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Lisker's Admissions of Guilt Recounted

By MATT LAIT AND SCOTT GLOVER

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A parade of corrections officials and psychologists testified Wednesday that a San Fernando Valley man who contends he was wrongfully convicted in 1985 of killing his mother confessed to the crime during interviews and court-ordered evaluations.

Judith Holland, a retired California Youth Authority caseworker who interviewed Bruce Lisker when he was a teenager, provided the most vivid testimony, saying Lisker spoke of his mother “pretty much as his enemy.”

“He admitted that he killed his mother. There was no question about it,” she said. “He acted more like he was the victim than she was. It was like she deserved to die. He had no remorse at all.”

Holland and six other evaluators testified that Lisker admitted murdering his mother at two stages during his incarceration: once when he unsuccessfully tried to get a plea deal that would have resulted in his release at age 25, and later when he was eligible for parole from 1992 to 1996.

Lisker, now 40, has disavowed those confessions, saying they were desperate attempts to minimize his time behind bars. He said he merely provided accounts that mirrored the police theory of the crime. He said he stopped feigning guilt after 1996 and read a statement at a parole hearing in 1999 proclaiming his innocence.

Lisker was convicted of fatally beating and stabbing his 66-year-old mother, Dorka, in the family's Sherman Oaks home in March 1983. New or previously overlooked evidence, Lisker's attorneys contend, proves that he did not commit the crime.

Testimony at the evidentiary hearing into Lisker's habeas corpus petition to overturn his conviction ended Wednesday. State attorneys rested their case without calling two key players from Lisker's original trial: LAPD Det. Andrew Monsue, the lead investigator in the case, and Robert Hughes, a jailhouse informant who said Lisker confessed to him. Lisker's attorneys have raised questions about their credibility.

Lawyers on both sides are expected to present closing arguments Friday. Then it will be up to U.S. Magistrate Judge Ralph Zarefsky to determine whether there is enough evidence to go forward with Lisker's petition. A ruling on the matter could take several weeks or longer, attorneys said.

During the evidentiary hearing, testimony from witnesses called by Lisker's lawyers and those representing the attorney general's office undermined much of the evidence used to convict Lisker, casting doubt on the verdict.

For example, a bloody shoeprint that authorities said Lisker left at the crime scene did not come from his shoes, according to analysts from the LAPD and FBI, strongly suggesting that someone else was present. The LAPD expert said the unidentified print was "similar in size and dimension" to a shoe impression on the victim's head.

Expert witnesses for both sides also agreed that Lisker might have been able to see his mother lying on the floor from a dining room window in the back patio. At trial, the prosecutor said that would have been impossible and called Lisker's assertion that he had seen her the "most condemning lie" that he told police.

With much of the trial evidence in dispute, Deputy Atty. Gen. Robert D. Breton produced witnesses to testify about Lisker's previous admissions -- none of which were presented at his trial.

Among those who said they heard Lisker's confessions were four prison counselors, a prison psychologist and a court-appointed psychologist. Two of the counselors and one of the psychologists said they had no independent memory of interviews with Lisker and had to rely on reports they wrote at the time.

Lisker's admissions, they said, were voluntary and occurred before his parole hearings or during the unsuccessful attempt to get a plea deal in 1984.

Linda Rianda, a former counselor at Mule Creek State Prison, where Lisker is serving a life sentence, said he provided her with some details of the crime in 1991.

“He told me he remembered everything that occurred and then started telling me what he remembered,” Rianda said. “It took me aback.”

Adrienne Davis, a prison psychologist, testified that much of her interview with Lisker “was about his relationship with his mother.”

At times, she said, Lisker seemed fidgety, nervous and restless. At others, he talked about “emotional issues in a calm way,” Davis said.

“He said he felt badly about what he had done,” she said, adding that he said he loved his mother.

Under cross-examination, Davis and other counselors acknowledged that Lisker’s accounts were not blow-by-blow admissions but were more vague statements of culpability.

Two of the prison counselors said Lisker gave them no details about the crime as they prepared reports in advance of his parole hearings. They said that Lisker had nothing to add to his previous statements but that he didn’t dispute them either.

Holland, the former youth authority caseworker, said she met Lisker in 1985, after he pleaded guilty to killing his mother in anticipation of the deal in which he would serve his time in the California Youth Authority and be released at age 25.

The deal fell apart when a judge ruled that Lisker was not fit to be housed by the youth authority. After that ruling, Lisker withdrew his guilty plea and proceeded to trial, where he maintained his innocence and his confession wasn’t mentioned.

Holland coordinated the effort to determine whether Lisker was suitable for confinement in a youth authority facility as opposed to state prison.

As part of the process, Holland interviewed Lisker several times -- once for about three hours. She testified Wednesday that she “somewhat” remembered the interview because it was “one of the more violent, grisly cases” she had handled.

She recalled Lisker as having a negative view of his mother.

“He said nothing positive about his mother, and nothing negative about his father,” she recalled.

Holland said Lisker described having shouting matches with his mother, throwing things at one another and, eventually, killing her.

On cross-examination, Lisker attorney Vicki Podberesky suggested that Lisker may have faked the confession because he knew that accepting responsibility for a crime and showing remorse were factors that would be considered in determining whether he could get the reduced sentence at CYA.

“Was he trying to say things he thought you wanted to hear?” Podberesky asked.

“Yes,” Holland replied.

But under questioning by Breton, the deputy attorney general, Holland said she did not believe Lisker had fabricated his confession.

“He was quite credible in admitting that he killed his mother and in describing it,” she said.

Scott Glover is a former investigative reporter for the Los Angeles Times.