



Costa Rican Women and the Post-WWII struggle for the Return of their German Husbands and Sons

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Abstract

This paper examines role played by Costa Rican women, utilizing their status as wives and mothers, to have their German Costa Rican husbands and sons reunited with their families after World War II. This was necessitated by the Costa Rican government's actions taken against German Costa Ricans during World War II, including loss of properties, internment in Costa Rica, and subsequent deportation to and internment in the United States. Elite Costa Rican wives and mothers of the deportees made emotional as well as legal pleas to win the favor of important sectors in the country to fight for justice for their families.

Keywords: Women Latin America; Costa Rican History; Latin America World War II; U.S. Internment WWII

Women who rally together to protect their loved ones, to fight for rights, and to stand up for their beliefs in the face of oppression have been present throughout history, particularly modern history, and in all parts of the world. In Latin America, the historical women's movement most commonly known is that of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, as their movement has been visible in international news for decades. Lesser known similar movements include the Arpilleristas in Chile and the women's cooperatives in Central America. Then there are women who have fought in and supported revolutionary movements and guerrilla armies since the early twentieth century – from the female Zapatistas in the Mexican Revolution, to FARC commanders in Colombia, to indigenous leaders like Rigoberta Menchú in Guatemala to mention only a few of many. More recent movements include women's marches protesting violence against women, calling for the decriminalization of abortion, bringing awareness to femicide, and demanding gender equality in the workplace, in politics, in society, and at home.¹ The purpose and goals of these women of course vary by circumstance – demanding information about or protection for loved ones, taking up arms to fight for justice in the face of dictatorship and repression, working alongside international human rights organizations, and more. The more recent movements are strongly feminist in nature, specifically waging struggles for gender equality and women's rights. Yet a unifying factor of women in many of the earlier movements, like the Mothers in Argentina and the Arpilleristas in Chile, and even at times in later ones was the use of their status as women, as mothers and daughters and sisters and more, as protectors of life, to support and justify their causes.

This tactic can make a quite poignant appeal in Latin America where mothers are generally revered, at least in theory if not always in practice, for being the female protectors of households and families. One may find this perplexing, as people more commonly associate the idea of *machismo* with the region. Interestingly, Benjamin Arthur Crown in a 2017 article debunks the idea that machismo is necessarily rooted in Iberian or Ibero-American culture. Instead, he demonstrates that the concept and use of the term *machismo* “emerged in English as an ethnicized construction of hypermasculinity, forged and maintained at the nexus of social science, popular culture, racism, and empire.”² Nonetheless, scholars across disciplines have adopted the term to describe Latino masculinity. It has also been adopted into Latin American popular vernacular, and it holds true that *machismo* is prevalent within Latino societies. An interesting facet of *machismo* is that it also includes elements of respect for

¹ The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, “Women’s contribution to equality in Latin America and the Caribbean” (2007) discusses many of the diverse movements of women in the region that have fought for social and gender justice. See also Victoria Gonzalez and Karen Kampwirth, *Radical Women in Latin America: Left and Right* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 2001).

² B.A. Cowan, “How Machismo Got Its Spurs—in English: Social Science, Cold War Imperialism, and the Ethnicization of Hypermasculinity,” *Latin American Research Review*, 52(4) (2017), 607.

and veneration of women, at least in relation to Latino mothers, and Latino women as a result have often had considerable influence and elements of power within families and households.³ While this concept may in part be rooted in the historical idea of women needing protection, it has evolved to include the recognition of strong women who stand up for their families. The dichotomy of women respected for upholding and protecting the family, with women who need to be shielded and protected themselves is an interesting one. Moreover, it is one that women in Latin America have made use of in struggles against injustice.

The most common and the most well known of these women's movements have been among women of the lower and lower-middle classes, groups who have faced oppression throughout the history of Latin America and that experienced the brunt of increased injustice during periods of dictatorship and repression. As mentioned earlier, the most easily recognized of these is the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who have been active for over forty years and are recognized as having a profound role in the revolutionizing of the role of mothers in Argentina in particular and Latin America in general.⁴ There are some notable exceptions of movements outside of the lower classes, however, and the Costa Rican women's movement examined in this paper is one of them. Costa Rican elite women, who were married to German Costa Ricans, led the charge for restitution of the injustices their families faced during World War II. These families had loved ones labeled as enemy nationals, stripped of their Costa Rican citizenship, removed from their homes, and deported for internment in the United States. At the end of the war the Costa Rican women led the charge to demand that their deported loved ones be allowed to return to Costa Rica and have their families reunited. Though the movement led by these women would not be the deciding factor in having their families restored, their efforts brought renewed awareness to the injustice carried out during the war years. In this way, they join the ranks of women who have used their position as wives and mothers to bring justice for their families.

