the number of children abducted abroad by an estranged parent. In France, a similar upsurge has been recorded.

Despite the rapid increase in abduction cases, there is too little awareness of the phenomenon in the governments and legislatures of Convention signatories. Nor is there much awareness among the populations at large. As a result, very little is being done to tackle the issue and to make The Hague Convention work as originally intended.

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The Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction is an international treaty currently in force between 49 countries.

The objectives of the Convention are “to secure the prompt return of the children wrongfully removed to, or retained in, any Contracting State; and to ensure that rights of custody and access under the law of the Contracting State are effectively respected in the other Contracting States” (Article 1). The Convention is not concerned with the “best interests of the child”, that is to say, with the merits of a custody case. Criticisms or complaints about the custodial parent or the terms of a custody award, are matters to be dealt with by the jurisdiction of the child’s habitual residence. The paramount objective of the Hague Convention is to return the child to the country of habitual residence and to confirm that country’s jurisdiction.

The Hague Convention provides for a civil proceeding to be brought by the country from which the child was removed or retained. If proceedings are filed within one year, the judge of the country of retention is mandated to order the return of the child to the country of habitual residence. (Return is discretionary if more than one year has elapsed and the child is settled in the new environment). The abducting parent can raise objections to the return. But the intent of the Convention is not to allow these objections except in the most narrowly defined circumstances.

The exception to the requirement for the immediate return of the child to the country of habitual residence is to be found in Article 13 of the Convention.

“The judicial or administrative authority of the requested State is not bound to order the return of the child if” (Article 13b) “there is a grave risk that the child’s return would expose him/her to physical or psychological harm or otherwise place the child in an intolerable situation. The judicial or administrative authority may also refuse to order the return of the child if it finds that the child objects to being returned and has obtained an age and degree of maturity at which it is appropriate to take account of its views”.

A main intention of this article was to draw a clear distinction between a child’s objections, as defined in the article, and a child’s wishes as commonly expressed in a custody case. This is logical, given that the Convention is not intended as an instrument to resolve custody disputes per se. It follows, therefore, that the notion of “objections” under Article 13b is far stronger and more restric-

tive than that of “wishes” in a custody case. A failure by courts to grasp this distinction, and to see it as a key defense against the manipulation of a child by the abductor-parent, is a root cause of the difficulties described below in the implementation of the convention.

To sum up:

By allowing an exception, the Hague Convention does not set an absolute rule. Children are not automatically returned.

Article 13, in constituting this exception, can offer abductors a way of legitimizing their actions.

Whether or not article 13 serves this purpose depends on how the judge interprets its meaning.

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The discretion given to judges has in practice resulted in a wide variation between signatory states in the outcome of proceedings. The American Bar Association reports that judicial returns vary between 5% and 95% from country to country. Article 13b, originally intended as an exception, has in some countries become virtually the rule. This is jeopardizing the Convention’s effectiveness and perverting its original intent.

Evidence is accumulating that a major cause for the discrepancy in rates of return orders is the level of court allowed to hear Convention cases. When cases are heard centrally by High Court judges, return orders are usually made. But, the system tends to fail, when the courts hearing Convention cases are local family courts without Convention experience. This is particularly significant when Article 13b is raised as an objection.

In England and Wales, Convention cases are exclusively heard centrally by a small number (seventeen at present) of specialist High Court judges. The High courts of England and Wales usually hear cases expeditiously based on paper evidence and without the child’s view being heard. Judges usually make a decision quickly to return the children, relying on the foreign court to make a fair decision at any subsequent custody hearing.

The Consultation paper on Child Abduction published in the February 1997 issue of the British Family Law journal reported that in England and Wales, the “consistent approach has been to draw a clear distinction between children’s objections under article 13b and children’s wishes in ordinary domestic custody cases”. The English High Court has taken a policy decision to approach Art. 13b with caution (for example against the risk of indoctrination by an abducting parent) and, even if a child were found to object to a return, to refuse a return only in an exceptional case.

Conversely, in countries where Convention cases are first heard in local courts without Convention expertise, the results can be very different. For instance, in Germany, all Amtsgerichte (small family courts that can be found in towns which have as few as 20,000 inhabitants) have jurisdiction to hear Convention cases. Cases are heard in the locality where the abductor has taken the children

(usually his hometown) and it is impossible to change jurisdictions.

