

The Case Against the Generals

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When Juan Romagoza was being shocked, shot and hung by his hands, he had every reason to be terrified of El Salvador's military leaders. Twenty years later, in an American courtroom, the roles were reversed.

Clenched, curled, the surgeon's fingers struggle to knot his tie. At last, he grips the loop and hastily feeds the burgundy tip through with his small, pudgy fingers.

"It's a kind of torture," says Juan Romagoza Arce, with a wry, quiet laugh as he prepares for another hectic day at his Northwest Washington health clinic. Buttons are even worse. "It's hard to feel them here," the doctor says, tapping the tip of his index finger on his thumb.

There is a reason why the fingers that once wove sutures now strain to knot a tie. Why the doctor who once performed emergency surgery now winces at the sight of blood. Why the executive director of La Clinica del Pueblo, a health care oasis for Washington's Hispanic community, doesn't treat patients.

More than two decades have passed since Romagoza fled El Salvador, yet it still isn't easy for him to talk about the torture he endured or the damage it did. For a long time, the words were too painful, the memories too searing, the healing too precarious. Then he was asked to tell his story publicly, in an American courtroom, as part of what many people considered a quixotic legal effort to hold his torturers accountable for what they'd done to him. And what they'd done to El Salvador.

Romagoza rubs his left arm, which bears a faint brown bullet scar, the only visible mark his tormentors left. "I love clinical work, I love surgery, but it is impossible for me," he says, peering down his glasses. He takes out a yellow legal pad and pencil.

"Let me show you," he says in his choppy English. "When they broke this bone . . ." He sketches a bent arm and pencils in the nerves, a twisted composition of matted lines. When the nerves are cut, he explains, "there's less tension. The tissue is pulled" like a spring. He touches his arm again.

"My surgery isn't as precise as it was in the past, but I think that my limitation is more emotional, psychological. It is more related to . . ." He pauses thoughtfully. "Impotence. Fear. Stress.

"They stripped me of my gift."

Romagoza wasn't surprised to learn "they" were here. By the time El Salvador's civil war finally ended in 1992, many members of the military elite -- the people who presided over the torture and murder of thousands of guerrillas and suspected leftist sympathizers - - had chosen the same haven he had: the United States. Two of the military officers who ruled El Salvador during Romagoza's ordeal -- Gen. Jose Guillermo Garcia and future general Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova -- had retired to Florida, joining their children who were already living there. That made sense, Romagoza says, given their close ties to U.S. officials throughout the 1980s.

"Where else are they supposed to live?" asks Romagoza, who turns 52 this week and is now a U.S. citizen. "In El Salvador? No. In another Central America country? No. They had an open door to come here."

In fact, Florida, California and a handful of other states are home to hundreds of accused war criminals and torturers from all over Latin America, according to Amnesty International, a human rights group. Other suspected human rights abusers have made their way to the United States from Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Iraq, Sierra Leone, Vietnam, Somalia, Eastern Europe and Afghanistan, sometimes settling in the same communities as their victims. (Torture treatment centers and refugee groups claim there are roughly 500,000 torture survivors nationwide, with an estimated 40,000 in the Washington area.) Vides Casanova and Garcia received U.S. visas in 1989 after retiring from the military; Garcia was granted political asylum on the grounds that he and his children had been threatened during the war. Vides Casanova was allowed to enter the country despite a 1983 report to the State Department that he was likely "aware of, and for a time acquiesced in, the coverup" of the murders of four American churchwomen.

It was through the deaths of the churchwomen that Romagoza came to confront his past.

Romagoza knew, of course, about the three nuns and the Catholic lay worker who had distributed food and health supplies to local campesinos, or peasants. On the evening of December 2, 1980, they were stopped by the National Guard outside San Salvador, the country's capital. They were raped and killed, their bodies dumped into a shallow grave.

The women had been dead for 18 years when Romagoza got a phone call from an old friend, Shawn Roberts, the lawyer who had helped him win permanent residency in the United States. Roberts, who worked for the Center for Justice and Accountability, in San Francisco, wanted Romagoza to join a civil lawsuit being brought by the families of the dead churchwomen against Garcia and Vides Casanova.

Romagoza initially agreed to be part of any legal effort to take on the generals, then began having second thoughts. He lay awake in his small Northwest Washington rowhouse, which he shares with a niece studying at Howard University, and agonized over what to do.

He felt safe there, in that house with its Central American pottery and its small garden of radishes, corn and peppers that reminded him of the one at his family's home in El

Salvador. On summer weekends, he'd doze in a hammock in the back yard, savoring the sun and the chance to sleep. But his sense of security in the United States did not extend to his mother, his siblings and his in-laws in El Salvador, where the military continued to wield tremendous power. His family had already warned him not to get involved.

Yet he felt a sense of obligation -- to the churchwomen, who'd given their lives for the Salvadoran people, and to all the others who had suffered at the military's hands. If he didn't have the courage to confront the generals, who would?

