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The Tsarnaev family: A faded portrait of an immigrant's American dream

By Marc Fisher, Updated: April 27, 2013

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America, the golden door, had already welcomed two of his brothers when Anzor Tsarnaev crossed the ocean with his family in 2002. Anzor's brother Ruslan, who had immigrated just a few years earlier, already had a law degree and was on his way to an executive job and a six-figure salary. And at first, Anzor, his wife, Zubeidat, and their two sons, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar, seemed as energetic and brimming with initiative as their relatives had been. Anzor, a mechanic, fixed up cars. His wife turned a cut-rate apartment in affluent Cambridge into an improvised salon, offering facials at attractive prices. The boys — who authorities believe are the Boston Marathon bombers, responsible for killing four people and injuring more than 250 — took to their new home with gusto. The older one, Tamerlan, was sociable, even showy, dressing sharply, honing his body to become an Olympic boxer. He married an American WASP, daughter of a well-to-do Rhode Island family.

The younger boy, Dzhokhar, was almost instantly as American as they come: He fell for a blond beauty and won her over. He made the high school wrestling team and was popular and empathic enough to be named captain. He partied hard and studied when he had to.

But over the past four years, even as members of their extended family found their piece of the American dream, the Cambridge Tsarnaevs' experience in their new land curdled. Money grew scarce, and the family went on welfare. Zubeidat was accused of stealing from a department store. Anzor's business, never prosperous, faded.

When the mother found solace in a deepening religiosity, the father, icy to such devotion and ill with cancer, went home to Dagestan, a place that was never really home to start with.

And the boys underwent transformations so dramatic that some friends could barely recognize them: Tamerlan in his early 20s embraced a harsh, separatist brand of Islam and in a couple of years went from wishing his neighbor a merry Christmas to angrily

attacking a Muslim grocer for advertising a Thanksgiving charity food collection. The change in Dzhokhar, now a college sophomore, became apparent only in the past few weeks, and even then seemed to be tacked on to his existing lifestyle rather than displacing it. Less than two weeks before the marathon, Dzhokhar, previously known to friends as a stoner always up for a beer and a blunt, told a college friend that he no longer cared about his classes, that religion and God were the only true things in life.

No manifesto accompanied the marathon bombings, and investigators are only now piecing together an accounting of the Tsarnaev brothers' path to terror. But in interviews with relatives, friends, neighbors and business associates in four states and three countries, a portrait emerges of a family in a losing battle against its people's troubled past, against its own internal dysfunction and discord, and against conflicting interpretations of its ancient faith.

The Tsarnaevs are Chechens, a Muslim people of the northern Caucasus, a mountainous region that has been fought over through the centuries by the Russian, Persian and Ottoman empires. In 1944, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, who suspected the Chechens of conspiring with the Nazis, expelled nearly the entire population of 400,000 to Central Asia; about 70,000 died. Many of those who survived, including the Tsarnaev clan, were forced 2,000 miles east to Kyrgyzstan.

There, according to family members, the Tsarnaevs settled in a modest detached house in the small city of Tokmok, where they and a small community of other Chechens held tight to memories of their beloved home.

"Our nationality preserves cultures and traditions, regardless of where we live," said Leila Alieva, 25, an ethnic Chechen schoolteacher who was a friend of Tamerlan Tsarnaev when they were children in Tokmok. "We're very strict about it."

Chechen women generally wear head scarves and eschew pants and short skirts. They avoid being seen with men other than relatives, and they are expected not to look a man in the eyes.

In Kyrgyzstan, the Tsarnaevs raised cattle, goats and sheep. "We were pretty much farmers in an urban area," said Ruslan Tsarnaev, an uncle of Tamerlan and Dzhokhar who lives in Montgomery Village and goes by the name Ruslan Tsarni.

Through more than seven decades of communist rule, religious practices were harshly restricted. The Chechens in Kyrgyzstan never had their own mosques, Alieva said. She doesn't recall the Tsarnaevs going to mosque at all, though many Muslims prefer to pray at home.

The Tsarnaevs, restless and homesick, briefly moved back to Chechnya in the early 1990s but soon returned to Tokmok, where Alieva recalled Tamerlan as a good student, both in academics at Gymnasium No. 1 and on the accordion at music school.

As early as elementary school, Tamerlan was serious about boxing. He attended a sports academy and won several "degrees," or trophies. "He was always number one," she said.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the strictures of a totalitarian state vanished, and in the resulting vacuum, some young Chechen Muslims, brought up with stories about injustices inflicted on their people through the centuries, were drawn to a black-and-white version of Islam imported via recorded lectures and sermons, mostly from Saudi Arabia.

