Beat: Miscellaneous

Latvian man who killed wife named suspect in disappearance of British girl, 14

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USPA News - A Latvian man who was previously convicted of murdering his wife is now being treated as a suspect in the disappearance of Alice Gross, the 14-year-old girl who vanished in west London late last month, British police said on Thursday. The girl`s fate remains unknown.

Investigators began looking into 41-year-old Arnis Zalkalns when he was reported missing about a week after Alice`s disappearance and was found to frequently cycle the same path where the schoolgirl was last seen. Detectives have since identified Zalkalns in CCTV footage from the moment of Alice`s sighting. "Detectives now know that on Thursday, 28 August - the day that Alice disappeared - Arnis Zalkalns was seen on CCTV cycling along Brentford Lock at 4 p.m., some fifteen minutes after Alice walked that route at 3:45 p.m. Detectives believe he is likely to have come across Alice as they were both going in the same direction," a police spokesperson said. "What, if anything, happened there is now one of the focuses of this investigation." Zalkalns was last seen at his home in the London Borough of Ealing on the night of September 3 and his disappearance has been described as "completely out of character" by friends and family, who have expressed concern for him. Investigators said Zalkalns has not accessed his bank account or used his mobile phone and his passport was left at his house. It is believed Zalkalns left his home early on the morning of September 4, after which he failed to meet a friend at approximately 8 a.m. to cycle to work together. He was reported missing by his partner around noon on September 5, more than 36 hours after he was last seen at their home. Detective Superintendent Carl Mehta, from the Homicide and Major Crime Command, said there was no evidence to suggest that Alice and Zalkalns knew each other. Latvian State Police spokesman Toms Sadovskis confirmed Zalkalns was convicted in 1998 for the murder of his wife and spent seven years in prison, after which he moved to the United Kingdom in 2007. He was later arrested in Ealing in 2009 after the alleged indecent assault of a 14-year-old girl, but the case was dropped after the victim declined to give further evidence. The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), which is better known as Scotland Yard, refused to comment on the 1998 murder conviction, saying it had not yet received access to the full records. "To obtain the full file in relation to the conviction of Arnis Zalkalns we now need to obtain an International Letter of Request (ILOR)," a spokesperson said. Police added that the investigation into the disappearance of Alice continues to be "fast moving and ever expanding" and indicated that detectives were pursuing other leads which have not been made public. "As with all live investigations there is information that the police have that they cannot and should not make public," the spokesperson explained. A reward of up to 20,000 pounds ($32,750) has been issued for anyone who has information that leads detectives to find the missing girl. Alice, who had not been in good health recently, left her home in west London at 1 p.m. on August 28 and told her family that she would be home at around 10 p.m. that night, but never returned. She was seen on CCTV walking alone on the Grand Union Canal towpath at 2:23 p.m. and was later seen at the same point at 3:45 p.m., heading in the direction of her home. Detectives looking into Zalkalns later found that the Latvian man traveled the same towpath at 4 p.m., riding fast on a bike in the same direction as Alice was going. Alice`s backpack, which contained some of her personal belongings, was discovered near a towpath alongside the River Brent on September 2. The discovery, along with the CCTV images, prompted the Homicide and Major Crime Command (HMCC) to take over the investigation, with officials saying that they were considering the possibility that the teen may have become a victim of crime. "Her disappearance is out of character and this investigation continues to be a priority for us," Detective Chief Inspector Andy Chalmers said earlier this month, appealing for help from the public. "Our investigation has reached a point where we now know Alice was heading along the Grand Union Canal tow path in the direction of Hanwell and one would assume she was heading home." Two people - a 25-year-old man and a 51-year-old man - were arrested on suspicion of murder in connection with Alice`s disappearance earlier this month, but both were released with no further action to be taken. Police have emphasized that the investigation continues to be a missing person investigation as no evidence has been found to indicate she is no longer alive.

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