He stuck with the case, which was eventually split into two separate lawsuits, one for the churchwomen, the other for Salvadoran torture victims. Two other victims had signed on with Romagoza: Carlos Mauricio, an agriculture professor who'd been beaten with a rubber-covered metal bar, and Neris Gonzalez, a mother of two who was abducted when she was pregnant (and lost her unborn child after being tortured). None of the torture victims knew how much of a role they'd play in the legal drama about to unfold. The churchwomen's case was first, and their lawyers had compiled a mountain of evidence.

The families didn't accuse the generals of actually committing the murders; instead, they charged that torture and murder were endemic to their military leadership. They also cited the United Nations Truth Commission report on El Salvador that concluded the generals impeded the investigation of the murders.

The trial, held in West Palm Beach, Fla., in the fall of 2000, lasted a month and ended with exoneration for the generals. The jury acquitted both men of "command responsibility," and found them individually not responsible for the churchwomen's murder. But any celebration by the generals was quickly chilled by the prospect of a second trial. And this time the generals would be face to face with their accusers.

The letters were scary, the calls even more so. Remember that you will return to El Salvador someday, the first letter warned Romagoza. Remember you have family in El Salvador. Later, anonymous callers delivered an even more chilling message: If you weren't happy with your rape in El Salvador, we will rape you here. We will find you in the street. We know where you live.

In El Salvador, Romagoza's mother was so afraid for her safety that she stopped visiting church in the morning. By the time testimony got underway in U.S. District Court in West Palm Beach on June 24, 2002, Romagoza had suffered through months of anxiety and sleeplessness.

"Plaintiffs may call your first witness."

Romagoza made his way to the stand, his throat tight and his face strained. He pulled the microphone toward his mouth. Jose Guillermo Garcia, 68, and Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, 64, once two of the most powerful men in El Salvador, sat directly in front of him. Garcia was defense minister from 1979 to 1983, when he was succeeded by Vides Casanova, who'd been head of the National Guard.

One of Romagoza's lawyers, James Green, asked about his background, his medical training, his faith.

Then, "Dr. Romagoza, were you politically involved as a student or medical student?"

No.

"Were you ever a guerrilla?"

"Never."

"Directing your attention to December 12, 1980, what were you doing?"

He glanced at the generals, then explained he was part of a group that organized health campaigns in northern El Salvador, where peasants badly needed medical help. They went to provinces like Chalatenango, in one of the zonas rojas, or "red zones" -- areas where the fighting was the most intense, and where the military exercised martial law.

December 12 was the feast day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and local people would be attending Mass. In the hope that people already gathered would be more likely to take advantage of medical care, six health workers -- doctors, nurses, medical students -- traveled to the town of Santa Anita. It was only 10 days after the murder of the churchwomen.

"Were you carrying a gun?"

"Never."

"Was anyone with you carrying a gun?"

No.

Romagoza's group, he testified, attended Mass, then got to work, providing medical exams, inoculations, minor surgery. Soon a line snaked alongside the church in the town square.

"What happened then?"

A truck carrying National Guardsmen arrived. Romagoza assured the crowd the guardsmen would leave. "We were trying to calm them down, saying, You know, they will be here, but they will leave. But it wasn't that way . . ."

The guardsmen opened fire, emptying their machine guns into the crowd.

People scattered, but the wounded were pinned down. Romagoza touched his forehead and felt blood pouring from his head. He looked down and saw his boot ripped open by shrapnel, now lodged in his foot.

A guardsman walked over to him and pressed the barrel of his gun against Romagoza's temple. He heard a click! And again, click-click!

The safety was on.

The guardsman kicked Romagoza in the chest, then inspected his bag, with knives, forceps and needles. The equipment and his boots -- hiking shoes of the sort worn by Salvadoran Eagle Scouts -- apparently made them suspect Romagoza was a guerrilla commander. They took him, first by truck, and then by helicopter, to a garrison at El Paraiso, Spanish for "paradise."

"All they said was they were going to take me in, and I was about to go through some of the most difficult days of my life," Romagoza said. "I asked them to kill me right then, since I knew what was going to happen to me."

A child of middle-class parents, Romagoza grew up in Usulután, a farming community in southeastern El Salvador sandwiched between mountains and a sloping volcano. His father was a sports coach and physical education teacher. The family lived in a two-story Spanish colonial house, with thick walls that withstood earthquakes while others near it crumbled.

Romagoza's parents wanted him to become a priest, and sent him to seminary when he was 12. But Romagoza had a different dream: medicine, an interest fueled by seeing his grandfather die of a heart attack at 58 and watching childhood friends die of malnutrition and parasitic diseases.

Romagoza wanted to be a surgeon, but such ambitions seemed out of reach. He was one of eight children, and medical school was costly. But Romagoza had two uncles in the military, both colonels, who had connections. One of them, Lt. Col. Manuel Rafael Arce Blandon, was once the country's economics minister, and he helped his nephew get a medical scholarship.