Costa Rica and World War II

The movement led by Costa Rican women to reunite their families was necessitated by Costa Rica's alliance with the United States during World War II and the actions taken against ethnic Germans labeled as enemy nationals as a result. On December 8, 1941, the Costa Rican government in solidarity with its "Pan-American family" became the first American nation to declare war on the Empire of Japan, a few hours before the United States did the same.⁵ Costa Rica's declaration of war against Japan, followed with similar decrees against Germany and Italy on December 11, came in accordance with proclamations issued at Pan-American conferences in the late 1930s in which signing nations resolved that any act of aggression against "an American State shall be considered as an act of aggression against the states which sign this declaration."⁶ The decision to enter the war on the side of the Allied Powers did not involve any Costa Rican intentions to fight in the war. Rather, Costa Rica's declaration of war against the Axis Powers resulted from the strong democratic sentiments of the nation's government and people, combined with strategic economic and political motivations.⁷ It was intended ensure that Costa Rica would stay in favor of the United States and would maintain, or even increase, the share of Costa Rican goods purchased by their powerful neighbor to the North. The U.S. Government initially declared that it would not purchase any coffee or sugar grown on or processed by German Costa Rican owned properties, even if they properties were under the control of the government, so long as any of the money was going to the owners or their families.⁸ The loss of the U.S. market, while the war was waging in Europe would have been devastating to Costa Rican workers and the Costa Rican economy.⁹ In order to keep in good standing with the United States, shortly after these war declarations, the Costa Rican government began implementing measures to control the Italian and German enemy national populations in the country.

Though Costa Rica was not involved in any fighting of the war, the war nonetheless had a significant impact on the nation as it brought strict wartime measures against enemy nationals in Costa Rica and it caused tensions within the nation's population. The government of President Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia worked with

³ John Baldwin and Eros DeSouza, "Modelo de María and Machismo: The Social Construction of Gender in Brazil," *Interamerican Journal of Psychology*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2001), 9-29.

⁴ Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (Oxford: SR Books, 1994).

⁵ Archivo Nacional (AN), Costa Rica (CR), Colección de Leyes y Decretos, Segundo Semestre 1941, Poder Legislativo No. 3, December 8, 1941.

⁶ "Declaration of Reciprocal Assistance and Cooperation for the defense of that Nations of the Americas, Habana, July 30, 1940," 562-563, in U.S. Department of State, *Peace and War: United States Foreign Policy, 1931-1941* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1943).

⁷ Carlos Calvo Gamboa, *Costa Rica en la Segunda Guerra Mundial (1939-1945)* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universidad Estatal a Distancia, 1985), 44.

⁸ AN, CR, Junta de Custodia de la Propiedad Enemiga, N. 264, "Confidential Circular to American citizens and firms in Costa Rica," November 26, 1941.

⁹ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations*, vol. 6, 1943, 102., *La Tribuna*, September 2, 1942, 1., and *New York Times*, October 26, 1942, 5.

the United States' government to enforce measures against people included on the *Proclaimed Lists of Certain Blocked Nationals*, better known as Allied issued Blacklists, while attempting to keep the damage to the Costa Rican national economy to a minimum. Measures enacted for the enforcement of the U.S. published Blacklists, and to contain what the U.S. labeled as a potential "Fifth Column" threat included the creation of two internment camps in Costa Rica.¹⁰ They also included the founding of the *Junta de Custodia de la Propiedad Enemiga*,¹¹ Committee for the Control of Enemy Property, which expropriated and sold properties owned by those who the U.S. and Costa Rican governments labeled as enemy nationals. Further measures included the cancellation of naturalized citizenship of enemy nationals,¹² the deportation of German Costa Ricans to internment camps in the United States, and upholding U.S. plans to "repatriate" these "German nationals" to Germany after the war, in accordance with a war prisoner trade agreement between the U.S. and the Nazi governments.¹³ The U.S. and the Costa Rican governments labeled German Costa Ricans as German enemy nationals, despite the fact that many of them were not legally German nationals. As a result of this classification, however, over the course of the war almost 300 German Costa Ricans were deported to internment camps in the United States.¹⁴

The wartime measures taken by the Costa Rican government were in a large part the result of pressure from the United States to control the economically influential enemy national populations in the country. Since the mid-19th century, German immigrants to Costa Rica had become a small but significant sector of the nation's economic elite, particularly in coffee and sugar processing, which were the nation's two most important export crops, and owning large import and export businesses.¹⁵ This in turn fostered a strong economic relationship between Costa Rica and Germany. German Costa Ricans gained their elite status through not only the purchase of properties and ownership of businesses, but also through marriage alliances formed with prominent elite Costa Rican families.¹⁶ In the years leading up to World War II it was not uncommon for German Costa Ricans to appear in the society pages of local newspapers, along with their Costa Rican wives and children, in announcements of marriages, births, christenings, and more.¹⁷ German Costa Ricans further gained prominence in government positions, particularly consular positions to Germany.¹⁸ It is true that German Costa Ricans sent their children to the local German school, were active in the German Club, and held strong ties both in personal and business relationships to Germany. Yet a large part of the German Costa Ricans population had been born in Costa Rica, many were Costa Rican nationals, and there were others who had immigrated from Germany and become naturalized citizens of Costa Rica.

