

# Packed House : Preliminary Hearing for Gypsy Defendants Takes a Crowd

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A murmur of whispered Polish permeates the courtroom as the prosecutor's words are translated and relayed to the 20 Gypsy defendants listening through earphones.

Next to each defendant sits an interpreter and a court-appointed defense attorney. The hum of Polish grows louder as some of the groups confer while a handful of the attorneys raise their hands to object.

In a court proceeding that resembles a United Nations session, a highly unusual preliminary hearing is continuing through its fourth month in Alhambra Municipal Court. The hearing takes 74 people simply to start. Prosecutors and defense attorneys say they cannot recall so convoluted a case, involving so many defendants, interpreters and lawyers.

For 15 weeks, Pasadena Municipal Judge Judson W. Morris Jr. has been hearing testimony on whether the defendants should stand trial on charges of committing a spree of residential burglaries in dozens of Los Angeles and Orange County cities over a three-month period last winter.

"This is a great case," said Deputy Dist. Atty. Michael J. Grosbard, one of two prosecutors. "I've never heard of 20 defendants on trial all at once under these conditions. Definitely, one for the record books."

## Nationwide Network

Prosecutors allege that the defendants were part of a nationwide network based in Chicago and New York that made annual swings through the Southland. They say the group was responsible for more than 130 burglaries.

Prosecutors say there is some mystery about where the defendants are from and where they live while in the United States. And although prosecutors believe some of them are married, they are not even sure about that. If convicted on all counts, the defendants face prison terms of from six to 15 years.

The oversize nature of the hearing has made for a strange proceeding. Because of difficulty with Polish surnames, such as Portretowskie, Mankiewick and Parczewski, the defendants have been numbered to make identification easier. Defense attorneys, under unusual courtroom decorum, must raise their hands to enter objections.

The hearing originally was to be held in Pasadena Municipal Court but was moved to Alhambra, which had the only courtroom large enough to accommodate the crowd. To keep the hearing moving, Judge Morris has threatened to impose \$35-a-minute fines on anyone late to court.

Estimates vary, but most agree that the hearing could become one of the most expensive in county history. It costs the county \$11,000 a day just to pay for the lawyers and interpreters, said Earl Bradley, Pasadena court administrator. As of last week, the proceedings had passed their 54th day, for a total of \$594,000.

And it is likely that it will take at least two more months before Morris decides whether the defendants should stand trial. At that rate, some estimates say, the tab for the hearing could run as high as \$1.5 million.

"People would say we're expending a lot of county money; why should we do it?" said Deputy Dist. Atty. Richard F. Walmark. "The question is just a matter of justice."

Defense attorney Bruce M. Toomer said the case has created a small stir in the legal community.

"There's a certain amount of notoriety being part of it," he said. "It's not like the Night Stalker and the McMMartin trials. It's such an anomaly in the system, that it's so bizarre."

Many of the court-appointed attorneys from smaller or one-man offices say they are finding representing the Gypsies a costly experience. "This is a practice buster," said Toomer, who has worked on little else since taking the case in March.

Others relish the job. "The novelty of the case made me want to take it," said Frederick R. Rotenberg. "This has been the best hands-on education I've ever had."

### Snowball Effect

Participants say the hearing is taking so long because of the number of defendants, the need to translate testimony into Polish and the number of lawyers. When one defense attorney makes an objection, the other 19 often want to have their say in what one attorney called a snowball effect.

The defendants, nine women and 11 men, are charged with various counts of conspiracy to commit burglary, burglary, attempted burglary and receiving stolen property.

Investigators say the victims, who sometimes have trouble identifying the burglars because of poor eyesight and confusion caused by the crime, in many cases have lost family heirlooms and other valuables that cannot be replaced.

The youngest of the defendants is a 21-year-old woman and the oldest is a 52-year-old woman. Throughout, they are largely idle participants.

Prosecutors believe most of the defendants entered the United States illegally, but are unsure how long they have been in the country. Grosbard said he would rather incarcerate than deport

the defendants if they are convicted. "They got into the country once, they can get in again," he said. "If they go to jail, I know they'll stay there."