But the Tsarnaevs were driven more by the quest for a good living than by religious devotion, and when Ruslan immigrated to the United States in 1995, he quickly built a life that proved magnetic to the rest of his family. With a big house on a cul-de-sac in Montgomery Village and a salary in 2005 of $216,000, plus stock options, according to Securities and Exchange Commission filings, Ruslan was a shining model of what an immigrant could do in America.

Seven years after Ruslan began his U.S. adventure, Anzor and family — they now had two sons and two daughters — left Central Asia and settled in Cambridge, where they had friends. Within four days of landing in their new world, Anzor was busy fixing cars. He told his brother he was making $10 an hour, even $100 a day — almost inconceivable money to a newcomer from Russia.

"He was excited," Ruslan recalled. "He loved it."

In Cambridge, both boys attended Cambridge Rindge and Latin School, a public school with students from dozens of countries. Classmates portray Tamerlan and Dzhokhar — known as "Jahar" — as fun guys who soaked up American pop culture and hung out with kids from sons of Harvard to grandsons of Portuguese furniture makers.

Guive Rosen, 23, who was in several classes with Tamerlan, knew him as "a very goofy kid, a gentle-giant sort of person. . . . He liked to talk, always had his arm around your shoulders." Rosen knew that Tamerlan was Muslim, but that was by no means a defining part of his persona. "It was a very minute detail about him," Rosen said. "He didn't impose any religious things on you, never talked about it."

When Uncle Ruslan visited Anzor's family in 2005, he chatted with Tamerlan about his future. The teenager talked about an engineering degree, perhaps followed by one in law.

"He had everything in him for a happy life," Ruslan said. He and Tamerlan took a walk around the neighborhood, and the uncle was pleased to see people all over happily greeting his nephew.

A neighbor who lived next to the Tsarnaev family for five years said the older brother stood out in the early years for his flashy clothes and his devotion to fitness.

"He used to be more dressed like a pimp, kind of Eurotrash," said the neighbor, who declined to be named, for fear of being associated with terrorists. "Trying to be fancy, but cheap looking" in pointy-toed shoes and matched track suits.

The first time Kendrick Ball saw Tamerlan, at a fight in Lowell three or four years ago, the boxer stood out in a way that could get someone hurt. "He had on these tight jeans and long trench coat, and a white shirt unbuttoned halfway down, and silver

boots," said Ball, who runs a boxing club in Worcester. "I thought, either he's going to get picked on or he's a tough . . ."

Ball watched Tamerlan box and decided it was the latter. He invited Tamerlan to spar at his club. Tamerlan accepted, but when he arrived to fight, he had no trainer and none of the gear boxers wear to protect sensitive parts.

"No headgear, no mouthpiece and no cup," Ball said. When he offered to let Tamerlan borrow some, "He said, 'No, no, no. I don't need that stuff. I'm good.'"

Tamerlan was an impressive fighter with a peculiar style: He kept his hands at his sides rather than up near his face to protect it. "He was cocky," Ball said. Even pitted against a top-ranked fighter, Tamerlan refused to don protective gear until after he was spitting up blood and holding his side.

When he left his family's third-floor apartment on Norfolk Street, Tamerlan often carried a bulky gym bag and headed to the yard between his building and the neighbor's. There, Tamerlan often spent afternoons doing dozens of pull-ups, using the arch of a grape trellis as his gym equipment.

The Tsarnaev family was a neighborhood nuisance, said Rinat Harel, a longtime neighbor. She and other neighbors called police five years ago when the two brothers would hold loud parties and drink late into the night in the courtyard.

The brothers were "just obnoxious teenage boys," Harel said, but the father, a short, beefy fellow, was a constant irritant who regularly threw his trash in neighbors' recycling bins despite being asked to stop, filled precious spaces in this parking-starved city with cars he was working on, and claimed a 10-minute loading zone as his all-day storage space.

"No matter how many times people told him it wasn't right, he did it anyway," Harel said. "It was the difficult behavior of a bully."

Anzor obtained cars in bad shape, made cosmetic fixes and then sold those vehicles for a profit. Sometimes, when he needed parts, he would show up at Nissenbaum's Auto, a nearby parts and repair shop.

Several times, workers said, Anzor went into the parts yard to find a bracket or screw and emerged offering to pay a small sum for a handful of items. But employees would see his pockets stuffed. Confronted, they say, he admitted picking up a few other meager items.

At Cambridge Rindge & Latin, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was just Jahar — phonetically simpler, cooler, more in keeping with his new American persona.