In 1970 at age 19, Romagoza enrolled at the University of El Salvador in San Salvador, where he eventually hoped to specialize in cardiac surgery. Instead he found himself caught up in El Salvador's increasing unrest. A guerrilla movement was growing, inspired by the success of Nicaragua's Sandinistas, and the state was intent on crushing it. The government's hard-liners were supported by the United States, still fighting the Cold War and determined to prevent revolutionary, Cuban-style socialism from spreading across Central America. The United States provided the Salvadoran government with arms, military training and millions of dollars in aid.

By the late 1970s, El Salvador -- a country roughly the size of Massachusetts, with just 5 million people -- was on the brink of civil war. Though he hadn't yet finished medical school (and would not until 1994), Romagoza had already begun to perform surgery in the field.

"People didn't go to the hospital," he explains. "They died in the streets, they died in the church, they died in the school . . . I did a lot of surgery at that time."

The woman he would eventually marry, Laura Maria Melindas, was treating people caught in the crossfire, too. She was a year behind him in medical school and both were inspired by El Salvador's archbishop, Oscar Romero, who became a hero to millions in Latin America by openly challenging El Salvador's ruling class. Before he was silenced by an assassin's bullet on March 24, 1980, Romero helped establish groups that promoted land reform and workers' rights. He also called on medical students to treat the country's rural poor, who were being swept into a brutal, chaotic conflict. Romagoza and Melindas heeded the call, though it was increasingly dangerous to do so.

At the university's clinic, people began showing up with burns, lesions and track marks from electric shock instruments. Some had been raped with metal instruments, others beaten over and over again. Romagoza says he treated about 30 torture victims in 1979 and 1980. Their physical scars and bruises were always accompanied by "psychosomatic problems" and "much emotional trouble."

"There was a standard among them all," Romagoza says, "which was a terrible fear of everything."

At El Paraiso, Romagoza was stripped to his underwear, strapped to a cement table and blindfolded.

"Suddenly these voices appeared, and they started questioning me, and each question was accompanied by a blow," Romagoza testified. "When they didn't receive the answers they wanted, that is when the blows came, and the electrical shocks."

The next day he was moved to National Guard headquarters in San Salvador. His guards joked about taking him to the best hotel in the country. His room measured roughly four by four feet. No toilet, no running water.

He slept only about 150 feet from Vides Casanova's office, as he would later find out from schematic drawings of the National Guard compound. His ankles were tied with thick ropes.

Once again, the interrogation began. The same questions were repeated: Why was he with those people? Who were the other doctors helping those people? More blows followed. Then more shocks.

In the wood-paneled Florida courtroom, the doctor recounted the details without emotion as a hushed jury absorbed his words. But he was not really there, he said later. He could not recognize his own voice. The courtroom had receded, replaced by the torture chamber.

At night, he could hear the screams of other men and women being tortured. Meager portions of tortillas and beans were the only nourishment. Romagoza's wounds were left untreated.

"I feel I am once again thrown on the floor naked, waiting for the next blow," he told the jurors, "waiting for the next electrical shock . . . When is it going to come?"

"Do you remember Christmas Day 1980?"

It was the first Christmas that Romagoza had ever been away from his family. He and his wife now had a baby daughter, also named Laura. They didn't know where he was -- only that he had disappeared.

"That Christmas I had wanted to take my little girl to visit my mother," he testified. Instead, "on Christmas when they were drunk, and on New Year's when they were drunk, torture was harsher, and it would vary."

Blows and shocks increased each day. "The electric shocks . . . were almost like our daily bread." Alligator clips were clamped on every part of his body -- his tongue, testicles, anus, breasts and the edges of his wounds. Eventually he passed out from the pain. Then they would wake him with water and continue torturing him until he defecated.

One of the defendants, he told the jury, visited him in his cell.

"They would call him the big boss. They would say the colonel."

"And who was that?"

Vides Casanova, director of the National Guard.

The day of the visit, they cleaned Romagoza's wounds and blindfolded him. He could tell that this interrogation would be different from the others. A silence fell over the room -- there wasn't the usual chatter among guards. Footsteps advanced, and a familiar voice began to ask questions.

"Could you," Romagoza's lawyer asked, "see anything at all of the person who was interrogating you?"

Yes.

"What could you see?"

"I could see his boots, his trousers and the buckle to his belt."

"Were the boots shined?"

"Very shined." His clothing was of a much higher quality than regular guards wore. And his voice -- who could forget it? That voice was everywhere on TV and radio. Everyone in El Salvador knew the voice of Col. Vides Casanova.

The voice asked him about his connection to his uncles. The voice joked that Romagoza was almost dead -- that he stank of death.

"After the colonel visited you, did your treatment change?"

Yes.

"Did it become better, or worse?"

"It was worse . . ."

"Were you ever hung from ropes or pulleys?"

They called it the plane. They took him to a room where they hung him by his hands. Sometimes they would suspend him by his legs. He was raped as he hung there. "They introduced a stick . . ." And it was there, while he was hanging, that they shot him in the middle of his left forearm.

"They told me that was the mark they made for having helped those people. And they said that for the rest of my life I would bear the mark of a leftist, and that I would never again do what I had been doing there."

