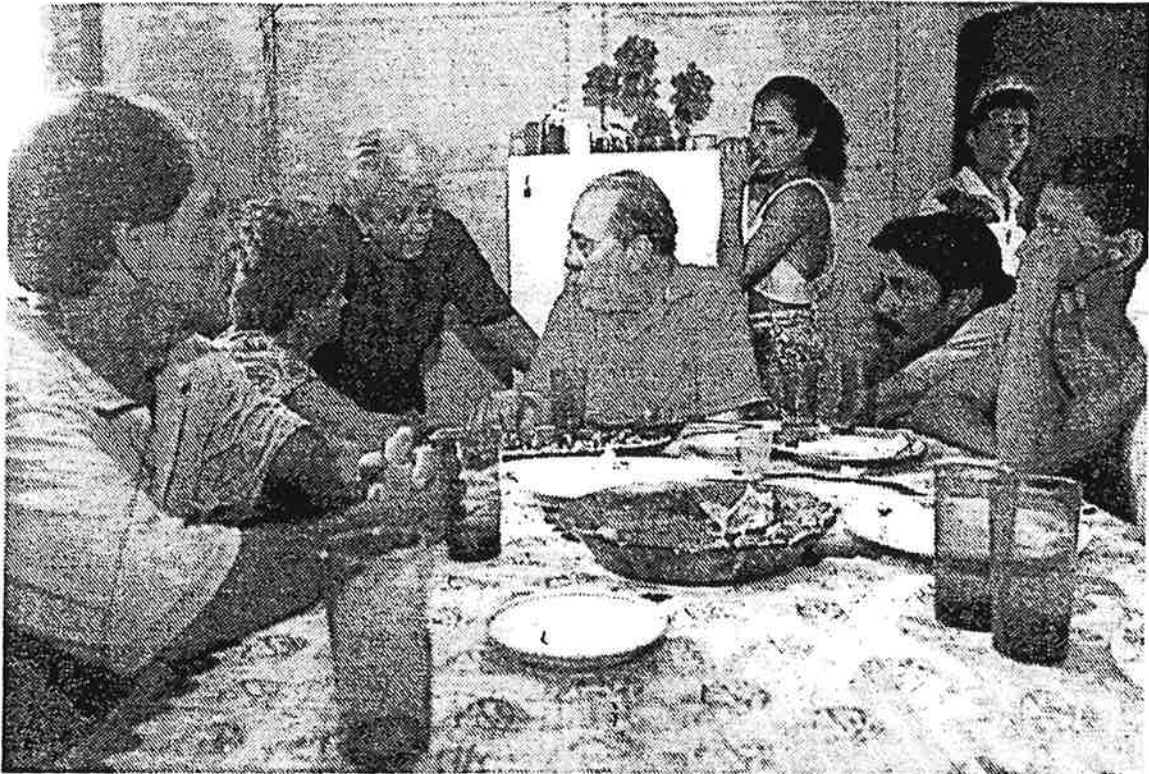


# The New York Times

Copyright © 1995 The New York Times

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 1995



Angel Franco/The New York Times

Gilberto Zaldivar, center, part of an aging generation of exiles, returned to Cuba after 30 years.

## Exile Returns, Lured by Memory of Cuba

By MIREYA NAVARRO

**HOLGUIN, Cuba** — The narrow street lined with guava and mango trees and cactus-plant fences was deserted as the taxi came to a halt and Gilberto Zaldivar got out.

To his right was the house where his sister was born and where he grew up until he was a teen-ager. Across from it, the family bodega was gone and a house had taken its place next to the shed where his father used to store beans and other grains.

As he looked around, word of his arrival spread quickly, and suddenly Mr. Zaldivar was surrounded by incredulous neighbors who greeted him with shouts of "Betico!" (his childhood nickname) and hugged him and gleefully noted that he was fat. For the next hour he and his car were mobbed as he drove through the village of Deleyte, here in eastern Cuba, popping in and out of houses.