Jahar was 16 and learning to drive. He lusted after a blond classmate, and he would eventually boast to friends that he had made progress on that front. He studied just enough to fend off his parents, who by late in junior year were pressuring him to get organized with his college applications.

Jahar instead put his energies into wrestling, becoming co-captain of the Cambridge team. Late at night, Jahar was also increasingly fond of other teenage rites: alcohol and marijuana. Friends said Jahar's nights were spent blaring the rap of Drake and

French Montana and driving around to quiet spots where the boys would roll blunts, laugh and talk about sex.

"We smoked," said Peter Tenzin, Jahar's wrestling co-captain during senior year. "Ninety-five percent of our school smoked. People are looking down on that about him, but that's what we did."

When Tenzin, now in college, thinks of Jahar, his mind fills with images of those long nights and so many fits of uncontrollable laughter.

"Jahar was a joker," Tenzin said. Friends would tease Jahar, telling him that, given his smoking and drinking, some recent converts to Islam in his class were more Muslim than he was.

"He'd come back with a joke about blacks or Asians," Tenzin said. "You have to understand — identity is always an issue in Cambridge."

When Jahar got his license, he would be seen around town in a refurbished green Honda Civic with signs of a hasty paint job. He drove with the windows down, even in the New England winter, music blaring, seat tilted way back.

If Jahar was not as studious as his parents wanted him to be, Tamerlan was the cause of more serious worries. His mother feared he was losing his way. In 2006, he started taking classes at Bunker Hill Community College, but over the next three years, he seemed more devoted to partying than studying.

Zubeidat said she began to encourage her older son—who would come in late at night from parties smelling of smoke and alcohol — to take more of an interest in religion to give his life a healthier core. The two, mother and son, began to study the Koran together.

In 2009, Uncle Ruslan heard that Tamerlan was no longer applying himself — academically or with work. Ruslan called his nephew, and the conversation quickly grew tense.

"What's up with you?" Ruslan recalled asking.

Tamerlan responded in religious phrases, speaking about following God's will. "Inshallah," he kept saying. "God willing." To Ruslan, the term seemed superficial, as if his nephew were reciting something learned by rote.

"It's very simple," Ruslan told Tamerlan. "To be a good Muslim, start being useful to yourself" and your family.

"No, you're forgetting about what is most important," Tamerlan replied. "The will of God."

Another uncle, Alvi Tsarni, who also lives in Montgomery County, heard about the tension between Tamerlan and Ruslan and called his nephew. "Why are you doing this?" Alvi asked. "Your uncle is always helping you." Tamerlan responded

aggressively, challenged Alvi to come to Massachusetts and said, "If you're so brave, we will fight."

"Tamerlan, you're nobody to me from now on," Alvi replied.

Meanwhile, Ruslan called a family friend in the Cambridge area and asked what was going on with Tamerlan.

The friend told him about a young Armenian American man, a recent convert to Islam who had befriended Tamerlan. "Tamerlan is absolutely occupied by him," the friend told Ruslan. "He's not listening to his own father."

Years later, Ruslan spoke to another relative who had met the Armenian, whom he knew only as "Misha," at the Norfolk Street apartment in 2007. Misha was in the kitchen, talking to Tamerlan, deep into the night. After midnight, Anzor grew frustrated and asked his wife, "What is this person doing in our house so late?"

"He's teaching wise things to your son," Zubeidat said.

Katherine Russell grew up in a sprawling house on a quiet cul-de-sac in North Kingstown, R.I., not far from the ocean. Her pedigree was New England blue blood: Her grandfather and father both attended Phillips Exeter Academy and Yale. Her father is an emergency room doctor. Her mother is a nurse and social worker.

Tall and fit, with long auburn hair, Russell graduated in 2007 from high school and soon left home to attend Suffolk University in Boston. She was interested in the Peace Corps and excelled at drawing, winning a state competition.

In Boston, Russell met Tamerlan at a nightclub, according to her attorney.

"She really fell for this guy," said a family intimate who declined to be named, because the Russells have told friends and relations not to give interviews. "He was tall, he spoke other languages, he was handsome and worldly — and that was that."

In 2009, Tamerlan was living with another woman, who one day called 911 to report that he had beaten her. "Yes, I slapped her," Tamerlan told police. The case was later dismissed for lack of prosecution.

In 2010, when Tamerlan and Russell announced that they would marry, there was considerable consternation in the Russell family, which is nominally Christian. Aunts and uncles did not much care for Tamerlan, according to the person close to the family, as well as a relative. Few, if any, extended family members attended the wedding.

