



The Lawyer Synanon Tried to Kill

Attorney Paul Morantz has devoted his professional life to fighting such organizations as the Unification Church, the Church of Scientology, and EST. But in the late '70s that life almost ended abruptly when another group called Synanon planted a live rattlesnake in his mailbox. Morantz describes this bizarre incident, as well as many others, in his new book: *Escape: My Lifelong War Against Cults*. In September, *California Lawyer* editor Martin Lasden spoke with Morantz in Los Angeles. Here are edited excerpts from that videotaped discussion.



Paul Morantz



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Legally Speaking is a series of in-depth interviews with prominent lawyers, judges, and academics, coproduced by *California Lawyer* and UC Hastings College of the Law.

Q: A few days ago I was telling a friend that I was going to be interviewing Paul Morantz. And she didn't know who Paul Morantz was. But when I mentioned the rattlesnake and Synanon, her eyes lit up because she knew exactly who that guy was. So how much did your life change after they tried to kill you?

My life changed in so many ways. I doubt I could list them all. You see, my goal was never to be a lawyer. I wanted to be a writer. That was my first love. But then when I came up against Synanon—and I don't know

the movies where John Wayne sucks the venom out, jumps back on his horse, and goes after the bad guys. It's like having your hand in a vice. See, part of the poison kills, but another part destroys tissue.

Three weeks before you met up with that snake you had won a \$300,000 judgment against Synanon on behalf of a married couple, in which the wife claimed that she had been held captive by the organization. Did you feel at that point your life was in danger?

"To me brainwashing [theory], if it got through, was the gravy. It was also a risk because it might get overturned."

how to say this ... but—I sort of had the feeling that this was why I was placed on earth, that this was my moment, and that I had to rise to the occasion.

I've never been bitten by a rattlesnake. How painful is it?

It's extremely painful. It's not like in

Way before. Synanon had trained a hit force called the Imperial Marines, and their chain of command was through the Synanon legal department. And we knew of 80 people over four years who had been physically attacked by them. One man was a former Synanon member who was trying to get his child out. They cracked his

skull, and only the shouts of people who came by saved his life.

Still, it seems that your feelings toward Charles Dederich, the man who founded and led Synanon, are rather complicated. You write, "[T]here was a strange, creepy bond between us." What did you mean by that?

It was like we were both captives to each other. I mean, I'd be at dinner with my fiancée and she'd say, "What's new dear?" And I'd say, "Well, Synanon purchased \$307,000 worth of weapons plus armor piercing bullets. How was your day?" I was captured. And Dederich was captured by me. I was out there to destroy him. And so we both had a sort of morbid curiosity about each other.

After you got out of the hospital, did you ever consider another line of work; something calmer and perhaps a bit more lucrative, like trying to find tax loopholes for rich guys?

I couldn't stand the practice of law. I couldn't stand tax cases, divorce cases,

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