It was a scene reminiscent of a political campaign

tour in some small American town, but this was Cuba, and Mr. Zaldivar, a Cuban exile visiting for the first time in 34 years.

"Oh, my God! The spitting image of Marina," said a neighbor, Maria de los Angeles León, 58, referring to his dead mother. "Do you remember me?"

Mr. Zaldivar, 61, had not forgotten, even when it seemed as if he had written off Cuba to pursue a new life in New York. Like thousands of Cubans of his generation and older who left after Fidel Castro's revolution took an openly Marxist-Leninist turn, he became an American citizen and over the years lost hope of ever returning.

But it is within those same generations, the ones who feel most cheated by Mr. Castro and who have fueled the politics of hostility toward the Cuban Government, that age and anxiety about seeing

Continued on Page 12, Column 1

1995  
1961

1995  
1961  
034

not  
return  
adm

Sr of  
a bodega  
owner  
w

# An Exile Returns, Lured By the Memory of Cuba

Continued From Page 1

Cuba and family again have worn down the resistance of many to visit.

There is also a growing desire among many exiles for alternatives to help bring democracy to Cuba and normalize relations. In the meantime, the return of those who have gone back after decades, like Mr. Zaldivar's, is marked by jarring emotion, an absence of recrimination and the sad clash between memories and the reality that is Cuba today.

Mr. Zaldivar, executive producer of the Repertorio Español theatrical company in New York, is not involved in exile politics. But the gradual extinction of his family in Cuba and impatience with persistent cold war-like relations between Cuba and the United States prompted his attempt to reclaim his country decades after he gave it up.

He said he mostly came to see his two remaining uncles and one aunt, whom he called his "principal nexus" to Cuba. In a painful coincidence, both uncles died four days before he arrived.

"If the Mexicans and the Spaniards come, why can't I?" Mr. Zaldivar said. "I didn't come for the beaches but to see my family."

Already, thousands of Cuban-Americans have come to Cuba from the United States to bring food and medicine and other essentials to their families, despite tighter travel restrictions last year and the American trade embargo. There has been increasing contact between Cubans

on both sides through the cultural and academic exchanges allowed by both countries.

Cuban officials say 48,000 exiles visited the island in 1994, most of them to see relatives. They say some have sought to return to live as well, but a housing shortage and the inability to collect retirement pensions from Cuba are obstacles.

During his 12-day visit to Havana and Holguín this month, Mr. Zaldivar, who left Cuba in 1961, when he was 27, smiled at the sight of the capital's colonial architecture and long seawall. When he spotted the majestic steps of the University of Havana, which he attended for two years, he erupted into clapping.

But he was shocked by the atmosphere of abandonment, even though he had expected it because of the country's economic problems.

In Havana, he found streets darkened by power outages, stalled vintage-model cars at intersections and enormous crowds at bus stops, former luxury hotels thriving with stained carpets, peeling paint and lobbies filled with prostitutes, who he said seemed more widespread and noticeable than in the old days.

Everything was both familiar and new. The Arlequin, the theater Mr. Zaldivar helped administer as a hobby after work as sales manager in Havana for the nationalized B.F. Goodrich Company, now houses Health Ministry offices on a wide street choked with cars, bicycles and pedestrians. His family's last house in Havana has been subdivided into three homes, the fate of many dwellings in the capital.

That house, in Vedado, in what used to be a middle-class district, was next to the Venezuelan Embassy, now a shelter for families who come for treatment in the capital's hospitals. It was there, next door, that Manuel Urrutia, the first President after the revolutionary triumph, sought asylum after Mr. Castro accused him of treason.

It was one of the events that persuaded Mr. Zaldivar that the new Government could not be trusted to follow a democratic path and spurred his decision to leave. His sister had left six months earlier, when militia duty was forced on her.

On May 11, 1961, he told co-workers, "I'm going downtown" and headed for the airport instead. He said goodbye only to his parents, who followed two years later.