Tamerlan Anzorovich Tsarnaev married Katherine Osborn Russell, who was soon to be the mother of their baby daughter, on June 21, 2010, in the Masjid al-Qur'aan mosque in Boston. Tamerlan is not known to have had any previous or subsequent ties to the mosque. But the wedding made some people notice that he was changing in important ways.

Russell's family was startled when she dropped out of college, converted to Islam and began to cover her hair, legs and arms in a show of Muslim modesty.

On Norfolk Street, neighbors noticed Russell chatting in the courtyard with other young women, wearing hijab, speaking in Russian or Arabic. A neighbor said Russell spoke directly to him only once. "I actually didn't think she was American," he said. "Her English was very good, but it seemed she spoke it very slow."

Marriage changed Tamerlan, as well. He dropped the flashy clothes, a change in look so drastic that his next-door neighbor at first thought the tall, athletic son had left town. Tamerlan now came out in the street in raggedy sweatpants and ratty T-shirts, sometimes with a bathrobe over his clothes.

"I thought a different person had moved in," the neighbor said.

But Tamerlan remained friendly toward his shy neighbor, approaching him just after Christmas as they dumped their trash. Tamerlan asked how his neighbor's holiday had been, whereupon the neighbor asked about Tamerlan's Christmas.

"Oh, no, I don't celebrate Christmas," Tamerlan said. After a pause, he added, "And you wouldn't either if you knew the real truth."

First, his wife, who once teased her hair and wore dark eyeliner, turned to religion and donned dark clothes and the hijab. Then his son, a boxer like himself, immersed himself in Islam and quit boxing. Anzor was crushed, according to relatives.

In 2011, Anzor and Zubeidat split up just a few months before their 25th wedding anniversary. Their divorce filing cites "an irretrievable breakdown of the marriage." The couple said they had no property, no pension, no retirement fund.

Anzor, diagnosed with cancer, returned to Dagestan, east of Chechnya in Russia, saying that if he was going to die, he wanted it to be in Russia. Zubeidat was arrested last year, accused of trying to steal up to nine dresses from a Lord & Taylor store in Natick, Mass. The couple's two daughters, Bella and Ailina, moved to New Jersey, where Bella was arrested in December, along with a man named Ahmad Khalil, and charged with possession of and intent to distribute marijuana. A man who answered the intercom at Bella's apartment said she had moved out several months ago. From behind the door of her apartment in West New York, Ailina, 22, told reporters that she had been out of touch with her family.

Back in Cambridge, Tamerlan and Russell received welfare payments, just as his parents had in earlier years, the Massachusetts Health and Human Services agency confirmed.

Finances were tight. Their landlord, Joanna Herlihy, who lived below them, tried to get the Tsarnaevs to move out, according to two neighbors. Zubeidat sent in rent checks each month, even after she moved back to Russia. But Herlihy had tired of their constant bickering that the rent was too high, neighbors said. And in late January, the Tsarnaevs lost the Section 8 housing voucher that had subsidized their rent, according to someone in local government familiar with the case.

The only steady income at the Norfolk Street apartment came from Russell, who, according to her family's attorney, worked 70 to 80 hours a week as a home health aide while Tamerlan stayed home with their daughter.

"He wasn't really willing to work," the Russell family intimate said. "That in my mind made him an unsuitable husband. She worked like crazy for him."

After high school, Jahar enrolled at the University of Massachusetts campus at Dartmouth, an hour south of Boston.

He started in 2011 as an engineering student, then switched to biology, telling friends he wanted to be a doctor.

But Jahar's grades were poor, and several people who knew him said he made no secret about regularly smoking pot.

"He was chill — I guess that's kind of cliche to say about someone who smokes, right?" said Wiktor P. Tomkiewicz, 20, a junior civil engineering major who met Jahar at lunch with friends a few days before the bombings.

For a time, Jahar played on an intramural soccer team composed of students involved with the campus Muslim Student Association, according to Facebook groups and teammates.

Jahar lived in the Pine Dale dorm with a roommate, according to friends. Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are filled with photos of him hanging out at parties.

In January 2012, Tamerlan arrived in Dagestan for what would be a six-month visit. He saw his father and other relatives — his mother was still in Cambridge then; she returned to Dagestan in the summer and recently reconciled with Anzor.

The city Tamerlan came to in search of his roots is beset by intrigue and contradiction. Makhachkala is Muslim but known for its cognac. Weekly shootouts produce a heavy murder toll. Many Dagestanis are turning toward Salafism, a strict fundamentalist sect. Police gun down fundamentalists they say have turned militant. Police are methodically blown up with makeshift bombs.

