

Death of a Salesman

The off-duty cop vs. the jewelry peddler

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published: May 25, 2000

A city caught up in the ongoing Los Angeles Police Department corruption scandal took little notice when a 23-year-old jewelry vendor was killed by three gunshots to the chest by an off-duty LAPD officer. The April 26 shooting only got a few paragraphs in the daily print media, where the early, incomplete reports didn't even include the dead man's name.

His name was Alfonso Ruben Renteria Gonzalez, and he arrived here from Mexico about two years ago. Poncho, as he was called by friends and family, lived with relatives in Pico-Union, and, until recently, sold jewelry along downtown's Maple Street. "He was tranquil and full of life," says Gonzalez's sister, Alma. "It isn't just."

Family members and authorities agree that he had approached Officer Jose Cortez Amaya, 39, to sell him costume jewelry as Amaya and a friend sat eating lunch on the patio outside Lucy's Drive-In in Lynwood.

But accounts differ when it comes to what happened next. The man's cousin, Carlos Gonzalez, said witnesses told him that the officer had taken the man's jewelry, told him it was illegal to sell it and refused to give it back.

The Sheriff's Department, which is investigating the shooting, would not comment on that allegation. The department's news release said Gonzalez became aggressive when Amaya said he was not interested in jewelry and became further aggravated when Amaya, who was not in uniform, told him he was a police officer. Amaya called 911, apparently to ask for help as Gonzalez, at 6-foot-2 and 200 pounds, grew more and more agitated. According to the release, when Gonzalez was 5 feet from Amaya, he reached for a "shiny object." At that point, Amaya drew his weapon and ordered Gonzalez to raise his hands. When Gonzalez refused, Amaya fired several rounds. Gonzalez died less than an hour later at St. Francis Medical Center from multiple gunshot wounds.

The Sheriff's Department declined to say what the "shiny object" might have been and said Amaya, at 5-foot-5 and 130 pounds, felt his life was in danger. Officer Amaya remains on duty as an internal LAPD use-of-force inquiry goes forward.

A less bellicose image of Ruben Gonzalez emerges from witnesses at Lucy's. Carlos Gonzalez, the dead man's cousin, filed a complaint with the Mexican Consulate. A day after his cousin's death, he accompanied a consular official to the restaurant to take statements from employees and customers who witnessed the shooting.

"When the shots hit him, he had nothing in his hands," said Carlos Gonzalez, in a phone interview from his Pico-Union apartment, which he had shared with Ruben, another brother, Ruben's sister and three children. Family members say that Ruben Gonzalez's earnings were especially important because his sister had arrived from Mexico a month before without a job. He had recently stopped selling on his regular beat along Maple Street and branched out to other neighborhoods to try to make more money.

According to Carlos Gonzalez, witnesses say that Ruben Gonzalez went up to Amaya and offered to sell him gold chains and rings. When Amaya said he was not interested in chains, Gonzalez persisted and showed him other jewelry. Amaya, says Carlos Gonzalez, then disclosed that he was a police officer and told Ruben that selling the jewelry was illegal. He threatened to arrest him if he didn't leave. But, according to witnesses, Amaya still had the merchandise — Gonzalez's livelihood — in his hands as he ran the vendor off. "I'm not offering it as a gift — give me my stuff," Carlos Gonzalez says his cousin protested. Witnesses reported that Amaya responded with a threat to shoot Gonzalez if he didn't move along.

"I don't care — give me my things," Gonzalez said, approaching Amaya.

According to witnesses, says Carlos Gonzalez, the "shiny object" his cousin was reaching for was a Thunderbird wine bottle with a glittery cap. Toxicology test results that would show if Ruben Gonzalez had been drinking likely won't be available until June.

The purported threat to shoot Ruben Gonzalez could appear a little far-fetched, unless interpreted with a literal translation from Spanish that makes more sense in the context of a heated exchange. According to the witnesses, Gonzalez said, "Give me my things," and Amaya returned, "I'll give you some bullets."

Fernando Herrera of the Mexican Consulate, who interviewed witnesses for a report by the consulate's department of protection, said that most witnesses agreed that the officer said that he would arrest Gonzalez for street vending, but Herrera would not say that the officer threatened to shoot the jewelry vendor. He says witnesses differed on that point.

The consulate has returned the body for burial to Gonzalez's mother, Gloria Gonzalez, in Michoacan, Mexico.

Marco Lopez, a consulting attorney with the Mexican Consulate, has filed a claim against the city, the first step in suing on behalf of Gloria Gonzalez.

The LAPD's policy is not to comment on officer-involved shootings under internal investigation, which can take as long as a year. The results are not made public until the police chief reviews them and presents a report to the civilian Police Commission, which can either agree with or question the findings.

The May 1999 shooting of a homeless, mentally-ill woman, Margaret Mitchell, was the only officer-involved shooting since 1995 in which the Commission disagreed with the chief and called the shooting a violation of department policy. The Mitchell case had become increasingly politically charged as the reports of criminal police misconduct in the Rampart Division became public.

As for the Gonzalez case, "Not much is certain except Ruben is dead and the officer was off-duty," says the Mexican Consulate's Herrera.