

Unraveling Family Secret, Man Admits Role in '58 Murder of Officer

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A 61-year-old Pennsylvania man pleaded guilty today to acting as an accomplice in the murder of a Rahway police officer 41 years ago, implicating his cousin as the gunman and revealing a pact of silence about the killing that many of his relatives carried to their graves.

The officer, Charles Bernoskie, was killed Nov. 28, 1958, when he interrupted a burglary at a Pontiac dealership in Rahway, leading to a shootout with two men.

The Pennsylvania man, Theodore Schiffer of Peckville, pleaded guilty in State Superior Court here to aiding and abetting a felony murder, and agreed to testify against his cousin Robert Zarinsky. Mr. Schiffer could serve as little as three years in prison.

Mr. Zarinsky, 59, a former Linden resident with a history of violence and mental problems, has since 1975 been serving a 98-year prison term for the murder of a 17-year-old Atlantic Highlands girl.

The plea agreement was the result of revelations made by Mr. Zarinsky's sister last year. The information she provided led the police to Mr. Schiffer and their first detailed account of what happened on the night Officer Bernoskie was killed.

Officer Bernoskie's widow, Elizabeth Bernoskie; four of their six children; and several police officers who had worked on the case were seated in the courtroom.

"Frankly, in the last few years we didn't have much hope of anything happening with the case," said Robert Bernoskie, 40, who was born six months after his father's death. "But finally the people who did it are going to have to take responsibility for it, and that's a positive step."

John DeStefano, a retired Rahway detective who was the lead investigator in the case, was close to tears today as he listened to Mr. Schiffer describe the crime. The killing of Officer Bernoskie was one of only two unsolved murders of officers in Union County, Mr. DeStefano said.

Mr. Schiffer, answering questions from Judge John S. Triarsi, said that at the time of the killing, he was 19 and visiting the Zarinskys for Thanksgiving. He said he and his cousin were riding in Mr. Schiffer's 1952 Ford convertible when Mr. Zarinsky, then 17, showed him a gun and suggested that they burglarize a car dealership's parts department.

Mr. Schiffer said he went along with the plan. While removing batteries and cans of antifreeze from the shelves in the dealership, they heard a noise, he said, and he ran outside the building, where a police officer came up behind him with his gun drawn. Behind the officer, Mr. Schiffer said, was his cousin.

"I started running and then I heard shots," said Mr. Schiffer, a slightly built former carpet installer and construction worker who stood handcuffed in the jury box in apple green prison togs. "I was struck in the lower left side."

Mr. Schiffer said Mr. Zarinsky approached him and said he had been shot, too, "in the side or the back."

The two went back to the Zarinsky home in Linden that night, and Mr. Zarinsky's mother, Veronica, dressed their wounds, which were relatively minor, according to accounts given last year by Judith Sapsa, Mr. Zarinsky's younger sister. Mrs. Zarinsky then summoned Mr. Schiffer's parents from their home in Carbondale, Pa., to pick up their son, Ms. Sapsa told the police.

Mrs. Zarinsky swore the family to secrecy, according to Ms. Sapsa, who provided evidence to the police when she and her husband were charged with defrauding Mr. Zarinsky of the \$100,000 inheritance his mother had left him when she died five years ago.

No trial date has been set for Mr. Zarinsky, who was formally charged with murder last month in the death of Officer Bernoskie. In 1975, Mr. Zarinsky was convicted of killing Rosemary Calandriello, 17, of Atlantic Highlands. He is a suspect in the deaths of four other girls whose strangled bodies were found in Monmouth and Middlesex Counties between 1969 and 1974.

William Kolano, an assistant Union County prosecutor, said Mr. Schiffer knew nothing of the murders of the four girls. Last August, the police spent three days searching beneath floorboards and behind walls of the Linden house once occupied by Mr. Zarinsky, looking for clues and evidence.

Outside court today, Mr. Schiffer's younger brother, Robert, said he had never heard any discussion about the killing of Officer Bernoskie by his brother or his parents, who "took the secret to their graves."

"We were a close-knit family," he said. "We stuck together. I don't know how to feel about this, but I feel bad for my brother. I feel bad for the Bernoskie family."

Joseph D'Andrea, one of Mr. Schiffer's lawyers, said the bonds within the Zarinsky-Schiffer family seemed to weaken somewhat after the officer's killing; Mr. Schiffer said he had seen his cousin only once since 1958.

Mr. D'Andrea said his client remained as "terribly afraid" of his cousin as he was 41 years ago.

Mr. D'Andrea described Mr. Zarinsky as a "jail house lawyer" who has handled his own appeals and parole applications, and predicted that he would drag out the case.

In exchange for Mr. Schiffer's cooperation, Union County prosecutors agreed to seek a 15-year sentence for him and to allow him to serve his time in a county prison near his home. Under the laws governing sentencing in 1958, Mr. Schiffer could be free in as little as three years.
