

El Salvador Slaying Case to Open in Fresno

The short man with the big belly who came from El Salvador by way of Miami was hiding a terrible secret. He arrived here one day in the early 1990s and began living a quiet suburban life amid the fruit and nut farms.

Nothing stood out about him, not unless you counted his devotion to beans. He loved all kinds — black, red, pinto. There was certainly no hint he was looking over his shoulder. Not even Ines Olsson, the old family friend from El Salvador who let him stay at her Modesto house, was sure of his past.

But Alvaro Rafael Saravia was a man on the run, trying to put as many miles as he could between him and one of the most infamous assassinations in Latin American history — the murder of El Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Romero 24 years ago.

Today, one of the last twists of that past will play out in an unlikely setting: a federal courtroom in Fresno where Saravia faces a civil lawsuit brought by a relative of Romero alleging "crimes against humanity." It marks the first time that the assassination of the beloved archbishop, a crime that still resonates in Latin America, will be heard by a court of law in any country.

Saravia, who has been named by witnesses as the chief planner of the assassination, isn't expected to show up for four days of testimony that will replay the dread of paramilitary death squads and the sniper's bullet that struck down Romero in the Chapel of the Hospital of Divine Providence in San Salvador on March 24, 1980. In a federal courthouse in downtown Fresno, attorneys representing Romero's relative will call 14 witnesses, four of whom have come from El Salvador.

Friends say Saravia, a former Salvadoran air force officer who made his living in Modesto by selling cars, vanished more than a year ago. He left behind a trail of debt and lawsuits from dissatisfied customers.

Some believe he remains in this vast farm belt between Bakersfield and Stockton. Others think he went back to Miami. All agree that the man in his early 60s nicknamed "Chele" — slang for someone with light skin, blond hair and green eyes — is mercurial, above all.

"I let him stay here, but he moved from address to address so many times I couldn't keep track," Olsson said. "He was no businessman, I will tell you that. Then one day he took off, and we never knew what happened to him. I would like to know myself."

A lawyer for the San Francisco-based Center for Justice & Accountability, which has brought the lawsuit on behalf of the unnamed relative of Romero, says

Saravia's failure to defend himself will result in a default judgment against him. But that won't stop the witnesses from testifying.

"There was no reckoning for the people who carried out Archbishop Romero's assassination," said Matt Eisenbrandt, a lawyer with the center. "This can't replace a criminal prosecution in the courts of El Salvador. But this will be the first public airing of the facts in a judicial context, and that's incredibly important."

In the early 1990s, as Saravia moved from Miami to the northeast side of this fast-growing farm town, the murder became the subject of two inquiries: one by the United Nations Truth Commission and the other by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Witnesses testified that Saravia was "actively involved in planning and carrying out the assassination."

Saravia was a longtime officer in the air force when a reform movement in 1979 forced him and other right-wing officers to leave the military. This old guard was headed by Saravia's close associate, former Maj. Roberto D'Aubuisson, who once headed the country's national intelligence agency.

A struggle for power between the reformists and the old guard ensued. D'Aubuisson organized a network of paramilitary groups, or "death squads," that began carrying out a systematic campaign of terror against so-called "communists."

Romero, the Metropolitan Archbishop of San Salvador, became an outspoken voice on behalf of the oppressed. From the pulpit and in weekly homilies broadcast on national radio, the slight but willful cleric exposed the human rights violations committed by the paramilitary groups.

Romero began receiving death threats. On March 10, 1980, a briefcase containing a bomb was found behind the pulpit of the church at which he had said Mass — for a murdered official — the day before.

Two weeks later, Romero directed his sermon at the current and former soldiers tied to the murders. "In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose cry rises to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you: Stop the repression."

The next day, according to the lawsuit, which cites testimony from both international commissions, Saravia and D'Aubuisson met at the home of a supporter in San Salvador.

Saravia ordered his personal driver to transport the assassin to the church where Romero was giving a Mass that day, testimony shows. After a bullet fired from inside the car struck Romero 80 to 100 feet away, Saravia's driver returned the

assassin back to the same house. Saravia confirmed that the mission had been accomplished and then delivered a sum of cash as payment.

"The Romero assassination is one of the most important political murders in the history of Latin America," said Terry Karl, a Stanford University professor of political science who will testify at the trial. "It is a signal that no one is safe, not even the archbishop, one of the most important figures in a country that is nearly 95% Catholic. Romero's murder led to the civil war."

In the mid-1980s, Saravia distanced himself from D'Aubuisson and went to work as the head of security for a seafood company. A few years later, he made his way to Miami on a visitor's visa and stayed.

At one point in 1987, the government of El Salvador seemed interested in prosecuting Saravia and called for his extradition from the United States. Saravia was detained in Miami on immigration charges and held for 14 months. But the Salvadoran Supreme Court, packed with his supporters, withdrew the extradition request.

Olsson, a Modesto accountant who was born in El Salvador, renewed her friendship with him during a visit to Miami. She said he didn't talk much about the past, but he wanted to leave Miami and move to a more quiet place. She suggested he visit her in Modesto.

"I talked about it being a nice place. So one day, he came and he visited," she recalled. "He watched a lot of TV when he was with me. I don't miss beans — I was raised with them — but he sure did. Beans, beans. He couldn't get enough. After a while, he made friends and moved out."

He went to work selling cars at the Three Amigos dealership just down the road from her house. He then joined up with another man and opened his own car lot, the Modesto Auto Mart. They had 50 to 60 cars, trucks and SUVs; the prices were competitive. One customer, John Isola, walked out last summer with a 1993 Ford Ranger.

"The big-bellied guy sold it to me," Isola recalled. "I paid \$3,500 plus a trade-in, and it was a lemon. The clutch went out, the brakes went out, the signal lights went out. I later learned that they had turned back the mileage 90,000 miles."

Isola sued Saravia in small-claims court. But he never showed up to answer the charges.

If Saravia doesn't appear in the Fresno courtroom, the judge probably will award the plaintiff some economic damage. The fact that Saravia may be broke is beside the point.

"This isn't just about money," Eisenbrandt said. "After 24 years, it's about accountability and justice."

[Source: By Mark Arax, Times Staff Writer, Los Angeles Times, Modesto, Ca, 24Aug04]