The bullet severed nerves, limiting motion and sensation in his thumb and middle and index fingers. Bleeding, he was still suspended by wires that dug into his hands. He tried to pull himself up to ease the pain, but this tightened the wires, and buried them deeper inside his fingers.

"They tightened so much they went halfway through my fingers," he said, his voice cracking. "I've lost feeling in three fingers in my right hand."

Romagoza's eyes swelled with tears. "They were quite right, I would never ever practice surgery. I will never again be able to help people in such a way."

After three weeks of torture, the guards took Romagoza to a room filled with coffins. They placed him inside one barely big enough to hold his body. He waited two days inside the coffin before a guardsman came for him. This time there were no guns, no blows, no threats. His two high-ranking military uncles had managed to intercede.

"A guardsman pulled me out of the box and handed me over to the arms of my uncle, who carried me to his car."

"As you were leaving did you see anyone else?"

"I saw my uncle, Colonel Mejia Arce, next to Colonel Vides Casanova."

"Do you see Colonel, now General, Vides Casanova in the courtroom today?"

Romagoza pointed to the man seated directly in front of him.

"That man," he said. "The one in the middle."

Shoulders hunched, Vides Casanova stirred uncomfortably for a moment in his dark suit.

"And are you positive that that is the same voice that you heard from the colonel back in the torture chamber in late 1980, early 1981?"

"Almost 90 percent sure, yes."

Romagoza later came to wonder if his torture was protracted not because of a pair of boots and a medical bag, but because the military suspected that he and his prominent uncles were passing weapons to the guerrillas. National Guardsmen, and Vides Casanova in particular, pressed Romagoza repeatedly about this. Why else, they may have thought, would a doctor with two high-ranking uncles, both colonels, be caring for the poor in a militarized zone?

"When you were released, how did you feel?"

"As if I had been born again."

"Were you able to walk?"

No.

"How much did you weigh?"

After 24 days of detention, he weighed about 70 pounds, down from 120. He had lost a great deal of blood, and badly needed a doctor. His neglected wounds were infected; some had worms in them. But friends turned him away, "because they were afraid for what could happen to them if they helped me." Even his family would not allow him to stay with them.

He had to leave El Salvador. Not just for his own sake, but for his family's.

"That part, leaving El Salvador, was the worst," says Romagoza, whose wife remained behind, determined to continue working in the red zones. He understood her decision. What she was doing, he says, "was necessary at that time. They needed a doctor there, and she was a good doctor." Romagoza was spirited into Guatemala on a truck loaded with onions. From there, he made his way to Mexico City, which had become a haven for thousands of Central American refugees. He lived with Salvadorans from his home town of Usulután in a modest two-story house near the airport. They nicknamed it the "Usulután Embassy," because there were sometimes as many as 15 people crowded into three small rooms. Most of them had scars, though they didn't share what they'd been through.

"We would talk about politics, not our trauma," Romagoza says. "We wouldn't talk about it. We dealt with it with alcohol.

Psychologically, it was very hard. You wanted to cry, but couldn't."

Romagoza worked as an accountant at a restaurant; on weekends he volunteered at a nearby clinic. He and his housemates tended a small garden behind their house and bred rabbits, which they butchered and sold to support themselves. At the market, Mexican neighbors who knew they were displaced Salvadorans would offer free fruits and vegetables.

"The Mexican people were beautiful and wonderful," Romagoza says. The Mexican police were a different matter. Wearing civilian clothes, they would approach Salvadoran refugees and ask for documents, threatening deportation. A bribe would buy Salvadorans the right to remain in Mexico, but such encounters always heightened their fears.

As economic conditions in Mexico worsened and police harassment increased, hundreds of refugees began heading to the United States. Romagoza joined them, deciding to cross the border with a group of Guatemalans. He and 14 others hid in a farmhouse, then hiked through the desert at dark, evading border guards. Ten hours after setting out, they arrived in California at daybreak, on April 23, 1983.

Romagoza wound up in San Francisco, where he found work as a janitor. He didn't speak much English, and it felt strange to be living in the United States, which was supporting the very people who had tortured him. Ordinary Americans, he realized, didn't understand their government's role in El Salvador's civil war. "I was surprised by how little people knew about what was happening outside their [borders]," Romagoza says. "People didn't know too much about the war in Central America -- all they knew were 'communists' . . . That was a shock. Because I suffered the consequences" of U.S. policies.

Back then, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service was denying political asylum to nearly all Salvadorans. Some were even deported.

Though he was illegal himself, Romagoza became active in the sanctuary movement, pushing to change U.S. policies toward Central America and its refugees. He was

attending a movement conference in Washington in 1986 when he stumbled upon La Clinica del Pueblo. Situated on the third floor of a red-brick building in Columbia Heights, the clinic was open only Tuesday nights and was struggling to stay afloat. But the Salvadoran community around it was vibrant and growing. Salvadoran street vendors sold sliced mangoes and tortillas outside the clinic, and the neighborhood was home to men and women from Romagoza's home town.

