

# The Michigan Roots of Leon Czolgosz

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At the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York on September 6, 1901 Leon Czolgosz became America's third presidential assassin when he shot William McKinley with a .32-caliber revolver hidden in his handkerchief-wrapped hand. The president died eight days later. Apprehended at the scene, Czolgosz (pronounced chol-gosh) was tried, found guilty and executed on October 29, less than two months later.

As he was shackled to the electric chair, Czolgosz calmly voiced his oft-repeated explanation for the homicidal deed: "I killed the president because he was the enemy of the good people—the good working people. I am not sorry for my crime. I am sorry I could not see my father." Czolgosz's last words may have been a final lament for the family support he seldom received in his youth.

Born in Detroit in 1873, Leon Czolgosz grew up in Michigan during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, experiencing the harsh realities of life—especially the working-class realities of poverty, job insecurity and family instability—that determined his character. Like present times, when widespread anger and excessive violence often result from unemployment, a shrinking job market, family disruptions, changing values and a legacy of brutalization, societal convulsions a century ago also prompted violent acts.

Explanations of Czolgosz's attack have often been shaded by ideological bias. Psychiatric evaluations and public officials' comments during and after the trial and execution concluded that Czolgosz was sane. His deed was disturbing, yet at the time, politically inspired assassinations were common internationally. One year after the execution, however—and until quite recently—psychiatrists and historians advanced the belief that the assassin was indeed demented.

Czolgosz came to be described as a loner, a delusional daydreamer and shiftless wanderer. In short, he was irrational. His murderous act could not have been brought on because he was "victimized" by nineteenth century society. Insanity became a convenient explanation that did not challenge beliefs in an egalitarian, free, capitalist America. "Such a monstrous...wanton murder of the President," one contemporary observed, "[by] so insignificant a citizen, without his being insane or degenerate, could be nothing short of a miracle."

Today, psychological historians reaffirm the initial diagnosis that saw Czolgosz as a committed anarchist who acted rationally. His anarchism was consistent with a revolutionary fervor that developed worldwide in reaction to complex changes in the socioeconomic order during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

The final quarter of the nineteenth century has been described as one of the most oppressive and exploitative periods in America. Low pay, long hours and insufferable working conditions brought about demands for radical alternatives to capitalist democracy.

Historian James W. Clarke in *American Assassins* cites a series of national economic upheavals—the 1886 Haymarket riot, the 1892 Homestead Steel strike, the 1894 Pullman strike and the 1897 Latimer Mines massacre—as significant events that shaped Czolgosz's anarchist beliefs. While these national traumas—especially the indiscriminate killing of nineteen Slavic workers by deputy sheriffs during the Latimer strike in Hazelton and Latimer, Pennsylvania may have cemented his anarchism, Czolgosz's sensitivity to oppression was formed as a youth by exposure to the hardscrabble life of the foreign-born laboring classes.

The Czolgosz family came to Detroit in 1873, following their father's arrival earlier that year. Paul Czolgosz, Leon's father, born in Prussia, who later emigrated to Slovakia, was a landless peasant working as a hired agricultural laborer in Poland. Paul came to America "for bread" and maybe to accumulate enough savings to some day buy land in Poland. His itinerant lifestyle, common to Polish immigrants, made life an unpredictable struggle.

Leon, the fourth child in the family, was born within a month of his mother's arrival in Detroit. His father had found a job with the city's sewer system; Leon's mother took in washing. The family lived in a rented brick house at 141 Benton Street on Detroit's northeast side in an area known as Polacktown and attended St. Albertus Parish, the city's first Polish Catholic church. Their landlady, who lived on the third floor, later described the Czolgoszes as a "law-abiding family."

Polacktown, made up mostly of Poles from German-occupied Poland, was nestled within the bustling industrial town. Yet, in 1870 Detroit was still a compact, walking city of only eighty thousand inhabitants. But as population swelled, competition for work intensified. Laborers like Paul Czolgosz earned between \$1.33 and \$1.50 a day, working ten or twelve hours a day, six days a week. Ethnic discrimination made it difficult for newly arrived immigrants to find consistent, year-round employment. Most workers moved from job to job due to seasonal layoffs, illnesses or unstable market conditions.

Efforts to establish a family history of the Czolgoszes in Detroit have turned up little information. Known as a card player, Paul Czolgosz was nonetheless a hard-working laborer. Even twenty years after arriving in America, Paul spoke little English. Apparently, Leon attended the nearby Catholic grade school but was not a regular student.