Mr. Zaldivar returned to Cuba after hardly any contact between his immediate family in the United States and those left behind, includ-

*Left Cuba when he was 27 1961*

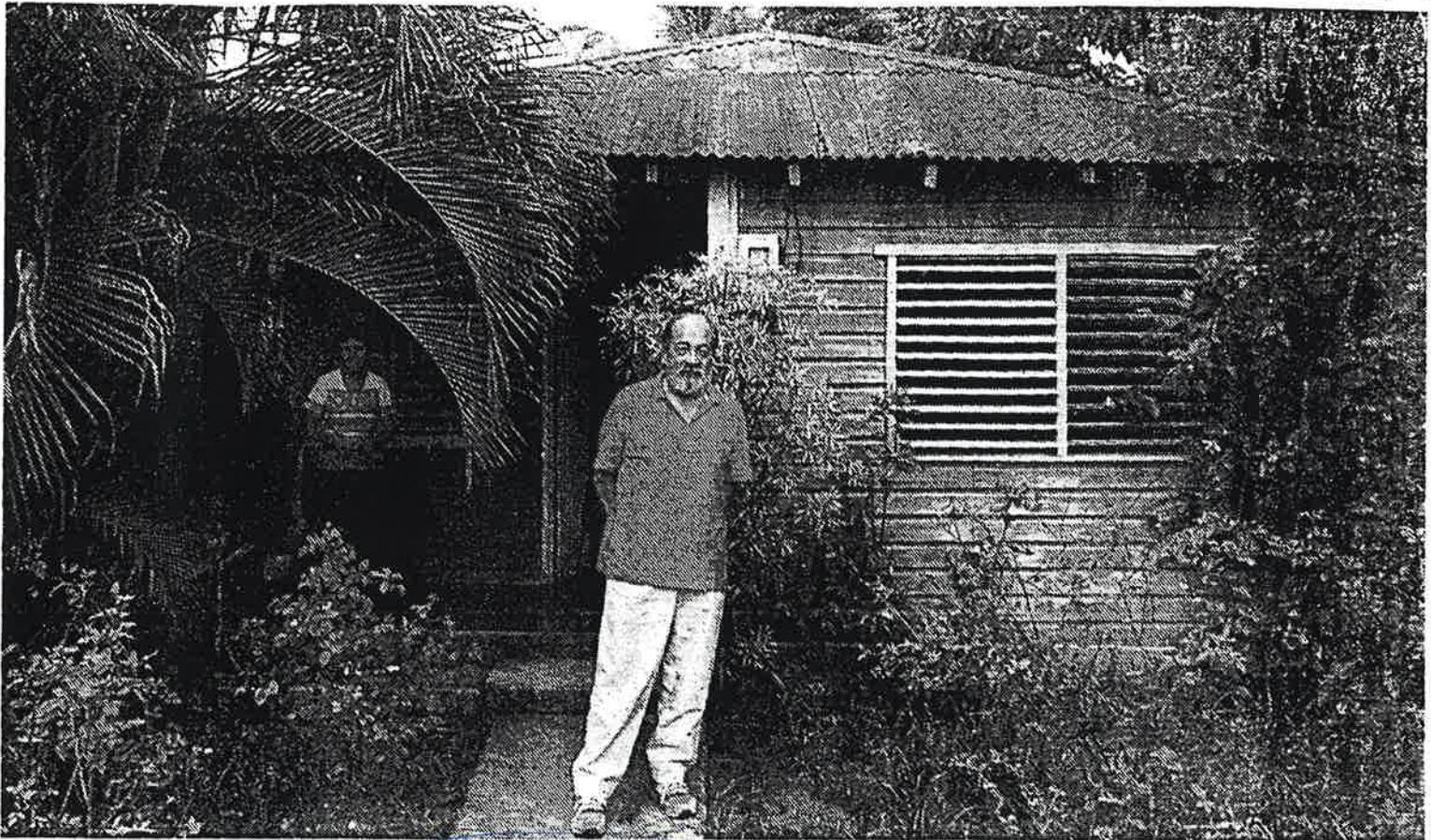
*Both uncles died 4 days before he arrived.*

*Arlequin started as a hobby*



A returning exile found his relatives in Deleyte had fared poorly.