Nonetheless, the United States government still considered the German Costa Ricans a threat because of their elite status in the country, combined with their familial, economic, and political ties to Germany. This is what justified the U.S. government placing hundreds of German Costa Ricans and their businesses on the Allied Blacklists and the U.S. refusal to purchase any coffee or sugar grown blacklisted German owned properties.¹⁹ It was also at the urging of the U.S. government that the Costa Rican government built internment camps in Costa Rica, and interned German Costa Ricans first there and then deported them for interment in U.S. camps,²⁰ where they could be watched more closely. Even in the 1930s U.S. representatives in Costa Rica expressed concern over the possible Nazi penetration in the country amongst the German Costa Rican elite, and particularly the inability of Costa Rica to adequately control the threat.²¹ The U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica went so far as to stipulate that "it is unanimously agreed . . . that the Costa Rican government cannot now, or in the foreseeable future, be depended upon to exercise effective controls" against a possible Nazi German element in the country.²² The concern

¹⁰ "Dos campos de concentración, uno para hombres y otro para mujeres, fueron establecidos por nuestro gobierno en esta capital, dotados de todas las comodidades necesarias," in Juan Rojas Suarez, ed., *Costa Rica en la Segunda Guerra Mundial: 7 de diciembre de 1941; 7 de diciembre de 1943* (San José, Costa Rica: Imprenta Nacional, 1943), 49-50.

¹¹ Decree No. 9, March 25, 1942, in Rojas Suarez, ed., *Costa Rica en la Segunda Guerra Mundial...*, 133.

¹² *La Tribuna*, July 4, 1942, 1.

¹³ AN, CR, Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores, Caja 540, Mora to Ehandi, April 25, 1942.

¹⁴ Jacobo Schifter, *Costa Rica 1948: Analisis de documentos confidenciales del Departamento de Estado* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1982), 94. And "Expulsion de ciudadanos..." in Rojas Suarez, ed., *Costa Rica en la Segunda Guerra Mundial...*, 42-48.

¹⁵ W.F. Leopold, *Der Deutsche en Costa Rica* (Hamburg: Verlag Hanseatischer Merkur), 1966.

¹⁶ AN, CR, Ministro de Justicia, *jurídicos and mortuales*, 1890-2030.

¹⁷ *La Tribuna*, "Mundo Social" 1930-1941.

¹⁸ Carlos Calvo Gamboa, *León Cortés y su época* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universidad Estatal a Distancia, 1982), 157-158.

¹⁹ AN, CR, Junta de Custodia de la Propiedad Enemiga, No. 264, "Confidential Circular to American citizens and firms in Costa Rica," November 26, 1941.

²⁰ United States Department of State, *Provisional Administration of European Colonies and Possessions in the Americas* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1941), 12.

²¹ N.P. MacDonald, *Hitler over Latin America* (Great Britain: The Mayflower Press, 1945), 209-211.

²² U.S. Department of State, *Internal Affairs*, Reel #1, Attaché's Report, October 30, 1934., and Reel #3, Attaché's Report, June 12, 1940., and U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers*, vol. V, 1940, "The American Republics," 85, Hornibrook to Secretary of State, June 5, 1940.

stemmed in large part because of Costa Rica's proximity to the Panama Canal. It was additionally at the insistence of the United States Government that Costa Rica moved forward with the control, expropriation, and sale of German Costa Rican owned properties.

During the course of these events, German Costa Ricans, their family members, and supporters were vocal in their public protests against these wartime measures. In response, individuals filed lawsuits to try to stop the expropriation and sale of their properties.²³ Family members and other supporters of the affected German Costa Ricans took out ads in the local newspapers proclaiming their innocence, particularly for those who either were Costa Rican nationals by birth or naturalized Costa Rican citizens, as well as those who said they were "Costa Rican at heart" and were anti-Hitler.²⁴ Though the majority of the protests voiced during the war came from male supporters, a handful of them were made, and even more were at the very least signed, by elite Costa Rican wives and mothers of the impacted German Costa Ricans. Nothing came from these efforts during the war, however, due to the suspension of constitutional guarantees in December 1942. As long as the emergency decrees were necessary, the families had no legal recourse to which to turn.²⁵