The risk here is of inexperienced judges, who may misinterpret the meaning of the Hague Convention. The 1996 Lowe report found that in Germany, no single Amtsgericht court had heard more than one case and that every time that the child's objections were raised as a "defense" for abduction or retention, a return order was refused

A feature of many such cases is that they are allowed to become a discussion on the merits of custody arrangements. Frequently, an abducting parent will, within the framework of Article 13b, level allegations against the other parent and request that oral evidence be heard. Judges, who are inexperienced, treat these Article 13b objections as "a merit of custody" argument. This is exactly what the Convention was supposed to avoid: such considerations are meant to be reserved to the court of the child's habitual residence, which is best placed to decide on questions of custody and access. But local family courts are too often unable or unwilling to uphold the difference between proceedings under the Hague Convention and arguments over custody arrangements. Underlying this is a distrust of foreign courts.

There is the added risk of a vicious circle, if family court judges are seen to favor local residents. Abductors will be readier to take the law into their own hands, if they believe that their judges will ex-post facto legitimize what they have done.

The merit of the Convention is supposed to lie in the speed of its proceedings. But, some countries are markedly slower in dealing with Hague applications than others. This is particularly the case where, as described above, court proceedings become in reality an argument over custody. (The problem of delay is compounded when cases are first heard in lower courts and appeals can then be lodged in higher courts).

In some countries, the involvement of the local Youth Authority or Social Services, plays a major role in proceedings. Local judges tend to rely on their evidence, and hold up matters by asking to see welfare reports and the children. While in principle this could give a more complete picture of the children's situation, it is nonetheless a major factor for delay. In the meantime the child is more and more under the influence of the abducting parent and further alienated from the absent parent. There is another problem. Youth Authority reports are usually based on information available only in the country of retention and there is little direct investigation into the environment from which the child has been taken. The result, therefore, can be an in-built bias in favor of the abductor. Finally, the passage of time will eventually generate a new argument, which favors abductors, namely that the children are now settled in their new environment and should not be moved yet again.

### 3. Perversion of the Convention's intent

In a number of countries, therefore, interpretations of the Hague Convention extend its meaning to encompass in practice an unwarranted jurisdiction in custody matters. Certain consequences flow from this, all of them prejudicial to the victim.

When a child is not returned, the abducting parent has the additional advantage of having subsequent proceedings dealt with in the country of retention rather than the country of the child's habitual residence. Case studies show that these court decisions, dealing with custody and access rights, tend to favor the abducting parent. This, combined with the fact that in some countries (for example in Germany,) judges are reluctant to enforce access orders, results in a situation where a parent is often deprived of all contact with the child, or at best, has contact in only the most harrowing circumstances (e.g. a government office with a third party present). On this interpretation of Article 13, the Hague Convention becomes in effect the instrument of alienation between child and victim-parent - the very opposite of what was intended

Professor Elisa Perez-Vera provided the primary source of interpretation of the Convention in her Report of 1980: "The Convention as a whole rests upon the unanimous rejection of the phenomenon of illegal child removals and upon the conviction that the best way to combat them at an international level is to refuse to grant them legal recognition... the systematic invocation of the said exceptions, substituting the forum chosen by the abductor for that of the child's residence, would lead to a collapse of the whole structure of the Convention by depriving it of the spirit of mutual confidence which is its inspiration".

#### 4. Child trauma and Parental Alienation Syndrome

Children who are abducted will have already suffered from their parents' separation. But, in addition, they will experience the trauma of being suddenly cut off from their familiar environment - from a parent, grandparents, school and friends.

This experience is already bad enough: many children do not understand what is happening or why. But things are often made even worse, when the abducting parent is hiding from the police or taking precautions against re-abduction; when the child realizes that there is a state of war between its parents. The child has already been traumatized by the loss of one parent; its greatest fear becomes that it will lose the other parent. This fear itself then becomes an obstacle to resolving the situation, since it is central to what is known as Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS).

Studies of PAS have established the severity of psychological damage done to abducted children, suddenly separated from a parent. The studies have also shown how susceptible the child is to being systematically alienated by the abductor-parent from the victim-parent.

This susceptibility bears comparison to the "Stockholm Syndrome", when hostages start to identify with their captors. In the case of an abducted child the identification will be the stronger, because of the age of the "hostage" and the child's relationship with the "captor". For fear of losing the abducting parent as well, the child will not only be eager to please, but ready to believe allegations that it has been abandoned by the victim parent.

This is fertile ground for systematic indoctrination by the abducting parent and/or a professional psychologist. Since under some judicial systems, children - sometimes as young as three - may be

required to appear in court, it becomes of paramount importance to abductor-parents that their children say “the right thing” to judges. This puts an even higher premium on placing psychological pressure on abducted children.