Soon after the family immigrated to Michigan, the United States plunged into four years of severe depression. While in Detroit, Leon's parents struggled under a shaky economy that offered little security and reduced the family's lifestyle to a subsistence level. A year later the Czolgoszes had saved enough money to buy a saloon grocery store. Despite a reputation for frugality and hard work, Paul Czolgosz could not make a success of the business venture, which certainly tempered the family's belief in the American success story.

When Leon was four, the 1877 nationwide railroad strike affected both Detroit and his family. When railroads in dozens of cities cut wages an additional 10 percent in May of that year, an already volatile national mood exploded. A strike erupted in Martinsburg, West Virginia, workers rioted in Pittsburgh and Chicago and nine workmen were killed by state militia in Baltimore, Maryland.

In Michigan, Governor Charles M. Croswell, anticipating trouble, asked the War Department for the use of federal troops to control possible insurrection. President Rutherford B. Hayes ordered all available federal troops moved from Fort Mackinac to Detroit in July. Though violence was minimal in Detroit, the impressions of angry workers and economic dislocation were stark reminders of the culture of poverty and violence and the fragile economic lifestyle that plagued the Czolgosz family.

The bitter struggle and violence of 1877 reaffirmed the belief among laborers that they were a hopeless, powerless class. Working-class leaders began agitating for the formation of workingmen's organizations. Socialist unions and political parties emerged in Detroit in the late 1870s.

In 1878 Detroit craftsmen secretly formed the city's first Knights of Labor assembly. At local saloons and beer halls the Knights preached to workers in English, German and Polish. Efforts were also made to organize street-railway and utility workers. During these years radicals in the labor movement dominated discussions and depicted wage earners as victims engaged in a class struggle. The Czolgosz family could not have avoided the conflicts and realities of such divisive economic times. In 1880, with little to show for his seven years in Detroit, Paul Czolgosz moved his family to Rogers City, Michigan.

After six months in Rogers City, the Czolgoszes relocated to a farm six miles north of Posen. Halfway between Alpena and Rogers City in Presque Isle County, Posen was predominantly Polish and steadfastly dedicated to Old-World customs. Men and women in European-peasant garb still tilled the fields there.

Paul Czolgosz farmed, but also may have worked in nearby sawmills. Over the next five and a half years Leon attended a Catholic school, public schools and, when older, night school. Although he spoke and read English, Leon preferred reading in Polish. Because he read for hours, Leon's parents considered him their best-educated child.

Shortly before the Czolgosz family arrived in Posen, an incident occurred that reminded the Polish settlers of the friction between capital and labor, and ethnic and class differences. Albert Moliter, a German farmer near Rogers City, was tyrannical in his treatment of his Polish farm hands. Long hours, poor wages, harsh working con-

ditions and general mistreatment caused twelve of his laborers to murder him. Although some historical sources claim Paul Czolgosz was one of the twelve, the incident apparently occurred before the family arrived in northern Michigan. Even in rural Michigan the Czolgosz family could not escape the sense that as wage earners and small farmers they were an exploited class.

During the early 1880s the labor movement spread into the smaller industrial sawmill towns of northern Michigan. In 1881 sawmill workers in Muskegon struck for ten-hour workdays.

The following year, the Workingman's Party in Muskegon captured most city offices in the spring 1882 elections. Later that summer, salt block workers struck the large Bay City sawmill owned by Henry W. Sage & Company. Absentee-owner Sage fired all employees, many of whom were recent Polish immigrants. In Detroit, the Knights of Labor demanded ten hour workdays. In May 1885, lumber drivers, asking two dollars a day, struck the sawmills in Alpena. By 1884 Detroit's Labor Party had elected five state representatives.

Amid this industrial turmoil the Czolgosz family abandoned rural life and moved to Sable Street in Alpena in 1885. Paul Czolgosz got a job at a nearby lumber yard and Leon, at the age of twelve, began work in an Alpena factory. When Leon became a full-time wage laborer, he was forced to give up going to school. Shortly after the Czolgoszes moved to Alpena, Leon's mother died following the birth of her eighth child. Leon, who had always been close to his mother, was left to adjust to workaday life alone.

Although little is known of the impact on Leon of the death of his mother, evidence suggests that it was traumatic. Shortly before her death, his mother admonished Leon to attain "greater understanding and be more learned." She had selected Leon as the child to gain upward mobility for the family. Though Leon continued to read, work demands and the loss of his mother's encouragement made formal education impossible. When his father remarried a few years later, Leon never accepted his step-mother. Although he remained quiet and solitary and was at times disobedient, Leon was never thought to be, even in hindsight, an abnormal child.