Costa Rican Women's Movement in Support of their Families

On August 18 of 1945, the Costa Rican Congress voted to reestablish constitutional guarantees that the government suspended during the course of the war.²⁶ The reestablishment of constitutional guarantees resulted in the gradual elimination of the emergency wartime decrees, and brought an intensified campaign on behalf of German Costa Ricans impacted by wartime measures. With the close of hostilities and eradication of wartime measures, relatives of interned German Costa Ricans again took up their newspaper campaign in hopes of generating the support of the Costa Rican public for the return of their loved ones from interment abroad. They also demanded the return of or prompt payment for expropriated properties. Additionally, they filed suits with the Costa Rican Supreme Court in order to obtain legal support for their demands. This time Costa Rican and German Costa Rican women spearheaded the movement, making their pleas on behalf of their families, and utilizing their position as wives and mothers to do so.

The families of deported relatives worked both individually and as a group to bring their post war struggle to the attention of the Costa Rican government and people. The first significant appeal published in the nation's newspapers came from a member of an influential political family, Eduardo J. Pinto H., a brother-in-law of Germans Franz Amrhein and Kuno Becker. Members of the Pinto family had previously advertised in *La Tribuna*, defending Franz Amrhein and Kuno Becker, when they were deported in 1944. On July 1, 1944, the family took out a third of a page advertisement defending the family members who had been deported. The ad read:

To Avoid Rumors in Relation to
the Deportation of our two Brothers-in-law
FRANZ AMRHEIN
and KUNO BECKER
WE HAVE TO POINT OUT
That they have been deported only and exclusively for being German Citizens.²⁷

The intent was to dispel any notion that they were in any way associated with Nazi sympathies or pro-Nazi activities. After the war, Eduardo Pinto argued that the Costa Rican government was obligated to work on behalf of those Costa Rican citizens whose families had been affected by the wartime measures against the German Costa Ricans. He stipulated that it was unjust for such families to remain separated during times of peace, particularly since he had heard rumors that German North Americans married to women in the U.S. had been released from custody, while Latin American Germans were still interned.²⁸ The official justification for continued interment of these Germans was that they were to be "repatriated" to Germany. The U.S. had signed a reciprocal repatriation agreement with Germany, which stipulated that prisoners of war would be repatriated to their respective countries, along with willing family members, at war's end or sooner if they wished. After the war ended, the U.S.

²³ *La Tribuna*, November 8, 1942, 1., February 2, 1943, 1., and December 8, 1943, 1. Also *Diario de Costa Rica*, May 13, 1944, 1.

²⁴ Theodore S. Creedman, "The Political Development of Costa Rica: Politics of an Emerging Welfare State in a Patriarchal Society" PhD diss (University of Maryland, 1971), 144., *La Tribuna*, August 29, 1941, 1., July 8, 1942, 2., and July 11, 1944, 2.

²⁵ *La Tribuna*, August 14, 1945, 1., and AN, CR, Junta de Custodia de la Propiedad Enemiga No. 699, Lane to Piza, February 13, 1942.

²⁶ AN, CR, Colección de Leyes y Decretos, Segundo Semestre 1945, Poder Legislativo No. 13, August 18, 1945.

²⁷ *La Tribuna*, July 11, 1944, 2 (emphasis in the original).

²⁸ *La Tribuna*, August 28, 1945, 3.

government argued that this obligated them to return any Germans interned in their territory during the war years, including those who had been deported from Costa Rica and other Latin American countries.²⁹

Sr. Pinto pushed ahead, requesting that President Teodoro Picado first look to his heart, and then “order, or at least solicit, the return to their homes of those deportees who had Costa Rican wives, to which Costa Rican children had been born, and that feel the grief of an inhuman separation.”³⁰ This argument fell on deaf ears in the Picado government, as the administration was at least initially determined to strictly adhere to the agreements with the United States. Costa Rican relatives of other Germans made similar arguments, and in the following days the Pinto family issued increasingly aggressive statements to this effect. The intensification of demands from the families of German Costa Ricans came after the Picado government asserted that it had no control over whether or not German Costa Ricans would be permitted to return from interment in the U.S.³¹

Though the initial appeal from Eduardo Pinto came from an elite male, he used language and arguments that the movement of female family members would take up as their own in the struggle to have their families reunited. Many Costa Rican relatives and their associates continued the struggle for the return of their deported German family members and friends, but the Costa Rican and German Costa Rican women related to deportees could make the best use of emotional appeals. These women protested against the government’s inaction on the part of deportees, and were able to make the most poignant appeals on their behalf. On August 25 “wives, mothers, and daughters of Costa Rican homes”³² sent a letter to President Picado beseeching his aid in bringing back the husbands, sons, and brothers of Costa Rican families. Not all of the women who signed the petition were from affected families. Many other Costa Rican women stated that they endorsed the letter simply because of their firm belief that families should not remain separated in this way.³³ Thus, those wives of detainees who were of Costa Rican origin as well as supporters from the elite Costa Rican families were extremely influential gaining broader support for the struggle to return deported German Costa Ricans to Costa Rica. The women who signed the petition stipulated that

we cannot view with indifference that so many of our compatriots, who have been obligated during this long war to live separated from their loved ones, continue in this state while the world enjoys peace. . . . We desire for peace to also reign in these homes . . . and for husbands, wives, and children to live together under the same roof.³⁴

This was only the start of the pleas that Costa Rican wives and mothers of interned Germans would make to bring justice to their families.

