Legacy of a schizophrenic's rage

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December 21, 2003
Publication: Times, The (Trenton, NJ)
Page: A1
Word Count: 2022

CAPTION:

Staff photo by Michael Mancuso

Twenty-five years have passed since Jean Zelinsky shocked New Jersey, and the nation, with an unspeakable act.

CAPTION:

Staff photos by Michael Mancuso

Jean Zelinsky has gradually achieved greater freedom during her 25-year stay at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital, and his seeking a move outside the facility.

Legacy of a schizophrenic's rage

25 years after an unthinkable crime

Jean Zelinsky seeks greater freedom

For a single moment on that day just before Christmas, Jean Zelinsky reconsidered her murder-suicide plan.

She already had committed an unthinkable crime, but her most twisted act, the one she'd be remembered for, was still only an idea. "At one point, when I was still in the house after my mother was dead, I thought, 'Maybe I should drop the rest of my plan and call the police and confess to what I did,' " Zelinsky told The Times in a rare interview about the gruesome crime she committed in her East Amwell home on Dec. 22, 1978.

"But then I said, 'I've gone this far, I might as well go all the way to the end.' And I did."

Twenty-five years later, locked away in a state psychiatric hospital in Ewing, Zelinsky says it was depression and paranoia that prompted her to kill and behead her mother, Julia.

"I was angry at society for turning against me," she says. "That's why I decapitated my mother and took her head and threw it on the State House steps _ because (the building) symbolized society to me, and I was saying to the world: 'See how you have warped me by the way you treated me?' "

The incident, during which Zelinsky drove up the steps, crashed her car into a pillar, threw her mother's head at the feet of some state troopers and shouted "Merry Christmas _ this is what you wanted," was so bizarre that it set the legal community abuzz well beyond New Jersey.

Even now, the shocking episode, which ended with Zelinsky trying to slit her own throat with a razor, remains firmly embedded in Trenton lore.

Because she is so notorious, the news that she has regularly left the hospital to visit stores and restaurants _ sometimes without supervision _ tends to raise some eyebrows.

But soon, Zelinsky may have even more freedom: She is seeking release from Trenton Psychiatric Hospital into transitional housing.

A judge will consider that possibility in March.

The process is a reminder that, a quarter of a century later, it's still up to New Jersey to sort out the criminal justice issues generated by Zelinsky's violence: Will she pose a risk to her neighbors or herself if she's set free? And should her fate rest forever in the hands of the state?

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In conversation, Zelinsky doesn't obviously fit the label she carries _ that of a paranoid schizophrenic with mixed personality disorder _ and it's hard to imagine her doing the violent things she describes.

She's 73 now, old enough to find getting up from a chair to be a strenuous chore; a tall, carefully dressed woman with stark-white hair, tortoiseshell glasses and orthopedic shoes.

She's pleasant, and her comments are articulate and focused.

But from between her words peek quirks that could be symptoms of her illness, of her medication or of things altogether unrelated _ slow speech, a slushy pronunciation of the letter "s," a tic that's somewhere between a squint and a grimace.

And there's this: When she's asked to reflect on her murder of the woman who raised her, Zelinsky doesn't talk about epic emotions like shame, or guilt or grief. Remembering, she says simply, leaves her "sorry" and "sad."

"It's been a long time and that's in the past, and I just don't dwell on it," Zelinsky says. "Thoughts come and they go, but I don't sit and try to bring them up or anything."

That lack of emotion is typical for a paranoid schizophrenic _ even a medicated one, says Dr. Humberto Marin, a psychiatry professor at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School.

"You don't see (emotional response) in these people," he says. "They're, like, flat. They talk about terrible things in the same tone of voice they use for happy things."

It's a trait Diane La Ware _ the daughter of Zelinsky's late sister _ has grown used to.

"She never shows remorse in her letters," says the niece, who learned of the murder in a newspaper and then shocked her family with a chilling announcement: "Aunt Jean killed Grandma."

"If you asked, 'Do you feel guilt and remorse?' she'd say, 'Yes,' " continues La Ware, 45, of North Jersey. "But if you allowed her no hint of what you wanted to hear, I don't think she would use those words. She hasn't in 25 years."

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Still, doctors say Zelinsky may be a candidate for release from the hospital.

Although she attempted suicide seven years ago, has occasionally lashed out at staff members and refuses to believe she's schizophrenic, her illness is in remission. She hasn't been psychotic in at least six years, says Joan Mysiak, a psychologist at the hospital.

To gauge how Zelinsky might handle release, a judge has asked her doctors to gradually offer her more freedom on the hospital's campus, and possibly outside it.

It's a test Zelinsky hopes to pass, because her frustration with hospital rules has made her eager to trade her shared room on a locked ward for a spot in a supervised home outside hospital grounds.

"They classify me as a high-functioning patient," she says of hospital workers, "but they don't treat me like a high-functioning person."

An example cropped up a few months ago.

"I wanted scissors to cut something _ out of paper, not myself _ and they would not let me use the scissors because they said I might hurt myself," she recalls. "It infuriated me."

Zelinsky insists she wouldn't be a danger to anyone if she were released, saying she'd be "hooked up with a mental health system of some sort" and would continue to take her medicine.