Habib Magomedov, a member of the Dagestan government's anti-terrorism committee, said Tamerlan did not come to official attention during his stay. "Maybe he is unusual in America," he said, "but there are many such young people in Dagestan. Here he would be a lot like many others."

Accounts of Tamerlan's time in Dagestan remain spotty. His father told reporters that the son hung out, slept late, helped Anzor fix up his apartment, and said he was going to the gym. His great-aunt, Patimat Suleimanova, said Tamerlan prayed five times a day and sometimes talked to her about Islam. According to the father, Tamerlan went to a Salafist mosque, where he would have heard speakers rail against the West's treatment of Muslims.

But if Tamerlan's radicalization was cemented or enhanced during his stay, evidence of that has not emerged. What is known is that Tamerlan came home from Dagestan with a full, dark beard, according to two neighbors. Within a few weeks of his return, he was beardless again.

His passions, too, seemed to slip back and forth between his secular American world and his newfound devotion to the sermons of a hard-line Australian sheik and videos of lectures such as "The End is Near" and "Your Last Day on Earth." On YouTube, Tamerlan documented his transformation, his tastes morphing from hip-hop to songs such as "I Will Dedicate My Life to Jihad."

Back in Cambridge, in November and again in January, Tamerlan disrupted sermons at the Islamic Society of Boston mosque a few blocks from the Tsarnaev apartment. Ismail Fenni, a volunteer imam, said Tamerlan heckled a speaker who preached that congregation members should celebrate the American holidays of Thanksgiving and July Fourth just as they marked the birthday of the prophet Muhammad.

When Tamerlan yelled that no good Muslim would do such a thing, members told him to quiet down. The speaker tried to reason with Tamerlan afterward but made no headway.

Two months later, Tamerlan yelled at a speaker who preached that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was a model to all people of faith. Tamerlan "took offense at that" and yelled that King represented American values, said Yusefi Vali, a mosque official. "But the congregation simply wouldn't tolerate him saying that, his intolerance."

Again, members sought to calm Tamerlan, who this time grew quiet and stayed that way on his return visits over the past few months.

If Tamerlan's transformation was gradual, Jahar's path seems to have taken a turn only very recently. What actually happened between the brothers remains a mystery : Did the older brother impress his younger sibling into a violent strain of Islam in which the West was the cause of their sense of alienation? Did the brothers

independently fall into the orbit of radical preachers? Did the family's troubles overwhelm the sons just as their parents left them and abandoned their adopted country?

If there were hints along the way, they were scant. In 2010, Jahar urged a fellow Muslim classmate to join a little-known prayer group he attended in the empty classroom of a Moroccan math teacher, according to a student who participated and another who witnessed the prayers several times. The lunchtime prayers lasted only a couple of months, and then Jahar returned to being the fun-loving stoner they had always known.

Less than two weeks before the Boston Marathon, Jahar told a friend from both high school and college that he no longer cared about his classes and that religion and God were the only true things in life, according to a close friend of both men.

Sanjaya Lamichhane, 22, said the mutual friend had recently had a surprising conversation with Jahar on the Dartmouth campus in which Jahar said that "it didn't matter if you are a doctor or engineer — everybody cheats. . . . With religion and God, you can't cheat."

But Jahar still behaved like Jahar and friends neither saw nor talked about any transformation.

Near dark the night before the marathon, Jahar and Tamerlan walked down Norfolk Street carrying a pizza box, said Malisha Pitt, 42, who was sitting on her stoop. One of her relatives yelled out for a slice, and Pitt hushed him: "Stop harassing my neighbors." The brothers laughed it off and continued on their way.

On the Tuesday night after the bombing, sometime after 8 p.m., Jahar's friend Zach Bettencourt was at the gym and noticed Jahar sitting on a bench, listening to his iPod. Bettencourt brought up the bombings.

"Tragedies happen," Jahar said. "Tragedies happen like this all the time."

Two days later, just hours before the shootout that would end Tamerlan's life, he called Alvi, his estranged uncle. Tamerlan said nothing about the bombings, Alvi recalled, but wanted to apologize.

"I want to have an uncle, and I love you," Tamerlan said.

"I love you, too, Tamerlan," Alvi replied. "Now we can just be a family."

Tamerlan asked for his uncle Ruslan's number. "I just want to make peace with him," the nephew said.

Ruslan said Tamerlan never called.

Now Ruslan looks forward to visiting his surviving nephew in prison; he would tell Jahar that there is still time for evil and hate to leave his body, that he is still loved.

Ruslan believes his family is not so different from many others. "We all think we know each other," he said, "but in fact we don't."