Gerte Werth de Steinvorth, a German Costa Rican who had resided in Costa Rica for fifty years prior to World War II, wrote a letter to President Picado requesting the return of her son, Eberhard Steinvorth, who she stated had been interned in the United States, “for the only reason of being young and of military age.”³⁵ Not only did Werth de Steinvorth write to the president, but she also had her letter published in national newspapers, as were many similar petitions, in order to bring her sentimental plea to a wider public. It is interesting that the initial appeals like the petition and the one from Gerte Werth de Steinvorth appeared on internal pages of the newspaper, while later ones from Costa Rican women made front-page news. Her appeal and her tone fits those of others who argued for the reunification of their families, using their status as wives and mothers to make their case.

The love of a wife and the love of a mother are parallel sentiments that possess neither nationalities nor borders. With good reason admirable Costa Rican women, married to German citizens, are taking steps to obtain . . . the return of their husbands and of the fathers of their children to the homes we have formed in this noble country. . . . Señor President, understanding my anguish as a mother, and my desire to stretch my arms one more time around my adored son, kindly intercede . . . in favor of the Costa Rican women, who like myself are mothers above all else.³⁶

Werth de Steinvorth demonstrated that she recognized that the efforts of the native Costa Rican women was having the most significant impact, at least as far as public opinion and the favor of politicians within the Costa Rican

²⁹ AN, CR, Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores, Mora to Echandi, April 25, 1942.

³⁰ *La Tribuna*, August 28, 1945, 3.

³¹ *La Tribuna*, August 28, 1945, 3., August 29, 1945, 4., August 30, 1945, 6., August 31, 1945, 3., September 1, 1945, 3., etcetera.

³² *La Tribuna*, August 29, 1945, 4.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *La Tribuna*, August 30, 1945, 10.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

government was concerned. At the same time, it was clearly important to her to make her own emotional plea as well.

While Werth de Steinvorth's letter was compelling, it was native Costa Rican wives and mothers of deportees, as well as female supporters from elite Costa Rican families, who were more successful in the struggle to return the deported German Costa Ricans. Their appeals held more weight than those of German Costa Rican women, who the Costa Rican and U.S. governments argued could easily be repatriated to Germany along with their husbands and children.³⁷ I was able to interview Bernd Niehaus, former Costa Rican Minister of Foreign Relations and Ambassador to the United Nations, whose father and uncles had been deported to and interned in the United States during the war. Niehaus verified that his mother, Fanny Quesada Cordoba de Niehaus, who was from a prominent elite Costa Rican family, was able to be more active in the efforts to have her husband returned than were his two aunts who were both German in origin. He believed that his mother made extra efforts on behalf of her husband's brothers, not just her husband, to have them returned since their wives were not able to be as influential in the struggle.³⁸

Costa Rican wives of the interned German Costa Ricans wrote individual letters to President Picado, to the Minister of Foreign Relations Julio Acosta, to the Costa Rican Congress, and to members of the Supreme Court, and they had copies of the letters published in Costa Rican newspapers in an attempt to win the support of the Costa Rican public. Hundreds of Costa Rican women also took their case to Archbishop Victor Sanabria and asked that the Catholic Church support their fight to reunite families.³⁹ The Archbishop agreed that there existed "not even the slightest doubt" about the justice of the women's cause.⁴⁰ He not only supported them by making appeals to the Picado government; he also contacted the Archbishop of Baltimore and asked "his good offices to intervene with the [U.S.] Secretary of State" on behalf of the interned German Costa Rican and their Costa Rican families.⁴¹ As an added consequence of the support of the highest member of the Costa Rican Catholic Church, Costa Rican Catholic women's groups also pledged their assistance in the struggle on behalf of the wives and families.⁴² This backing of the Catholic women's groups was significant as it broadened the support beyond the elite class to a more diverse population in the country. Appealing on the basis of reuniting families was an effective strategy, which drew in more support than the wartime arguments that were made primarily based on citizenship, being Costa Rican "at heart," and of economic impacts of the loss of properties of elite families.⁴³ In addition, the endorsement of the Catholic Church helped to generate the sympathy of a broader sector general Costa Rican population for the reunion of these families.⁴⁴