*Parents moved to the U.S. 1963*



Angel Franco/The New York Times

Gilberto Zaldivar, 61, stands by his birthplace in Deleyte, Cuba. For many exiles of his generation, hostility has given way to a desire for reunion.

ing his mother's 10 siblings. His first overture was last November, when AT&T resumed service to Cuba and he called a cousin on a whim.

Ties had been severed after his father bequeathed his modest sugar farm and other property to a brother, a fervent supporter of the revolution, who turned them over to the Government in an action approved by other family members. The break was so complete that no one from Cuba called or wrote after his parents died in Miami — his mother in 1983, his father four years ago.

In Holguin, he now found many relatives poorer than he left them, complaining that they needed soap or toilet paper and having no qualms about begging him for money. Some said they ate only one meal a day. Mothers said their children lacked milk and school supplies. Most were in desperate need of dollars, which Cubans increasingly need to buy basic necessities.

Four relatives asked him to sponsor them to gain entry into the United States, including a cousin, who said he could not support his wife and two children as an electrician, and the 46-year-old daughter of his only remaining aunt.

"The only one who can help us is you," the aunt told him as she watched him eat a lunch of lamb,

conгри rice and yucca her daughter cooked in his honor. "Remember, I washed your diapers."

In the midst of need, there was the sheer joy of reuniting and no mention of political feuds. Mr. Zaldivar, who is single and has only one sister, who lives in Miami, suddenly could not keep track of his family. At one house, 28 relatives gathered around him for a family portrait.

"He died desperate to see you again," Nilvia Zaldivar, 51, a daughter of one of the two uncles who died, sobbed as she embraced him.

While older relatives interrogated him about the whereabouts of other family members in the United States, younger ones were full of their own questions:

"Is it true crime is rampant in 'the North?'"

"Can you change jobs?"

"How do you look for work?"

"Why did you leave?"

Mr. Zaldivar, overwhelmed, grinned and said little. But in a rare flash of anger, he asked a cousin who was a Communist Party militant, the one who was taking him around past sugar cane fields and billboards filled with revolutionary fervor: "How could this happen? Why can these families live in these conditions?"

There was no answer. Mr. Zaldivar,

## Age mellows bitterness in an exiled generation.

var, who had been surprised by the light police presence on the streets, still found widespread reluctance to discuss politics or criticize the Government and a tendency to be cautious with words.

Prodded by questions, most Cubans blame the American embargo. Those who stayed said they understood why relatives like the Zaldivars left. Some said they had toyed with the idea themselves but did not want to leave the country or to part with loved ones.

In Havana, Miguel Benavides, 55, an actor and acquaintance, said he was "happy because of his success but sad because he is not here." He said he had no doubt Cuba's fate would have turned out differently had people like Mr. Zaldivar stayed.

"Many valuable people left," he said, noting he himself stayed because he was more interested in collective benefits than personal ones. "They have a lot of blame to share."

Thirty-four years later, Mr. Zaldivar left again, with a new sense of commitment to Cuba. He wants to be the first to bring American theater to the island "when the doors open."

He vowed to bring his sister on his next visit. A realtor in Miami, she remains bitter and angrily refused to accompany him on this trip. Mr. Zaldivar said his parents, too, would have never approved of this return with Mr. Castro still in power.

But Mr. Zaldivar said he has become the hope of family members who feel hopeless.

"It's not just the poverty but an attitude that the solution won't come for them," he said. "They see a total lack of opportunities. They never imagined it would come to this."

It heartened him that one of them asked him to help finance a "paladar," as Cuba's private, home restaurants are known.

"Without having known capitalism, he understands it and wishes it," he said, promising to help when legally allowed.

From the airport, he called two cousins, one in Holguin, the other in Havana, to bid his last goodbyes.

"I'll see you soon," he said, carrying in his bags half-century-old photo albums from relatives and two prescriptions for bifocals from Deleyte neighbors.

make  
fake  
1991