While working in Alpena, bashful Leon had few close friends. He confided most often in his older brother Waldeck. In later years Leon became fond of hunting. He hunted daily during the fall and winter, and his brother remembered how good he became at shooting rabbits with a breech-loading shotgun. Leon also carried a family revolver, "with which" Waldeck recalled "he was quite skillful."

An avid reader living the working man's life, Leon was impressionable. In 1883, the Knights of Labor's Michigan Labor Journal began publishing weekly in Alpena. Its articles depicted restive laborers exploited by long hours, low pay and unsafe working conditions. Strikes and violence were often detailed. The difficult, dirty and dangerous workman's existence was something Leon could identify with.

Undoubtedly, Leon was aware of the May 1885 Alpena lumberwagon drivers strike. It preceded the "Great Strike In the Valley" that began in July in Bay City and Saginaw, then spread north to Oscoda. Striking Polish and German sawmill workers demanded ten-hour workdays, weekly pay and a restoration of wages recently cut because of a drop in lumber prices. Violence flared and 150 Pinkertons from Chicago and the state militia, sent by Governor Russell A. Alger, arrived to restore order. By the time the strike was called off in September, the workers had gained nothing. Many of them were let go by the owners; others resumed working twelve-hour days at the old wage rate.

Leon Czolgosz worked the next five years in Alpena. During that time, he grew more withdrawn and isolated himself from the community. Such national events as the Haymarket affair in Chicago in 1886, followed by the subsequent hanging of four anarchists charged with the deaths of seven policeman, may have further convinced Leon of the gross injustices laborers experienced at the hands of capitalists. Haymarket remained in the news until 1887 and was used by the Alpena Labor Journal as a popular reminder of the bitter disputes that continued splitting capital and, labor.

In 1889, when Leon was sixteen, the Czolgosz family left Michigan to move to Natrona, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh. There, Leon worked in a glass factory; two years later the family moved to Cleveland, where Leon found work in a wire factory. He joined a strike initiated by a cut in wages in 1893, and was promptly fired along with other striking workers. Eventually, he was rehired under an alias and worked steadily in the wire factory for four more years.

But the 1897 Latimer Mines massacre that left nineteen dead prompted Leon to quit his job. He told his brother, "I can't stand it any longer." Leon, who never returned to factory work, grew more reclusive. For the next three years

Leon's life revolved around reading, hunting and doing odd jobs in and around the family farm outside Cleveland. He also turned increasingly toward anarchism.

By 1901 he was convinced that labor organizations and political involvement were fruitless solutions for labor's grievances. President William McKinley's reelection in 1900 was a triumph for capitalists and may have provided the catalyst for Leon's deadly scheme. After McKinley's death, Leon claimed he had resented the president's espousing prosperity as he campaigned across the country when there was no prosperity for the poor man. "I am not afraid to die. I don't believe we should have any rulers. It was right to kill him."

His anarchist views materialized out of frustration. He acted, as Emma Goldman later said, out of "societal necessity"... He committed the act for what was his ideal. The good of the people."

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## Sidebar: Emma Caught in Dragnet

During the autumn hysteria following the September 6 attempt on President McKinley's life, police in Buffalo and Chicago attempted to connect America's most famous anarchist, Emma Goldman, with Czolgosz's act.

Disillusioned with a socialist local he had belonged to, Czolgosz attended one of Emma's lectures in Cleveland earlier in 1901. Leon approached Goldman during the intermission for suggestions on anarchist books to read. She wrote in her autobiography *Living My Life* that she was struck by his "most sensitive face."

Several weeks later, he made a surprise call on her while she was ending a visit to the Chicago home of Abe Isaak, the editor of the anarchist newspaper *Free Society*. Using the pseudonym Nieman, Czolgosz rode with her to the train station and again inquired about anarchism. As Emma boarded the train, she asked her Chicago friends to introduce Nieman to some of their comrades.

Czolgosz's interest in anarchism was more instinctual than researched, and this ignorance, combined with his repeated references to acts of violence and secret societies, made Chicago anarchists suspect he was a police infiltrator. When a letter arrived from Cleveland revealing that Nieman was an assumed name and voicing suspicions against the young man, Isaak published a warning in *Free Society* that Czolgosz was an agent provocateur. Goldman, in New York, was angry at this quick condemnation. After the assassination, she always wondered if the unjust spy accusation prompted Czolgosz to violently prove his sincerity.