As the month of August 1945 passed the emotionalism of the women's appeals increased, accusing the government of making "orphans . . . of innocent children," and blaming it for the "extreme anguish" being experienced by "honorable Costa Rican homes."⁴⁵ This also was a change from appeals made during the war when a large part of the Costa Rican population supported the actions taken against enemy nationals. The post-war pleas, made by Costa Rican women on behalf of their "Costa Rican homes," removed the stigma of "enemy nationals" from the equation, thus making the argument for the return of the German Costa Ricans more acceptable to the Costa Ricans at large. At the same time as they were making these emotional appeals, the women also issued quite rational arguments to support the return of their husbands and sons. On August 31, "Costa Rican wives married to Costa Rican citizens of German origin" wrote letters to President Picado and to U.S. Ambassador Johnson. In these letters, the wives accused the two governments of victimizing their husbands "for the simple crime of having had money."⁴⁶ They further argued that the Costa Rican and United States governments were guilty of "violating democratic principles," since the deportees were not allowed the right to trial before they were taken from the country. They, therefore, asked President Picado to survey the Costa Rican people to determine whether or not they opposed the return of German Costa Ricans to their homes and, if they were not, to then follow the wishes of his fellow countrymen.⁴⁷ In their letter to Ambassador Johnson, the women stipulated that

We are not asking for impossible concessions. We are only asking for a formal trial; that our husbands be permitted . . . to prove their innocence. . . . We are asking your embassy, that before rushing to declare that our husbands are dangerous to international security, you offer

³⁷ *La Tribuna*, August 30, 1945, 1, and September 1, 1945, 3. Also AN, CR, MRE, Caja 540, Mora to Echandi, April 25, 1942.

³⁸ Bernd Niehaus Quesada, interview by author, San José, Costa Rica, 19 November 1996.

³⁹ *La Tribuna*, August 30, 1945, 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *La Tribuna*, August 31, 1945, 4.

⁴³ See for example: *La Tribuna*, August 21, 1941, 1., July 8, 1942, 2, and Creedman, "The Political Development of Costa Rica," 144.

⁴⁴ *La Tribuna*, August 31, 1945, 4.

⁴⁵ *La Tribuna*, August 30, 1945, 1.

⁴⁶ *La Tribuna*, August 31, 1945, 4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

the basis of the tests used . . . to emit such a verdict . . . that causes the pain and desolation of so many of our homes.⁴⁸

Again the women resorted to emotionalism in their appeal, while not losing sight of the legality of their position. Many people in Costa Rica, including Archbishop Sanabria and President of the Supreme Court Victor Guardia, agreed with the Costa Rican women, and believed that the deported Germans should be allowed trials to prove their guilt or innocence.⁴⁹ This combination of emotional and legal appeals was an effective strategy in garnering support across a diverse sector of the Costa Rican population.

The intensification of their campaign came in part in response to information about a meeting between President Picado and Costa Rican Minister of Foreign Relations Acosta published in *La Prensa Libre*. The purpose of the meeting was to decide whether ethnic Germans sent out of the country to be interned in camps in the U.S. would be allowed to return. The article announced that the return would be on an individual basis according to the laws of immigration, and dependent upon the character of the person and their willingness to adhere to the laws of Costa Rica.⁵⁰ The primary hindrance to the return of the German Costa Ricans, however, was the United States government. In 1942 the U.S. had signed a reciprocal repatriation agreement with Germany, which stipulated that prisoners of war would be repatriated to their respective countries, along with willing family members, at war's end or sooner if they wished.⁵¹ After the war ended, the U.S. government argued that this obligated them to return to Germany any Germans interned in their territory during the war years, including those who had been deported from Costa Rica and other Latin American countries. Costa Rica had in fact agreed to these arrangements at the time that the U.S. - German pact was signed.⁵² In the summer of 1945, therefore, when the families and associates of the deported Germans began to press for their return, President Picado argued that it was Costa Rica's duty to uphold the repatriation pact of "the country's most important ally."⁵³ He also accused the elite associates of Germans of simply taking up their cause as a political battle to harm his government, and postulated that his political enemies were attempting to damage the relationship between the two nations as well.⁵⁴ Even when the Costa Rican government finally agreed not to impede the return to Costa Rica of ethnic Germans married to Costa Rican women, the President contended that his hands remained tied, since the decision on whether or not they would be returned was ultimately up to the United States.⁵⁵

Costa Rican women and their families, however, did not believe that this was the actual reason for the lack of action on the part of the government. As Costa Rican historian Carlos Calvo Gamboa writes, "in our nation it is speculated that the government did not desire the return of these Germans in order to keep hidden the evidence of a period of abuses and plunder of properties and businesses."⁵⁶ The United States, for its part, adamantly opposed the return to Costa Rica of interned German Costa Ricans. In August of 1945, after receiving petitions for the release of German Costa Ricans, the U.S. made a statement to the effect that "dangerous and influential German nationals should not be allowed to remain in this hemisphere."⁵⁷ According to the United States, ethnic Germans from Costa Rica were slated to be returned to their ethnic homeland,⁵⁸ even though many of these German Costa Ricans were from families that had been living in Costa Rica for decades, some almost a century, before the war.

