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## Glitz masked perversion, sons say



LOS ANGELES (AP) — By Hollywood standards, Jose Menendez' life was a classic success story — a Cuban immigrant who married a beauty queen, had two good-looking athletic sons and built an entertainment industry fortune.

But his sons say the glitzy surface of their privileged life hid the dark secret of their father's sexual perversion. They ended up shotgunning their parents to death in their Beverly Hills mansion.

For sheer drama, it was a bloody finale worthy of Shakespeare.

Now, Erik and Lyle Menendez have lifted the curtain on a life they say was a private corner of hell. Testimony about their father's alleged sexual torture has been so extreme that some choose not to believe it.

Defense team adviser Paul Mones says extreme abuse amounting to torture can drive a son or daughter to kill.

"Denial and shock permeate the fabric of these cases," the attorney says in his book *When a Child Kills*.

In two weeks of grim testimony, Erik and Lyle tearfully portrayed their father as a sadistic demon who sexually tortured Erik for 12 years and raped Lyle at age seven. They said shame kept them silent through the years.

"I just wanted more than anything else that when I died no one would find out this was happening to me," Erik said.

The brothers contend death threats from their parents, brought on by Lyle's threat to expose the alleged sexual abuse if it didn't cease, led them to kill. Prosecutors claim greed for inheritance money was the motive.

Among those who view the brothers' terrifying tale with skepticism is author Ronald Soble, who is writing a book on the case.

Soble, who began researching the story soon after the August 1989 killings, said he looked hard for someone to corroborate sexual abuse claims, but found no one.

"I do totally believe Jose was extremely strict with his sons and you could argue that he was mentally abusive," Soble said. "He did run his dinner table like a corporate meeting. I believe he did take a strap to these kids."

"But I have to tell you in all candor I have a great deal of difficulty with the testimony of the broth-

**'He did run his dinner table like a corporate meeting. I believe he did take a strap to these kids.'**

— Ronald Soble, writing book on case

ers that the father raped them. I just could not find anyone who suggested to me that he forced his sons into these gross sex acts.

"Of course, I wasn't there," Soble said. "And there are those who would argue only the brothers know."

Trial witnesses have painted Jose Menendez as a controlling, dominating father. His sister, Marta Cano, said what she admired most about him was his ability to intimidate people.

"He was a great humiliator," said author Dominick Dunne, who is covering the trial for *Vanity Fair*. "The people who were above him admired him enormously ... but anyone who worked under him despised him. He had a savage manner of speaking to people."

Menendez saved his company, Live Entertainment, from imminent bankruptcy and turned it into a profitable business. As chief executive of the video distribution company, he was earning a \$500,000 salary and was due for an \$850,000 bonus the year he died.

The Menendez family revered Jose's success and sought to preserve that memory. But in recent months, relatives have come forward to describe his dark side.

"They had a beautiful image of what the family name was," Cano said. "I wish I never had to change that."

Menendez's mother, Maria, a constant spectator at the start of trial, stopped attending when testimony turned to abuse. Family intimates say she disapproves of the defense.

Business associates have yet to testify. In fact, not a single witness has come forward to say a good word about Jose.

His longtime personal assistant, Marzie Eisenberg, said Friday she believes the public is getting a one-sided view of her ex-boss.

"I can't say anything bad about him," she said. But she acknowledged his demanding style.

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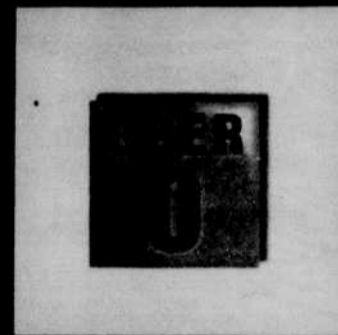
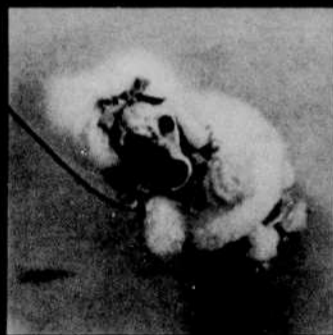
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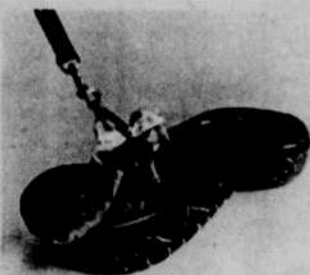
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