She knows it will be up to a judge to decide whether she can try it, and she's aware that he'll discuss her illness and treatment publicly when she appears before him March 17.

It's a process she's been through annually since her commitment, when the state's Superior Court was put in charge of determining her level of freedom _ and it's one that won't change unless she's released from her status as criminally insane, an idea the judge rejected in September.

"I accept that it has to be," Zelinsky says of the hearing process. "I did commit a crime _ even though I was found not guilty by reason of insanity, so I am not a convict _ but, still, I realize I committed a crime, a terrible crime, so I just accept going to court."

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Zelinsky is just as matter-of-fact when she describes the day that irrevocably changed the course of her life, and her family's.

She tells the story of paranoid thoughts _ among them the idea that her neighbors were resentful because she held a job and had never married _ and a mounting depression that wouldn't abate, despite medication.

It all became unbearable, she says, on Dec. 22, 1978.

"I just woke up that day with this urgent feeling that . . . I had to commit suicide," she said.

"When I planned my suicide, I also planned to take my mother, too. We lived in the sticks and there was no transportation. She does not drive, so she would have to depend on the neighbors to help, and they would take advantage, steal from her and cheat her. So I decided it would be best to kill her, too."

Reports from the time show that Zelinsky advanced on her 78-year-old mother in a

bedroom of the cottage they shared.

Instead of fighting her, Zelinsky says, her mother warned her.

"She said I'll go to jail, and I said, 'No I won't because I'm going to kill myself,' and she says, 'No, you will go to jail,' " Zelinsky recalls.

The warning didn't change a thing.

Zelinsky hit her mother on the head with a blunt instrument and strangled her, reports show. Afterward, she sawed off her mother's head and left her body draped over a bathtub.

What happened a short while later, when Zelinsky arrived at the State House and threw the head out her car window, is something Roy Bucci will never forget.

"A trooper started hollering, 'My God, look what's in this bag!' recalls Bucci, a former Trenton police officer who was on the building's steps that day. "And I happened to look in at the time and, yes, I saw the head.

"If I remember right, there was an (American) flag in the bag. It was a plastic trash bag, a green trash bag, the kind you would use for your normal, everyday garbage. My initial reaction was like, 'It can't be real, it just couldn't be real.' "

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About 15 minutes earlier, Zelinsky's neighbor, Floyd Menchek, had seen her pulling out of her driveway. He'd waved at her, he recalled, and received a wave in return.

There was nothing unusual about the casual exchange, Menchek says, and he soon got busy working in one of his farm buildings. But before long, Menchek began hearing radio reports about the head-tossing. And that, he says, was when state police showed up, approached Zelinsky's little white house and opened the door to "a disaster."

Troopers spent a couple of days collecting evidence in the bloody home. When they were done, they asked Menchek _ then mayor of East Amwell _ to wipe it clean, he says.

He made sure to do it before La Ware and her mother arrived from New York, he says, but the women were still spooked by what they found in the house.

Cans of food, La Ware recalled, were rotting in kitchen cabinets.

"They just were open so you couldn't use them again," she says. "You had to toss them."

Up in the attic, all of Zelinsky's clothes _ with the exception of one fur coat _ had been slashed.

"That was when I was suicidal," says Zelinsky, who admits she was paranoid back then. "I was so depressed, and I thought some people in the neighborhood would take all of my stuff if I killed myself, so I destroyed it."

It's an explanation filled with the depression, delusions and suicidal thoughts that are typical of paranoid schizophrenia, Marin says.

Acting on those suicidal thoughts, he added, is not unusual for someone with Zelinsky's illness. About 10 percent of schizophrenics do it, he says _ significantly more than the 1 percent of the general population who attempt to kill themselves.

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Those death wishes often go hand in hand with violence toward others, Marin says, but Menchek didn't expect anything of the kind from Zelinsky. He knew his exceptionally bright neighbor was eccentric, he says, but never realized she was sick.

He did, however, know something was wrong between Zelinsky and her mother.

"They had fights," he recalls, "screaming and yelling at each other."

La Ware says her family knew about the discord and suspected Zelinsky was causing it by stealing money from her mother and refusing to let her leave the house. But Zelinsky says the friction arose because she and her mother had different priorities.

"My mother was very much for girls getting married, and she was a little critical of me _ of my looks and why I did not take more of an interest in the fellas," she says.

Her aunt's darkest time, La Ware says, came after she left her job as a bookkeeper for the state and started telemarketing work at home.

"She stopped a lot of things, her habits that we liked when she was healthy: giving gifts and (being) more social," La Ware remembers. "Then, when she lost her job, everything turned really bad for her because she couldn't think clearly and couldn't come up with solutions."

La Ware heard eerie evidence of that lapse two years before the murder.

"My grandmother was claiming that her daughter, Aunt Jean, was going to kill her, and this was a thing that (my mother) heard often," La Ware says.

It never occurred to La Ware that her grandmother meant it.

"You figure she's just an old lady and it's just a phrase people use," she says.

Another warning arrived at La Ware's home shortly before the murder.

"I had a letter from my aunt," she says, "indicating there wouldn't be any Christmas."

Instead, there was a funeral, and the Christmases after that were never quite the same.

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