The Costa Rican women were not willing to accept that the United States government could simply declare that their husbands and sons would not be returned to Costa Rica, and this led them to seek legal support from the Costa Rican Supreme Court. On the same day that the U.S. response was published in Costa Rican newspapers, Ester Pinto Hernández de Amhrein Becker, the wife of Franz Amhrein Becker, was the first to take the initiative to present a writ of habeas corpus before the Costa Rican Supreme Court.⁵⁹ It is interesting to note that Ester Pinto had become the voice of the family, as she had taken over the struggle from her brother, Eduardo J. Pinto H., who had made the initial appeals on the family's behalf in the post-war period. She filed the case for her husband, who was not able to do so on his own since he was interned in the United States. Pinto argued that the governments of Costa Rica and the United States had wrongfully taken action against her husband, since he was an upstanding member of the community and law abiding resident, and since he considered himself in his heart to be a Costa Rican citizen.

She asserted that her husband had not fought the internment or deportation orders because "he always said that the country was at war, and it was necessary to support philosophically all of the deplorable consequences of

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., also September 2, 1945, 1.

⁵⁰ *La Prensa Libre*, August 29, 1945, 1 & 11.

⁵¹ AN, CR, Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores, Caja 540, Mora to Echandi, April 25, 1942.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ *La Tribuna*, August 30, 1945, 1 & 5.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ *La Tribuna*, September 1, 1945, 1.

⁵⁶ Calvo Gamboa, *Costa Rica en la Segunda Guerra Mundial*, 37.

⁵⁷ *La Tribuna*, August 30, 1945, 1.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ *La Tribuna*, August 30, 1945, 12.

such.”⁶⁰ In her petition to the Supreme Court, she included letters written to her by her husband during his internment that demonstrated “the goodness of his Costa Rican soul.” She implored the court to help put an end to the “pain, suffering, and nights without sleep” that she and her children had lived with since the day her husband was taken from their home.⁶¹ Her argument is yet another example of the appeal to using both the emotional ties of the family combined with legal arguments in the battle to reunite families. Her statement about her husband’s unwillingness to fight the deportation orders further worked to support the idea of his commitment to Costa Rica.

In this case, Sra. Pinto demanded that the court find in her favor due to the law being on her side. The basis of her legal dispute was the Law of Habeas Corpus, of November 1932 that

Said in effect that habeas corpus is appropriate, not only against the illegal detention that an authority imposes . . . , but also against any illegitimate restriction of the right to come and go and to move to any place, that article 28 of the Constitution guarantees people. Article 9 . . . establishes that if the order for detention or restriction of liberty, is given in virtue of the legal suspension of individual guarantees, when these are reestablished the act of the order of detention, EXPATRIATION, CONFINEMENT, OR EXILE, OR ANY OTHER RESTRICTION OF PERSONAL LIBERTY ceases.⁶²

She, therefore, stipulated that the executive order that allowed for the deportation of her husband had been voided by the reinstatement of constitutional guarantees. Thus, the Costa Rican government was legally obligated to allow Franz Amhrein Becker to return to his family.

On August 31, by a vote of fourteen magistrates in favor and three in opposition, the Supreme Court resolved in favor of the writ of habeas corpus in the case of Sr. Amhrein Becker.⁶³ Her legal appeal was what swayed the justices, as those who supported the petition argued that the Costa Rican constitution allowed any Costa Rican or foreign resident to seek restitution for injuries inflicted on his person, property, or honor. Their response stated that “foreigners RESIDENT in the country were included in the general and universal principal established in article 25 of our of our own political Constitution that says that ‘every man is equal before the law.’”⁶⁴ The success of this case gave incentive to others to take similar action. Within a week numerous wives, along with other relatives and attorneys, of German Costa Ricans filed analogous suits before the Supreme Court.⁶⁵ Among the cases were those filed by María Luisa Pérez de Arias for her son-in-law Ricardo Schroeder Koenig and her daughter María del Carmen Arias Pérez de Schroeder who had opted to be deported and interned with him, though she was a native-born Costa Rican.⁶⁶ Additional suits were filed by Costa Rican women from other elite families, such as Fanny Quesada Cordoba de Niehaus, Berta Pinto Hernández de Becker, Margarita Fernández Jiménez de Steinworth and more, in favor of their husbands.⁶⁷ The Court did not immediately find in favor of these interned Germans, as it had in the Pinto-Amhrein case. They instead voted to put the cases aside without ruling, since “there did not exist any order emanating from the Costa Rican authorities that impedes the deportees from reentering our territory.”⁶⁸ The reason for this decision was that President Picado had decided that the Costa Rican government would no longer block the reentrance of the deported Germans, and the Supreme Court therefore decided that the cases were now in the hands of the United States.⁶⁹

