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Menendez Brothers Win Major Legal Break as Judge Questions Withheld Abuse Evidence

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A California judge has delivered a major legal win to Erik and Lyle Menendez, whose high-profile murder convictions from the 1990s are now being called into question.

The ruling could be a pivotal step toward overturning their sentences as the court demands answers from prosecutors on why crucial evidence supporting the brothers' abuse claims was not presented at their second trial.

On July 8, Los Angeles Superior Court Judge William Ryan ruled that two pieces of recently surfaced information could have significantly changed the outcome of the case. One is a letter written by Erik Menendez to his cousin, Andy Cano, in 1988, where Erik described being sexually abused by his father. The second is a sworn declaration from Roy Rossello, a former member of the boy band Menudo, who says José Menendez raped him when he was just 14 years old.

Legal Momentum

In response to a habeas corpus petition filed in 2023, the court agreed that the letter and declaration qualify as new evidence. “Habeas corpus” is a legal process allowing inmates to challenge the validity of their imprisonment. Judge Ryan’s order compels Los Angeles County District Attorney Nathan Hochman to explain within 30 days why the brothers’ petition for relief should not be granted.

Hochman’s office had previously dismissed the Cano letter as “untimely” and labeled Rossello’s claims as “inadmissible” and lacking credibility. But the judge saw it differently, stating that the evidence, if presented during the second trial, could have led a jury to a different conclusion. That shift in legal opinion now puts pressure on the district attorney’s office to justify its earlier handling of the case.

The Menendez brothers were convicted in 1996 of killing their parents, José and Mary “Kitty” Menendez, in their Beverly Hills mansion in 1989. Though they admitted to the murders, the brothers have long argued they acted out of fear after enduring years of physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their father. Those claims were heard during their first trial, which ended in a hung jury. However, the second trial left out much of that abuse testimony, and the brothers were sentenced to life without parole.

This is not the first time the Menendez brothers have pushed for reconsideration. Though they sought a new trial last year, they later focused on resentencing. In May, they received new sentences of 50 years to life with the possibility of parole, replacing their original life-without-parole terms.

Their parole hearing, initially set for June, is now scheduled for August 21 and 22. The brothers have spent the last 35 years behind bars, and this recent ruling adds momentum to their renewed fight for freedom.

As the court demands accountability and transparency regarding withheld evidence, the Menendez case is once again sparking conversation across the country. Whether this new chapter leads to a full retrial or parole remains to be seen, but the Menendez brothers appear to have the law on their side for the first time in years.