Instead of returning to San Francisco, he volunteered at the clinic for six months. In 1987, he joined full time. He couldn't treat patients, but he took medical histories, translated for doctors, cleaned and did whatever else was needed.

There was a huge demand for La Clinica's services. Though they were thousands of miles from El Salvador, many immigrants still cringed at the sight of a police car. Some wouldn't open the door to the mailman because his uniform reminded them of the military. Some didn't go to the hospital or send their children to school because the INS might find them there and deport them. Their pervasive fear -- that "terrible fear of everything" -- produced persistent headaches, gastric difficulties, depression and hypertension, Romagoza says.

He suffered from many of the same symptoms. But he was finally working at a clinic again, doing exactly what he'd done in El Salvador: serving his country's poor.

Romagoza didn't really know his wife and daughter anymore. More than seven years had passed since he'd seen them. By 1987, they were living in Los Filos, roughly 15 miles from Santa Anita, the town where Romagoza had been abducted.

Laura Maria had never stopped delivering medical care to El Salvador's peasants. It was a mission she and Romagoza both believed in, but his long exile had distanced them. Now even phone calls were difficult. "Eventually we communicated only through letters," Romagoza says, "and in some way we decided to separate."

Then one day in 1988, a friend from San Salvador called Romagoza at the clinic. Did he know, the friend asked, that his daughter was now living with her mother's family and that his wife was missing?

Romagoza's heart sank. He called his mother-in-law. "And she told me . . ."

In Los Filos and the surrounding areas, the military had been stepping up their counterinsurgency efforts. They called their strategy "quitarle el agua al pez," draining the sea from the fish. By destroying the guerrillas' support networks and killing their sympathizers, they would make it more difficult for the rebels to operate. Los Filos residents fled the area rather than risk being caught up in the military sweeps. But Laura Maria returned to town to get medical supplies that were hastily left behind. After the sweeps were over, friends found her body. She'd been raped and then hacked with machetes.

Romagoza's daughter, Laura, was 8 years old. She went to live with her mother's family, first in San Salvador, then in Puebla, Mexico. Romagoza occasionally calls Laura, now in her twenties and studying child psychology, and travels to Mexico every year or so to see her. But he always stays in a hotel during his visits, rather than with his in-laws. To this day, he says, they blame him for Laura Maria's death. If it weren't for him, they say, she would never have begun working in the red zones.

He understands their anger, but doesn't feel responsible for Laura Maria's death. "I knew she would say no if I asked her to leave El Salvador," he says. "In some way, we thought: I will live here and she will live there, and once the war is over, we would get together and be a family again."

"General Garcia, you became minister of defense on or about October 15, 1979, correct?"

"Yes, yes, that is so."

Wrinkled, graying and grandfatherly, Garcia had taken the witness stand in his defense. Romagoza watched from the plaintiffs' table with mixed emotions. Part of him hated this man and Vides Casanova. They were, he would say later, "the architects of the terror that all of us were crushed by." But part of him also felt sorry for them, especially Garcia, who reminded Romagoza of his father. Once the most powerful men in the country, they'd been "abandoned by their masters."

Romagoza was right. Hardly anyone had shown up to support Garcia or Vides Casanova. No one from the Salvadoran government or military testified on their behalf. Only one former U.S. official spoke in their defense. Edwin Corr, the U.S. ambassador from 1985 to 1988, singled out Vides Casanova as "the person most responsible for helping to improve the human rights situation in El Salvador." But another U.S. ambassador, Robert White, testified on behalf of the torture victims, reading a series of damning State Department cables to the jury.

"The major immediate threat to the existence of this government is the right-wing violence," White wrote on March 9, 1980. "Unfortunately, the command structure of the Army and security forces either tolerates or encourages this activity." In another cable, on May 21, 1980, he described confronting the defense minister about the torture and killing of unarmed civilians by security forces. "Colonel Garcia admitted that the excesses were grave and that he had a good idea who was responsible . . . Colonel Garcia made no promise, implicit or explicit, to put an end to the official violence."

During his testimony, Garcia defended the military's human rights record and insisted that he had tried to protect Salvadorans from torture and repression. "I did everything possible that was within my reach," insisted Garcia, who was awarded the U.S. Legion of Merit in 1983 by President Reagan for his service in El Salvador. "At that time, it was not easy." Killing and kidnapping were so rampant on both sides of the conflict that he sent his children to live in the United States in 1979. Two of his drivers barely survived

assassination attempts. A close friend was killed because of his relationship with Garcia, the general told the jury.

Vides Casanova, tall and imposing, with jowls that give him an air of sadness, took the stand after Garcia. This was the man Romagoza had accused of direct participation in his interrogation.

Kurt Klaus, the lawyer defending both generals, asked Vides Casanova about the diagram of El Salvador's National Guard headquarters, where some of Romagoza's torture had allegedly taken place. "General Vides, you saw the diagram that Dr. Romagoza testified to?"

Yes.

"Could those cells have existed at the National Guard headquarters while you were head of the National Guard?"

"They did not exist."

