

## Ex-Police Chief Breaks Ranks, Testifying Against His Men

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He has admitted everything: the payoffs, the kickbacks, the shakedowns and the bribes. In his resigned and raspy voice, he has declared himself a liar, a loan shark, even a common thief.

But Alexander V. Oriente has been forced to do more than simply offer his confessions on the witness stand in Federal District Court here. He has had to break the code of his profession and testify against his own.

For more than a week, Mr. Oriente, the former chief of police in West New York, N.J., has been appearing as a Government witness in the trial of four of his former officers, who stand accused of taking thousands of dollars in bribes and kickbacks on the job. Although Mr. Oriente led the department during the years in which his officers are charged with breaking the law, he avoided a trial in the sprawling corruption case by pleading guilty to single counts of racketeering and tax fraud last March.

No one expected a lofty contest of ideals when the four officers -- Lieut. Richard Hess, Sgts. John Morrow and Arthur Pena and Detective Carlos Rivera -- went on trial last week. After all, the indictments in the case painted a detective-novel picture of illicit after-hours bars, illegal video gambling dens and police-protected prostitution rings. But even in a case like this, with its shady characters and film noir backdrop, Mr. Oriente's tale is exceptionally noir.

The case, which erupted in January 1997 with the arrests of 9 officers and 10 residents of West New York, a small blue-collar town across the Hudson River from Manhattan's Upper West Side, is the largest police corruption scandal in New Jersey history. For nearly a decade, prosecutors say, Mr. Oriente and his officers turned their department into a bustling organized crime enterprise that collected and shared as much as \$1.5 million in illegal gains.

More than 30 people, about half of them police officers, were eventually charged in the case. But most entered plea agreements with the Federal Government, and only the four accused remain on trial.

The trial is expected to last into the summer and feature a cast of characters that could include a father-and-son team of convicted Cuban gamblers and an officer who helped the Government by secretly tape-recording his colleagues and friends.

But for now, Mr. Oriente, 65, of Ridgefield, is the Government's star witness. When he first took the stand last week, he implicated each of the four defendants and testified that he himself had taken bribes from virtually his first day on the job, more than 40 years ago.

"It was normal procedure," he told the jury matter-of-factly. "If someone was brought in, you'd take their money, put it in your pocket or share it with your partner."

Defense lawyers have tried to portray Mr. Oriente as a serial liar who cut a deal with the Government to avoid a long prison term. In his opening statement, Vincent Nuzzi, the lawyer for Lieutenant Hess, referred to Mr. Oriente and his fellow witnesses as "lowlifes" and added, "Calling these people rats would be doing a disservice to the rodents."

On Wednesday, Peter Willis, a lawyer for Sergeant Morrow, peppered Mr. Oriente with stinging questions about lying on his tax returns and betraying everything from his sworn oath as an officer to his marriage vows.

But even under harsh cross-examination, the witness was serene in acknowledging these misdeeds. Indeed, Mr. Oriente's deadpan confessions, offered with wry shrugs that bunched the shoulders of his gray business suit, seemed to prove that he had become a man beyond embarrassment and shame.

On the stand, he has told how he joined the police force in 1956 and worked his way up from patrolman to captain and eventually to chief. Along the way, he told the jury, he took part in the civic life of West New York, lecturing on public safety to the P.T.A. and on the dangers of drugs to family groups. (His own family includes three children, one of whom, Alexander Oriente Jr., is a former West New York police officer who pleaded guilty in the case.)

But the former chief also admitted that he led a double life, scouring the streets in uniform looking for illicit deals. Over the years, he said, he lent millions of dollars as a loan shark, took kickbacks to protect illegal gambling and received at least \$200 a week from a local madam, whom he admitted sleeping with and protecting when her neighbors complained about the business. (The woman, who was charged in the case, suffered a nervous breakdown in jail and Government psychologists declared her incompetent to stand trial.)

Mr. Oriente resigned in 1997 under the shadow of a Federal investigation, and in January state officials revoked his \$80,000 annual pension. He now works an \$8.50-an-hour job at a home for the elderly, he said. While it remains unclear how much he made from his crimes, he said under cross-examination that he is now "busted, broke, just plain out of cash."

The sight of Mr. Oriente on the witness stand describing the crooked ways of his department has shocked some law enforcement experts, who say it is exceedingly rare for a police chief to testify against his employees.

"I don't think I've ever seen it before," said Michael Chertoff, the United States Attorney for New Jersey from 1990 to 1994. "It sounds like the underlings waited a little too long to cooperate, and the chief just beat them to the punch."

Most police officers in West New York have refused to discuss the case, though the handful of officers willing to talk have painted a picture of a department where morale is low and paranoia is high.

"It's depressing to everyone," one officer said on the condition of anonymity. "And I'm sure, for certain individuals, it's very scary. All I want now is to do my last seven years and get off the job as quickly as I can."

For Mr. Oriente, the trial is a chance to reduce the amount of time, if any, he will have to spend in prison; his maximum possible sentence is 25 years. But the trial is also an opportunity, he says, to clear his conscience after more than four decades as a corrupt police officer.

"I come here," he told the jury with a rare strain of emotion in his voice, "and I tell the truth. I come clean with everything. I tell what's really going on."

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