

Confession to the Assassination of President William McKinley

Leon Czolgosz

September 6, 1901

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Background

Until, give or take a few minutes, 4:00 o'clock in the afternoon on September 6, 1901, Leon Frank Czolgosz was nobody. Poor, unemployed, unskilled, maladroit, alone, and restless, he was as good as nameless. "Fred Nieman", he called himself in German; "Fred Nobody" is what it meant. It was as "Fred Nieman" that Czolgosz wrote, about five weeks before the afternoon of the 6th, what would become a spectacularly rare letter. In it, he described his seemingly erratic peregrinations, and vaguely hinted that Mr. Nobody had it in mind, vaguely, to become if not "Someone", at least, "something." The street car fare was only a nickel to Buffalo, he reported; and it was to Buffalo he would take himself, on the 31st of August. In Buffalo, he would wait — until, give or take a few minutes, at 4:00 o'clock in the afternoon on September 6, 1901, he would become a presidential assassin.

Czolgosz's confession letter is, then, the preamble, written weeks before, to this extraordinarily rare manuscript (both, in the Shapell Manuscript Collection): Leon Frank Czolgosz's signed confession that, give or take a few minutes, at 4:00 o'clock in the afternoon on September 6, 1901, he shot the 25th President, William McKinley.

Vice President Theodore Roosevelt, at the same time, was on an island in Lake Champlain, preparing to address the Vermont Fish and Game League, when he was pulled aside, abruptly, and told that the President had been shot. Whether McKinley would live or die was, at that moment, uncertain — and Roosevelt, even as he prepared leave the island — by rowboat, by yacht, by train — wired immediately for more information. He hastily scrawled on the back of a railroad timetable a 27-word message (also present in the Shapell Manuscript Collection):

Director of Hospital or House at which President lies Buffalo NY. / Wire me at once full particulars to Van Ness House Burlington Vermont. Theodore Roosevelt / Vice President

But even as Roosevelt sped toward McKinley's bedside, "Fred Nobody" was confessing to having shot the President. With this document, written in the first person, and signed by Czolgosz twice, he explains here why he did what he did it, how he planned the doing of it, what he thought, when he first thought it...

He had read about McKinley's planned trip to Niagara Falls and the Buffalo Exposition, he says, when he decided to make his fatal strike...

I saw in the papers what building the president was going to be in and I went there & waited for him to come in. I went right in when he came. I took the gun out and wrapped it in handkerchief at boarding house. I think I shot through handkerchief. I shot once and then again. I did not think one shot was enough. As soon as I fired second shot I was knocked down & tramped on, and gun taken away from me. The gun was fully loaded. All I have told you I have told of my own free will.

His crime, Leon Frank Czolgosz confesses, was premeditated — and brave:

I made my plans 3 or 4 days ago to shoot the President. When I shot him I intended to kill him and the reason for my intention in killing was because I did not believe in presidents over us. I was willing to sacrifice myself & the president for the benefit of the country. I felt I had more courage than the average man in killing president and was willing to put my own life at stake in order to do it.

Anarchist meetings, he explains, influenced his thinking:

I heard people talk about the duty they were under to educate the people against the present form of government and they should [do] all they could to change form of Government.

He expected to be arrested and didn't want to get away – but, tellingly, crosses-out these final lines:

I was willing to take chance of being electrocuted or hung if I could kill the president. I am willing to take consequences.

The date is September 6th, 1901, and Leon Czolgosz, feeling he had done his duty in shooting the President, hadn't at last anything left to say. But the last word would not be his. McKinley, it appeared, would easily recover from the attempt on his life. Everyone was sanguine that his prognosis was excellent. Roosevelt, writing to his host of the abruptly aborted Vermont Fish and Game League speech just three days later, on the 9th, about a coat gone missing in the hubbub – doesn't even address the President's condition until the second paragraph (a letter present, as well, in the Shapell Manuscript Collection):

Everything is going on most satisfactorily with the President. I feel assured not only that he will recover, but that his recovery will be so speedy that in a very short time he will be able to resume his duties.

Yet Roosevelt's confidence, though reflecting that of the President's doctors, was tragically misplaced. On September 12th, McKinley's condition changed for the worse, and two days later he died gangrene and infection caused by the gunshot wound. His harrowing death gave rise, however, to a brief life: Leon Frank Czolgosz was, finally, somebody.

Precisely because Czolgosz was such a nobody, who was "somebody" only long enough to pull a trigger, and stand trial, for 8 1/2 hours, a week after McKinley succumbed to his wounds; because he was within a month, executed; because, finally, sulfuric acid having been thrown on his body, and his letters and clothes burned – Czolgosz' signature, itself, is almost unobtainable. His signed confession, then, is virtually unique.

Manuscript Document Signed (twice), being the final two pages of a signed confession to the McKinley assassination. 2 pages, quarto, no place [Buffalo, New York], September 6, 1901. Transcribed, witnessed and countersigned by Vincent T. Haggerty, M.J. O'Laughlin and John Martin.

September 6th 1901

drew from bank. Bought my own clothes. I had about \$200 when I was searched. I saw in the Newspapers that president was going to Falls. When I worked in Wire [sic] mill I made from \$150 to 175 sometimes 200 a day. When I worked day work I got \$150 a day.

I went to Falls about bet 9 or 10 clock [sic] This morning I walked around the Island. I left there and took trolley car about 12 oclock into the City and took another car to the fair. I saw in the papers what building the president was going to be in and I went there & waited for him to come in. I went right in when he came. I took the gun out and wrapped it in handkerchief at boarding house. I think I shot through handkerchief. I shot once and then again. I did not think one shot was enough. As soon as I fired second shot I was knocked down & tramped on. and gun taken away from me. The gun was fully loaded. All I have told you I have told of my own free will. Everything I have hear [sic] said is the truth.

I made my plans 3 or 4 days ago to shoot the President. When I shot him I intended to kill him and the reason for my intention in killing was because I did not believe in presidents over us. I was willing to sacrifice myself & the president for the benefit of the Country.

I felt I had more courage than the average man in killing president and was willing to put my own life at stake in order to do it.

In these meetings I attended I heard people talk about the duty they were under to educate the people against the present form of Government and they should [sic] all they could to change form of Government.

I meant to say I was on the ground about an hour before arrival of president but did not enter building where shooting took place until after President went it.

Everything you have read to me is absolutely true [sic]

LEON F. CZOLGOSZ

September 6th 1901.

I planned this all out for 2 or 3 days. I had an idea there would be a big crowd at the reception. I expected I would be arrested. I did not intend to get away. I was willing to take chance of being electrocuted or hung if I could kill the president. I am willing to take consequences. I realized what it meant.

LEON F. CZOLGOSZ

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September 6, 1901

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