These cases, brought by Costa Rican women on behalf of their families, were significant for a number of reasons. First, it is obvious these influential women were able to generate support for even those German Costa Ricans who had been classified as having Nazi sympathies or of posing a potential “Fifth Column” threat. The arguments used by Costa Rican women in their petitions in fact demonstrate the belief that the pre-war status of their husbands and sons, combined with the validity of seeking justice for their families, was more significant than any accusations against them. Additionally the dispute between justices that were generated by the case indicate the importance of this issue in post-World War II Costa Rica. The Supreme Court was torn between upholding the wishes of the Costa Rican and United States governments, and supporting the demands and emotional appeals of very influential sectors of the Costa Rican elite. Within a month after Señora Pinto de Amhrein filed the first writ of

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid (emphasis in the original).

⁶³ *La Tribuna*, September 4, 1945, 1.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ *La Prensa Libre*, August 31, 1945, 1., *La Tribuna*, September 1, 1945, 1., September 2, 1945, 1., September 4, 1945, 1., September 5, 1945, 1., September 6, 1945, 1., September 7, 1945, 1.

⁶⁶ *La Tribuna*, September 5, 1945, 1.

⁶⁷ *La Prensa Libre*, August 31, 1945, 1., *La Tribuna*, September 1, 1945, 1., September 2, 1945, 1., September 4, 1945, 1., September 5, 1945, 1., September 6, 1945, 1., September 7, 1945, 1.

⁶⁸ *La Tribuna*, September 7, 1945, 8.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

habeas corpus in favor of her German Costa Rican husband, the Costa Rican court had decided to uniformly find in favor of all such cases.⁷⁰ The Costa Rican women had won a victory in the battle to bring justice for their families.

Conclusion

These victories in Costa Rica did not immediately translate into the return of interned German Costa Ricans, as they were still under the jurisdiction of the United States. The U.S. in fact began the process of “repatriating” Latin American Germans to their ethnic homeland, including German Costa Ricans.⁷¹ The United States “repatriated” dozens of German Costa Ricans to Germany, from where they subsequently continued their struggle to be allowed to return to Costa Rica.⁷² Additionally, almost a year after the end of European hostilities some German Costa Ricans remained in custody on Ellis Island, where they had been transferred from the internment camps in Texas and North Dakota, awaiting their repatriation orders. It would take a lawsuit filed by Ricardo Steinvoth Ey to change the situation for the German Costa Ricans interned in the United States. In October 1946, Steinvoth filed a writ of habeas corpus in the United States Court of Appeals, in which he argued that since he had legally obtained Costa Rican citizenship before Costa Rica declared war, his detention as an enemy national had been illegal.⁷³ Although the Costa Rican government had annulled his naturalized Costa Rican citizenship because of the war, that did not mean that he was a German citizen. The U.S. Appeals Court agreed that it was illegal to classify Steinvoth Ey as an enemy national since it was not possible to impose German citizenship upon him; only the German Government could grant this citizenship.⁷⁴ This decision aided Steinvoth, and others with similar status, to not only return to Costa Rica but also to have their Costa Rican citizenship restored.

Ultimately, the return of German Costa Ricans to the country that was their home came down to legal decisions in the United States. The battle initiated by Costa Rican women to have their family members returned to them did not have an impact on the actions and decisions of the United States government when dealing with their family members. Nonetheless, their pleas within Costa Rica and the cases they filed in the Costa Rican Courts did have a significant impact in that country. These women were able to use their status as elite Costa Ricans, as women, and as wives and as mothers, to generate the support of the Catholic Church and of a large part of the Costa Rican population. They proudly took their arguments to the highest court in the country and even to the President himself. In these ways, they joined the ranks of women battling injustice and using their status as women to protect their families and to seek social justice.

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⁷⁰ *La Prensa Libre*, September 17, 1945, 1., and *La Tribuna*, September 17, 1945, 1.

⁷¹ *La Tribuna*, September 14, 1945, 1.

⁷² See for example AN, CR Junta de Custodia de la Propiedad Enemiga No. 602, Junta de Custodia to Wilhelm Peters, June 19, 1946., and No. 119, Steinvoth to Junta de Custodia, July 17, 1946. Both these letters dealt with sons of these families who had been repatriated to Germany. Also AN, CR Junta de Custodia de la Propiedad Enemiga No. 725, Acosta Valverde to Herrera González, May 20, 1947.

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⁷⁴ *Ibid*.

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