"Is it possible that they existed in another building somewhere in San Salvador?"

"It's possible. Not that I was aware of it."

"Could they have been at the national police headquarters?"

"I wouldn't be able to answer that."

"Could someone have been tortured on the 10 acres of the National Guard headquarters without you knowing it in December of 1979?"

"I think it could have happened without one knowing about it, but I was never aware of a single act of torture during my tenure at the National Guard . . . I never spoke with anyone who was detained. And I have never interrogated anybody in my entire life; that has never been my function."

"Could that have happened for three and a half weeks beginning December 12, 1980, at the National Guard headquarters? Could someone have been detained and tortured without you knowing?"

"To me, it is very difficult that someone could have been tortured under those conditions. Any torture, any scream could have been heard . . . Firing a gunshot inside a building would have been heard."

The National Guard was doing everything it could to restore order to El Salvador, he said. The entire country was in turmoil. "We all suffered," he told the jury, describing

how his relatives were kidnapped, his house was machine-gunned, his mother's house bombed.

Romagoza's lawyer James Green cross-examined Vides Casanova.

"General Vides, isn't it true there was not one single act of insubordination to your orders during your entire 35-year career as military officer?"

"Not that I know of."

"And General Vides, because you never ordered an investigation, you never punished anyone who was responsible for torture?"

"I never discovered anyone carrying out torture."

"That is because you never ordered an investigation, correct?"

"Correct."

After Vides Casanova was finished testifying, the defense rested its case. Then the judge honored an unusual request from the jurors. They wanted to see the victims' scars. Romagoza bared his left arm where he'd been shot. His co-plaintiff Neris Gonzalez uncovered her arms, where a machete had sliced her and cigarettes had been burned into her flesh.

Throughout the trial, Romagoza shuttled back and forth between West Palm Beach and Washington, where he threw himself into his work at the clinic. Anything to take his mind off the trial.

His testimony had forced him to relive his darkest moments, says his therapist, Karen Hanscom, who works at Baltimore's Advocates for Survivors of Torture and Trauma and accompanied Romagoza to Florida.

Not many people, she says, "can go through this sort of thing -- to allow yourself to go through just as much pain as when you were tortured," she explains. "He is the bravest man I know."

Many Salvadorans thought so, too. One day, two fellow countrymen stopped by the clinic to offer their sympathy and talk about the trial. Over time their numbers swelled. Every weekend, as many as 25 Salvadorans would gather at the clinic for an update on the case, hanging on Romagoza's every word. Who testified? they'd ask. How did the generals react? What will happen to them?

They knew how hard it had been for Romagoza to recount his story. Many of them had been victims of torture, of trauma. Some were widows. Others were kin of the

disappeared. They nicknamed themselves the "grupo de los tuertos," the group of broken ones. Together, they wept, joked, reminisced, raged.

When closing arguments were finished in Florida, they held a party, celebrating not only the end of the trial, but Romagoza's willingness to confront the past. The doctor was helping them all heal.

The jury was on the verge of a verdict.

Romagoza's lawyers called and urged him to return to Florida. His plane was still circling the West Palm Beach airport the morning of July 23, 2002, when the jury filed back into the courtroom. The jury foreman carried a folded piece of paper.

"Has the jury arrived at its verdicts?" asked the judge.

"It has, your honor," answered the foreman.

The generals were not in the courtroom. Their accusers Neris Gonzalez and Carlos Mauricio, both of whom had recounted their torture in the same agonizing detail as Romagoza, waited tensely for the foreman to speak.

"In the case of Juan Romagoza Arce versus Jose Guillermo Garcia and Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, we, the jury, return the following verdict upon the claims of plaintiff Dr. Juan Romagoza Arce . . ."

Court spectators gasped. Gonzalez and Mauricio exclaimed and wept. Afterward, the two Salvadorans and their lawyers raced from the courthouse to meet Romagoza at the airport. They caught him exiting the terminal and delivered the news: An American jury had awarded the three of them \$54.6 million, including \$20 million to Romagoza for the loss of his surgeon's skills.

Romagoza could not comprehend it. "I thought it was impossible," he says. "I was shocked -- I was shaking."

The case had made legal history, marking the first time such high-ranking military officers living in the United States had been held accountable with the help of the Torture Victim Protection Act. Under the law, signed by the first President Bush in 1992, it did not matter if the generals did not personally execute an order, or did not personally oversee atrocities. If they held military command over the perpetrators, knew or should have known of the torture, could stop it but did nothing, they were responsible.

The generals were already planning to appeal the decision, and Romagoza and the other plaintiffs might never see a dime of award money. But what the generals' attorney called "really just a torts case" had become something much more significant: a surrogate war crimes tribunal. For many Salvadorans, two decades of denial and dissembling were over.

"I wanted to cry," Romagoza says, "cry out for all those who died in the streets, died in the country, died anonymously. I think they'd be happy that day."