Czolgosz was grilled for hours by Buffalo police in their "sweat box" the day of the shooting, and soon mentioned how impressed he was by Goldman's Cleveland lecture. Probing for an opportunity to arrest hated "Red Emma," Buffalo cops sweated Leon down well into the evening with relentless leading questions. In a statement Leon signed at 10:20 p.m., the following exchange was recorded:

Q.—Have you ever taken any obligation or sworn any oath to kill anybody; you have, haven't you; look up and speak; haven't you done that?

A.—No sir.

Q.—Who was the last one you heard talk [against rulers]?

A.—Emma Goldman.

Q.—You heard her say it would be a good thing if all these rulers Were wiped off the face of the earth?

A.—She didn't say that.

Q.—What did she say? What did she say about the president?

A.—She says—she didn't mention no presidents at all; she mentioned the government.

Q.—What did she say about it?

A.—She said she didn't believe in it.

Q.—And that all those who supported the government ought to be destroyed; didn't she believe in that?

A.—She didn't say they ought to be destroyed.

Q.—You wanted to help her in her work, and thought this was the best way to do it; was that your idea; or if you have any other idea, tell us what it was?

A.—She didn't tell me to do it.

Chicago was the city where only 15 years earlier, the Haymarket anarchists had been arrested, prosecuted and condemned to hang for their “inflammatory” writings and speeches. [See “Hang Me For It,” Letters, FE #347, Spring 1996, page 28.] The anarchist community there was still a significant social force, and the police were determined to ensnare the influential Goldman in an assassination conspiracy. Though Czolgosz steadfastly refused to connect Goldman with his decision to kill McKinley, Police in Chicago after the shooting detained nine of Emma's friends in an effort to induce her to return. As McKinley lay wounded, she immediately did return to Chicago. She was convinced by comrades, however, to hide out and give the *Chicago Tribune* an exclusive interview before she turned herself in. Funds were needed for legal expenses and the paper was offering her \$5,000. She was betrayed and arrested four days after the assassination attempt, while staying at a friend's house and before the interview could take place.

In custody, she added fuel to fire by refusing to denounce Czolgosz, though many friends counseled that she distance herself from him. Calling Leon- “the-poor unfortunate; denied and forsaken by everyone,” she offered sympathy. Goldman biographer Richard Drinnon wrote, “In a life filled with high drama Emma often showed exceptional courage. But her refusal to join the pack in its cry against Czolgosz approached the sublime: in jail in Chicago, in imminent danger herself of a long prison term or worse, she managed a breathtaking disregard for self in her willingness to extend sympathy to the pathetic slayer. Even reporters who held a professional disbelief in the possibility of any idealism, were genuinely puzzled by her expressed willingness to nurse McKinley, even though she sympathized with Czolgosz. In vain did she try to explain her solicitude for both of the protagonists in this tragedy.”

Though Buffalo police concocted and publicized lurid fantasies about Czolgosz being in love with Goldman and following her from town to town, the Erie County D.A. found insufficient evidence to attempt extradition proceedings. Emma was released after fifteen days in a Chicago jail, during which time a policeman punched her in the mouth and knocked out one of her teeth.

On the way to Auburn prison after being sentenced to die, Czolgosz resisted continued efforts to provoke him into implicating Goldman. “I knew Emma Goldman and some others in Chicago,” he reaffirmed. “I heard Emma Goldman speak in Cleveland. None of these people ever told me to kill anybody. Nobody told me that. I done it all myself.”

Awaiting execution at the “chamber of the condemned,” as New York's death row was then called, Czolgosz was further harassed by the prison superintendent. During an interview, the warden asked him, “You know. Emma Goldman says you are an idiot, and no good, and that you begged a quarter of her?” Czolgosz simply replied, “I don't care what she says. She didn't tell me to do this.”

The apparatus of judicial murder worked faster in those days. Czolgosz was awakened before dawn on October 29 for his trip into eternity, less than eight weeks after stepping up to McKinley in the Buffalo receiving line and shooting him twice. Leon demanded to make a statement with “a lot of people around,” but his request was denied. He was taken to a rubber platform and belted into the electric chair. To facilitate that era's technology, salt water-soaked sponges were strapped to his head and below his knees. At 7:12 a.m., Czolgosz was killed with 1,700 volts

of electricity. Earthly remains of his existence were obliterated. His clothes and belongings were burned, and a container of sulfuric acid was placed in his casket to speed the decomposition of his body. It is recorded that he was buried in the prison cemetery, but the location of his grave is unknown.

Information for this section from Richard Drinnon, *Rebel In Paradise: A Biography of Emma Goldman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

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