

Family haunted by fugitive's bid for U.S. asylum

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The party lasted well into the night. Raymond Persaud's friends and relatives had gathered at the family home in Georgetown, Guyana, to wish him well on his new adventure. The 19-year-old was one of six students in the country awarded a scholarship to study medicine in Cuba. In the morning, he and the other students would fly to Havana.

"I remember that we had borrowed all these chairs for the party," recalled Roseanne Nenner, Raymond's sister, who was just 11 when her brother left. "In the morning, we got up and the whole family drove to the airport. All my brothers and sisters, we all took off from school to see my brother off. It was Oct. 6, 1976, a Wednesday, and I'll never forget how very hot it was outside."

A picture taken that morning at the airport shows Raymond, dressed in his best suit, standing alongside two of his five siblings, his brother Trevor and sister Roseanne. "He was so happy," Roseanne said. "And my father was so proud."

The family hugged and kissed at the airport, as Raymond told his mother he would send her a letter as soon as he arrived in Havana so that she would know he had arrived safely. After Raymond boarded the Cubana DC-8, the family returned to their home. "We were tired from the night before, and we all fell asleep," Roseanne recalled. "And [by midafternoon] I remember that my cousin came over and woke us all up. It was very bizarre. She gathered us all together and told us the plane had crashed. And my mother just started to scream."

Flight 455 flew from Guyana to Trinidad and from Trinidad to Barbados. The plane was then scheduled to fly to Kingston, Jamaica, before making its final stop in Havana. Eight minutes after the plane took off from Barbados, a bomb exploded.

"We have an explosion on board," the pilot radioed to the control tower. "We're descending fast. We have fire on board." The pilot struggled to keep the plane airborne for several minutes, but it ultimately crashed into the Caribbean, five miles short of Barbados' Seawell Airport. All 73 people aboard the plane died, including 58 Cubans and 11 Guyanese.

That night, and for the next seven days, the extra chairs the family had borrowed for Raymond's celebratory goodbye party would be used for his wake and memorial service.

"We've lived with grief ever since that day," said Zena, Raymond's mother. "Especially my husband."

"My father was not the same after the death of my brother," Roseanne said. "It was such a shock, the way it happened," added another of Raymond's sisters, Sharon Persaud, who was 12 when her brother died. "My father had so many hopes for his child. And for it to all end that way. He became obsessed by it."

Charles Persaud moved his family to the United States in 1979 and for years gathered boxes of information on the bombing. “My father died two years ago from a massive heart attack,” said Roseanne. “He died of a broken heart because he could not get over losing my brother.”

No one else in the family had become nearly as obsessed with the Cubana flight as Raymond’s father. And in the two years since his passing, it was rarely mentioned. Until two weeks ago when Zena Persaud noticed a story in a Caribbean newspaper in Queens, N.Y., under the headline: **Asylum to be sought in U.S. for 1976 Cubana Airline bombing suspect.**

The story explained that Luis Posada, long suspected of the bombing, had illegally entered the United States and was going to seek political asylum. “He’s hiding in South Florida,” she said incredulously, adding that she immediately called her daughter Roseanne with the news.

“Here it is, 29 years later, and I just started crying,” Roseanne said.

At almost the same moment Zena was reading that story in the Caribbean Daylight, Sharon Persaud was at her desk at the Department of Homeland Security’s office in Garden City, N.J. For five years, she was an asylum officer hearing claims like Posada’s; now she was a supervisor in the naturalization section: “News stories of interest are often e-mailed around the department, and I just happened to see this one that mentioned Posada. I couldn’t believe it.”

Two men were convicted for planting the bombs aboard the Cubana flight. Hernan Ricardo and Freddy Lugo boarded the flight in Trinidad and planted the bombs before deplaning in Barbados. Ricardo and Lugo had both worked for Venezuela’s secret police, DISIP, which was closely aligned with anti-Castro Cubans who were using Caracas as a base of operations against the Castro government. The two men also were linked to a private security agency started by Luis Posada, a CIA-trained Cuban exile who once oversaw DISIP’s explosives section.

Orlando Bosch, another Cuban exile who had embraced violence as a way of removing Fidel Castro, was in Caracas at the time, and Posada assigned Ricardo to drive Bosch around Venezuela before the bombing. All four men—Ricardo, Lugo, Posada and Bosch—were arrested and tried in Venezuela for the Cubana bombing. Ricardo and Lugo were convicted. The trials of Bosch and Posada—who were accused of masterminding the attack—ended in acquittals. **There were allegations that the verdicts had been rigged and that officials had been bribed.**

Bosch was released and came to the United States. In 1989, President George Bush—over the strong objections of his own Justice Department—granted Bosch political asylum.

Posada, however, continued to be held in Venezuela while prosecutors appealed his acquittal. In 1985, Posada escaped from prison, after prison bosses were bribed to let him go. He then went to work with Oliver North, providing weapons to the Nicaraguan Contras. He also continued to fight against Castro by allegedly organizing a series of hotel bombings in Havana in the mid-1990s. An Italian tourist, Fabio di Celmo, died in one of those bombings in 1997.

While both Posada and Bosch have repeatedly denied being involved in the Cubana airline bombing, neither expressed remorse over it. "At times, you cannot avoid hurting innocent people," Bosch once told investigators. Now 77, Posada wants to retire in Miami.

"The part that is disturbing to me is that someone like this could come into this country and there isn't more outrage," said Roseanne. "He probably will get political asylum because he apparently does know a lot of important people in a lot of high places." "Why should the United States be a safe haven for him?" asks Sharon Persaud. "This guy should go to Venezuela, where he is still wanted. He's a terrorist. He killed innocent people. If he is granted asylum, what does that say about this country?"

Initially, Sharon said she was nervous to speak out, fearing it could jeopardize her career with Homeland Security. In recent days, though, she went through her father's old files on the bombing and realized she couldn't stay silent. "This would have been his time to speak out, this would have been his time to say all the things he wanted to say," she said. "He would probably be there in Miami right now. And I think that's why the rest of us are speaking out now, because we know he would have wanted his voice to be heard."