Vides Casanova eagerly hauls out his three-inch-thick scrapbooks, which chronicle his military career. They are filled with photographs of three U.S. presidents: Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, and carefully preserved invitations to presidential luncheons and rides aboard Air Force Two and Marine One. Other photos show the general standing shoulder to shoulder with U.S. military officers; Colin Powell hovers in the background of a black-and-white snapshot of a U.S. military classroom.

Vides Casanova flips through the scrapbooks in the living room of his Palm Coast, Fla., home, where his life now revolves around his children and grandchildren. Look at this, the general urges when he comes across commendations from members of Congress and officers from the Southern Military Command. One lauds him as a "shield of democracy." In a letter accompanying one of two U.S. Legion of Merit awards, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger congratulates Vides Casanova for "broad institutional reform of the Salvadoran Armed forces" and "high professional and ethical standards."

Months have passed since the end of the trial, and the general is still struggling to make sense of the outcome. "We tried to prove that we were innocent and that we had done everything proper throughout our lives; to try to show that they were trying to accuse us unjustly," he says. "Our image was distorted, and it's a reality we now have to accept."

He claims his life has been unaffected by the verdict, which is still being appealed. He says this even though Romagoza's lawyers are trying to garnish \$275,000 from his Merrill Lynch account and determine whether he has any overseas accounts and assets. Vides Casanova doesn't express any hostility toward those who sued him, not even Romagoza.

"I felt sadness for being seated across from Salvadorans and not being able to shake their hands," says Vides Casanova. But he adds that they were probably exaggerating their experiences.

He speaks with an air of authority, explaining, in Spanish, the holes in the plaintiffs' case. With flowing hand gestures, he argues that since none of them came forward to report their torture to the authorities at the time, their accusations are baseless. He boasts about the Salvadoran military's discipline, professionalism and organization.

Then he's asked about U.S. State Department cables describing massive human rights violations during his command. He's asked about documented massacres committed by National Guardsmen. He's asked about paramilitary death squads and the notorious body dump at El Playon, just 20 minutes from his office.

Vides Casanova's lips curl, and his hands grow still. He compares himself to a doctor who wasn't capable of knowing everything happening in his hospital. He explains that though parents can train a child to be disciplined and obedient, "the son can do something

without the parents realizing it." He insists he only heard rumors of torture during his tenure, though he never ordered any investigations to find out whether they were true.

He says he served his country; his conscience is clear.

The sounds of blow dryers and ringing telephones drift through Jose Guillermo Garcia's house in Plantation, Fla., where, the general says, he gets by on a \$700-a-month Salvadoran military pension. He takes his grandchildren to school and stays active at his church. His family and faith, he explains through a translator, were a great source of strength during the trials.

Garcia came from a poor family and saw the Army as his escape route from poverty, though the military wasn't his first career choice. "I really wanted to be a doctor -- that was my dream. I really wanted to heal people . . . That was my dearest interest."

He says this without irony or guilt. Romagoza, he is reminded, was trying to heal people when he was detained. But Garcia doesn't buy that story.

"All the doctors had left that area in Chalatenango because they were worried that the terrorists were going to capture them," Garcia says. "And so how can you explain that this man was helping the poor there? He should have been in the main hospital.

"He deserved to be detained -- he was dressed in combat boots from Eagle Scouts."

Even so, Garcia doesn't want anyone to think he countenanced torture; he says he didn't. "Absolutely nothing justifies the use of torture. It's really not useful for anything -- it just worsens the problem."

Later, he says "it is possible" torture occurred, "but I was never privy to seeing it."

Is it possible you didn't investigate the torture, disappearances and massacres under your command?

"Yes, it's possible."

Is it possible you didn't do anything to discipline the men responsible for these acts under your leadership?

"Yes, it's possible."

"I really tried to be perfect before the law, but nobody is perfect," Garcia says. "The only one who never does anything wrong is the one who never does anything, period."

The longer he talks, the more agitated he becomes. "El Salvador was on fire," he insists. "There were some of us who went out to defend our country and we had the approval and

support of the majority of the people in El Salvador . . . I never gave an order that wasn't legal, I never sent anyone to get killed."

By the end of the interview, he seems worn out, used up. Garcia goes to get his wife, who has apparently been listening from another room. Her eyes are red as she says thank you and farewell to their guests, a reporter and his translator. She does not meet their gaze.

The waiting room at La Clinica overflows with patients on a winter morning, but no one seems to mind the lengthy queue to see a doctor. In this community, La Clinica is a treasured sanctuary. Its patients don't have to struggle to explain their aches and pains in English; the staff of 50 speak Spanish.

Patients don't have to worry about their lack of medical insurance; treatment is free. They don't have to answer questions about their immigration status; the clinic doesn't know and doesn't care if they are here illegally.

Romagoza presides over the institution he has helped build with tremendous pride and a seemingly endless supply of energy. He works here six and sometimes seven days a week, immersing himself in the daily dramas and demands.

Today, the heat is out, and the phones aren't working. Every time it rains, the roof leaks. The building on Irving Street NW has never had an elevator -- patients in wheelchairs have to be carried up a flight of steps -- and vivid murals of peasant life can't make up for the ridiculously tight quarters. The place just isn't big enough to handle 31,000 patient visits a year.