The irony - and tragedy - is that the Hague Convention, in judicial systems like these, delivers children into precisely the danger from which it is supposed to protect them. Again Article 13 b is the crux. It can only be invoked if returning the child would expose it to grave risk of “physical or psychological harm” or place it in an “intolerable situation”. What greater psychological harm, what more intolerable situation could there be for a child, than to be exposed to systematic indoctrination by one parent against the other; and, worse, to carry the main burden of responsibility in adult court proceedings for deciding between mother and father? When placed in this context “the will of the children” becomes nothing less than a vehicle for legitimizing the actions of the abductor-parent.

## 5. Enforcement

Another problem lies in the alarming number of return orders, which have not been enforced. In several Convention countries, abduction is not considered a criminal act. Returns orders are not enforceable. In other countries, the enforcement process can take several months and does not always end in a return order being made. (The case of Tom Sylvester -US/Austria - is but one such example).

## 6. Legal Aid

The lack of legal aid provisions in some countries is another major problem. Victim parents are often unable to bare the costs associated with these expensive procedures. In England & Wales, for instance, the legal aid provisions are extremely generous. But there should be no reason why each Contracting State should not underwrite the application under the Convention itself. It would also be helpful to judges if they knew that legal aid will be available in the Contract State to a parent whose child the judge is returning under the Convention.

Eighteen years of experience with The Hague Convention leads inevitably to the conclusion that it is a seriously flawed instrument, which at worst prejudices the welfare of abducted and illegally retained children. The heart of the problem lies in the failure of national legal systems to implement the Convention in a uniform fashion, consistent with its spirit. As a result the Convention appears to be no deterrent to child abduction.

It is arguable that, in so far as Article 13 can be exploited to justify abduction or retention, it has made the situation worse. It is also striking that, according to research by Dr. Linda Girdner, a parent is more likely to secure a return order through a non-Convention proceeding than through a Hague Convention proceeding (Dr. Girdner quotes an 80% success rate with the former compared with 33% under the latter).

This is not an argument for dismantling the Hague Convention. It is an argument for improving it. The international community needs an international treaty based on the rejection of illegal abduc-

tions or retentions across frontiers and the need to return children to their usual place of residence. The fact that, as in England & Wales, the Convention can be made to work as intended shows its potential. The task is to come up with remedies to deal with those situations where the Convention does not work.

This task will not be easily or quickly accomplished. That would require the establishment of some kind of supra-national legal body, to which signatory states would defer. That is not going to happen any time soon. The raw material with which we have to work is 52 signatories, with different judicial systems. By definition, as long as this situation remains, the proper implementation of the Hague Convention will depend in large part on a willingness to cooperate in good faith.

But there are a number of steps, which we can begin to take straight-away and which should set in motion an incremental process of improvement.

A Hague Convention Review Conference needs to be called as soon as possible to debate and introduce improvements in the following areas:

The Convention should make trans-national abduction and retention of children a criminal offense, notifiable to Interpol, Europol and national police agencies.

At the same time, so as to coordinate action and information, there should be “hot lines” between Central Authorities and police; between national organizations, such as NCMEC and Reunite, on the one hand and Central Authorities and police agencies on the other; and between members of the public and national organization.

Governments should fund information campaigns to make the public aware of these arrangements.

The staff and resources of the Permanent Bureau in The Hague and of Central Authorities should be increased to meet the need for more effective action to tackle international child abduction. In particular the Central Authorities should notify the Permanent Bureau of all abductions or illegal retentions brought to their attention, as well as of the outcome of Hague Convention proceedings on their territories. The Bureau should keep a comprehensive database of these cases.

While an exception clause cannot be dispensed with altogether, Article 13 should be re-drafted in a way, which narrows its use to genuinely exceptional circumstances. As currently drafted, it can too easily become the rule and not the exception.

In parallel, strict limitations should be placed on the age and circumstances in which children can be called to appear before the court. As a general rule, since Convention hearings are not about custody, children should not appear in courts at all. To require young children to appear in court and to make a choice between parents is a form of child abuse, inflicting extreme cruelty. The confusion and stress involved are for most children beyond description, and empty the notion of the “will of the children” of any significance. There may be rare cases when it is important to hear the child at first hand. But no child below a certain age should have to endure this ordeal.

Article 13 should incorporate a clause dealing with access provisions. Namely, if a court refuses a return, it should automatically make the necessary provisions for enforceable access rights, with a fair division of travel costs.

Article 21 should be entirely revised. Experience has shown that it does not work.

Provisions for legal aid should be addressed and a common policy should be established by all signatory countries.

Many of these points were discussed at the recent NCMEC conference on 15 and 16 September 1998. The recommendations which will be put together shortly, cover much of the above ground.