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Could the Marathon bombings have been prevented?

Docuseries follows local journalist's investigation into 2011 Waltham triple murder

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by **Steve Marantz** — October 13, 2022 in News

Recreation of the murder scene in Waltham. / Photo: ABC News Studios, Story Syndicate & Anonymous Content

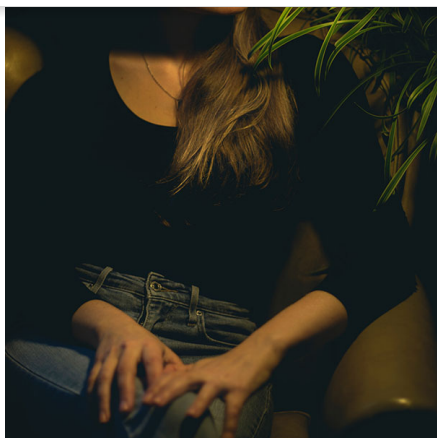
As a journalist, Susan Zalkind has to ask questions. As a Jewish journalist, she feels morally compelled.

“My Jewish education was about asking questions and aligning yourself with the oppressed,” says Zalkind, 35, a Newton native. “Those traditions are very much how I identify myself as a Jew, and I’m proud of that.”

Zalkind asks a lot of questions, provocatively, in her new three-part Hulu docuseries, “The Murders Before the Marathon,” which threads antisemitism with failed law enforcement in a tragic and troubling story.

Her central question is this: Could the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing have been prevented if law enforcement had solved a triple murder in Waltham in 2011? If law enforcement had apprehended the Waltham murderer or murderers, could the three people killed by the marathon bombing, the more than 260 injured, and the police officer killed three days after the bombing have been spared?





Susan Zalkind / Photo: Divya Akhourri

reasons.

On April 15, 2013, Tamerlan Tsarnaev, a Chechen-born Muslim radicalized by antisemitic and anti-Israel dogma, and assisted by his younger brother Dzhokhar, carried out the Marathon bombings. Eluding capture, they killed MIT officer Sean Collier on April 18. Early on April 19, in Watertown, Tamerlan Tsarnaev was killed after being shot by police and run over by his brother's getaway car. Later that day, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was captured and arrested.

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Five weeks after the bombing, Todashev – supposedly Tamerlan Tsarnaev's Waltham accomplice – was shot and killed in his Florida apartment while being interrogated by an FBI special agent and two Massachusetts state troopers. The story that emerged was that Todashev had confessed to the

Waltham murders, and had written a confession, but then had attacked the FBI agent, who shot him. To this day the Waltham case remains unsolved and open. Zalkind has reported and written about it for 10 years and has a book, "The Waltham Murders," coming out in 2023.

"It's apparent this case was not thoroughly looked into," said Zalkind. "And there still has been no accountability for that."

One of the Waltham victims, Erik Weissman, 31, was a friend of Zalkind, and was being represented by her father, criminal defense attorney Norman Zalkind, on a drug arrest from January 2011.

Weissman and the other two victims, Rafi Teken, 37, and Brendan Mess, 25, were local marijuana dealers found dead in Mess' apartment with throats slashed, marijuana strewn over on their bodies, and \$5,000 in cash untouched. Weissman and Teken were Jewish, with Israeli roots. Teken, whose father was the spiritual leader of a Jewish congregation in Newton, had attended Brookline High and Brandeis University. Weissman and Mess had attended Cambridge Rindge & Latin.

"These (victims') families go through horrific loss, and instead of sympathy they are shamed, that these men essentially had it coming to them because they were drug dealers," Zalkind says. "Well, it looks to me like they were killed potentially because they were Jews."

Gerry Leone, who was Middlesex District Attorney at the time of the 2011 triple murder, and now serves as general counsel to the University of Massachusetts, issued a statement: "That matter, which I believe remains open and unsolved, is and remains the jurisdiction of the Middlesex DAO and/or other Law Enforcement Agencies. Therefore, I cannot comment on the record on the present status of the matters that remain unsolved by county, state and federal law enforcement agencies over a decade after their occurrence."

The Middlesex County District Attorney's Office did not respond to a request for comment. District Attorney Marian Ryan has run the office since April 2013.

Tamerlan Tsarnaev, who had graduated from Cambridge Rindge & Latin, had known the three Waltham victims. He had trained with Mess at a local boxing gym, and knew Weissman and Teken through the local



This photo of Tamerlan Tsarnaev was found on his laptop. / Photo: Federal Public Defender Office

says. He had a fixation in which he believed Israel planned 9-11. He had a fixation where he read “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” and highlighted words and passages. He was a conspiracy theorist, and his conspiracies were entirely oriented around the Jews. The same mentality also dictated his religious radicalization. In the 10 years I’ve spent delving into who he was, he was an antisemite in the strongest sense of the word.”



For Zalkind, the deep dive into her docuseries provided a mirror on her own upbringing. The daughter of an interfaith marriage – Jewish father and Irish-born gentile mother – Zalkind

grew up affluent and secular in Newton. Her father’s family had once fled a Russian pogrom to come to Chelsea and then Dorchester and Brookline.

“I come from a big Jewish community. All my neighbors were Jewish, I celebrated holidays with them,” Zalkind says. “My mother is Irish, so we celebrated Easter and Christmas, but all of our guests on those holidays were Jews. It was a community where you had to be selective about which bar and bat mitzvahs to attend on weekends because there were so many.

“Being in Newton I was really protected. I didn’t realize people still made jokes about Jews being cheap or hoarding money until I was in my 20s.”

After high school Zalkind went to Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Ore., for two years.



Journalist Susan Zalkind in “The Murders Before the Marathon.” / Photo: ABC News Studios, Story Syndicate & Anonymous Content

“When I went to Oregon I realized what was missing, and it was my Jewish culture,” she recalled. “I didn’t go to Hillel House, I wasn’t religious, but I began to see the value of growing up in a Jewish community where most of my friends were Jewish. It was just a part of who I was.”

She finished her secondary education at Boston University and was a 24-year-old production



thinking. And the more I studied it and found that the origin of a lot of conspiratorial thinking is antisemitism, [that] was really a shock to me. Coming from a place where I was not religious but identified as a Jew and was really protected from antisemitism, it was shocking.”

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Zalkind continues to pursue records from the Middlesex DA’s Office on the Waltham investigation. Secretary of State William Galvin has agreed to examine her records request and determine which ones can be released to her. The failure of Attorney General Maura Healey, and her predecessor, Martha Coakley, to investigate, raises more baffling questions, Zalkind has said.



She says her book will lay out the case for Tamerlan Tsarnaev as the murderer, and the plausible reasons state and federal law enforcement have refused to act. One possible reason is that Dzhokhar Tsarnaev’s death penalty, upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court, might not have stood if the Waltham murders had been pinned on his older brother. Speculation that Tsarnaev may have been an FBI or CIA informant/collaborator has found traction.

“There are a lot of conspiracy theories about this case, a lot of which originate in Russian propaganda,” Zalkind says. “You have to be careful about putting those forth because people can just deflect them.

“The motives are beside the point. The point is that it doesn’t appear to have been thoroughly investigated before the bombing, and not vigorously pursued after the bombing, either. And there appears to have been no level of accountability.

“It was an extremely unusual murder, and it boggles my mind why it was not prioritized and why more attention was not paid to it then, and why to this day more people are not paying attention to it.”

Steve Marantz can be reached at marantzsteve@gmail.com



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