Romagoza and the clinic board have long wanted to expand, to move to a larger, more modern space. Now, after seven years of fundraising, they are about to realize their dream. The clinic is getting ready to relocate to a three-story, \$3.4 million facility with 10 examination rooms, 11 mental health and HIV counseling rooms, a chapel and a children's playroom.

As moving day approaches, the excitement grows. And so does the sadness. For all its shortcomings, the old clinic is filled with memories. Romagoza arranges for psychotherapists to visit with the staff for three or four sessions.

"We had to prepare ourselves" for the emotional fallout of the move, Romagoza says later. "Many people at the last minute didn't want to move. They said, 'I want to be here. I love this building.' That was the big fear for everybody: that we would lose our identity."

The last workday in the old building arrives, on April 4, 2003. The staff members close the building with a ceremony of remembrance. They read poems and testimonials. Share laughter and shed tears.

And then they start dancing -- a conga line snaking through the hallways to the strains of mariachi music. When they are finished, they fall in line behind the band and head up the

street to the new building on 15th Street. Each staffer carries a stick of incense or a candle and one cherished item from the old clinic. Romagoza brings a Bible given to him by a former patient. A large painting of Archbishop Romero heads the procession.

The new La Clinica is pristine, untouched, with freshly painted walls in Latin reds, oranges and yellows. From Romagoza's office, he'll be able to see patients congregating in the waiting room, hear their rapid-fire Spanish. The staff members gather for a moment of silence in their new home. Romagoza stands quietly, thinking about all the moves he has made and the goodbyes he has said.

"I remember when I came here, how I was a refugee," he says later. "I came here with nothing -- only my clothes. I moved from El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, [California] and then [to] Washington. Moving, moving, moving. But each time has been a little different, a little improved."

The torture didn't end his journey; it was, in retrospect, its starting point.

After the trial, Romagoza found himself longing to return to El Salvador. He'd been back before. In 1991, after an armistice between the government and the guerrillas, he returned to Chalatenango and sought out the place where his wife is buried. Her grave lies in a forest near the Honduran border, marked by a simple cross. It is, Romagoza says, a peaceful place. Someday, after his daughter finishes school, he'll take her there.

He also ventured to Santa Anita, the town where he was abducted during the feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe. It looked exactly the same as he remembered it. "Two women actually recognized me," he says. "They were amazed and said, 'Were you that young doctor who helped us during the war? We thought you were dead!' "

From then on, he returned to El Salvador twice a year, seeing firsthand how the country was recovering from years of bloodshed. Under their agreement with the government, the guerrillas were integrated into El Salvador's civilian police forces. The National Guard and the military were downsized, becoming less visible and menacing. The U.N. Truth Commission report detailed many of the war's worst atrocities, but a sweeping amnesty law guaranteed that no one in El Salvador would be tried for them. No one would be punished for the torture cells, the massacres, the body dumps. It was as if a conflict that had claimed 75,000 lives and wounded thousands of others had never happened.

"We don't talk about the war," Romagoza says. "In some way, that's how we resolved things in El Salvador."

But the trial in Florida had pierced the silence, making headlines in San Salvador just as it had in Washington. Now that the testimony was over, the fear was back. Romagoza wanted to visit Usulután, but delayed the trip for months. If there had been death threats before the testimony started, what would he face now? Many people in El Salvador thought Romagoza was rich as a result of the verdict, though he has yet to receive any money.

That perception could make him a target for kidnappers in one of Latin America's most crime-plagued countries. His family didn't think he'd be safe.

But he couldn't stay away. After the opening of the new clinic, he boarded a plane to San Salvador to spend Easter with his family. Relatives met him outside the airport. They were armed, just in case.

Romagoza kept a low profile throughout the visit. He missed some of the Holy Week events in Usulután because of the throngs they attracted. Friends accompanied him on walks, and they made him turn his lights off at dark.

Few people asked him about the trial, especially in public. "They say it is dangerous to remember," Romagoza says. Sometimes it came up over dinner with close friends. None of them could get over his willingness to confront the past. But by doing so, he says, he has loosened its hold on him.

When he was in his cell, he remembers, the first thing he would hear in the morning was the Salvadoran national anthem. The guards would listen to it at 6 a.m. as they finished their breakfasts and were preparing to resume their beatings.

For years, Romagoza could not bear to hear that music. Then, when he was back in El Salvador this past spring, he heard the anthem being played on the radio early one morning as he made his way to the market. He stopped to listen. The music no longer reminded him of black-booted men coming to hurt him. Instead it made him think of the country he'd always loved: its mountains, its dusty roads, its churches, its people.

De la paz en la dicha suprema / siempre noble soñó El Salvador.

Of peace enjoyed in perfect happiness / El Salvador has always nobly dreamed.

Joshua E.S. Phillips is a freelance journalist based in New York. Juan Romagoza Arce will be fielding questions and comments about this article at 1 p.m. Monday on www.washingtonpost.com/liveonline.

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