

The Lancaster Legend

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HE HAD IT COMING: THE SORG MURDER (Part 2)

by Benedict Maryniak

During the two days of the wake, Assistant District Attorney Haller visited every house within a mile of the Sorg farm to interview anyone who would talk. He obtained dozens of statements which depicted squabbles between Lena and Michael. Two of Michael's cousins stated that he'd repeatedly predicted that "Lena will do me yet." A few village merchants had caught Lena Sorg exiting their shops with goods she hadn't paid for. In December, Buffalo authorities charged Mrs. Sorg with "adulterating milk" -- increasing Michael's deliveries by thinning them with water and pocketing the extra income. When Mr. Sorg was notified, a terrific fight raged in the house and even spilled out onto the lawn despite the cold. By the time these affidavits were brought to Kenefick, he himself had obtained two more -- from Lena and Lettie Sorg, Michael's younger sisters who worked as domestics in Buffalo. They claimed that their father's 1888 demise had been caused by strychnine mixed into noodle dough by Magdalena Sorg. Though the family never reported a murder to authorities, it was indeed the belief of Michael and his sisters. Kenefick also hypothesized that the Rost family were "murderous by nature." Though Lena's brothers Victor and George were well-to-do businessmen in Buffalo, another brother was reportedly in a California jail convicted of murder.

Buffalo newspapers all reported Senator Davis's outrage at Kenefick's remarks. He called Kenefick's case "too flimsy and circumstantial for the D.A. to be commenting on the Rost family." Davis pointed out that Michael Sorg had fought bitterly, just before his death, with a local teamster over a bad horse trade, and that a Lancaster man had been admitted to a Buffalo insane asylum following the murder. "Handsome George" also

attacked the circumstantial evidence against Lena Sorg. Wind-blown snow on that morning could easily have covered an assailant's tracks. Her bloody dress was a result of ministering to her husband as he lay dying. Sarcasm soared as Davis pointed to Kenefick's use of a microscope to examine the hatchet for blood "because the district attorney won't trust the naked eye if it betrays his evidence!" George Sorg's blood-stained mattress actually backfired as prosecution evidence when Davis discovered that "Mr. Sorg always slept in his boy's bed rather than foul his own when he had a severe attack of bleeding piles." Davis did, in fact, speak for many people who defended Magdalena Sorg. Her supporters undoubtedly felt for Lena the sympathy most of us feel for the provincial inside ourselves, the rube with the bad shoes and a taste for the high life. She may have killed a man, but she shouldn't be locked up for it -- he had it coming.

Seemingly nonplussed, D.A. Dan Kenefick told reporters to "take everything Senator Davis tells you, divide it by three, subtract six, and don't believe the rest."

On Tuesday, February 8, 1898, Michael Sorg's funeral proved to be one of the largest spectacles Lancaster had yet witnessed. Sheriff Kilgallon wrote that "at least two thousand people" covered the two miles between Sorg's farm and Saint Mary's Cemetery while newspaper reports had it at twice that figure. At the head of the procession, crepe-draped Magdalena Sorg was flanked by deputies. George had been brought from the city lockup to be there, circled by armed officers. And it got no better once the crowd reached the graveyard, for Michael Sorg had not been a practicing Catholic and was consequently buried "without the presence of a priest in a strip of unconsecrated ground south of the



cemetery." When eldest daughter Lena had a "seizure" as the coffin went into the ground, a deputy gathered her up under his arms like a bundle of dirty clothes and rushed the writhing girl to a house on St. Mary's Street. As the huge crowd looked back to the grave, Lena Sorg was being arrested for first-degree murder by Lancaster Constable Joseph Merkle.

At the home of Henry Schiefer, Lena Sorg continued her strange paroxysms. In a raspy voice that creaked like a mausoleum door, she looked at George and said "father has been looking for you." Mrs. Sorg leaned on Constable Merkle's arm while her brother Victor A. Rost divvied up her children. The older girls would stay with their neighbors the Diemerts, Victor took six-year-old Estelle to his home on Wohlers Avenue. A cousin of Michael's in the village would care for Eugene and other Rosts would shelter the younger boys. Lena's brother George took baby Isabelle. In the crowd outside the building, Michael's sisters Lena and Lettie cursed and

Magdalena Sorg in her mourning veil, being questioned by District Attorney Daniel J Kenefick about the February 4, 1898 murder of her husband.



abused Magdalena to the extent that one journalist thought the air would burn. (AUTHOR'S NOTE: Some newspaper accounts were rendered utterly senseless because reporters confused the accused widow Lena Sorg with her daughter Lena Sorg and with the victim's sister Lena Sorg.) Mrs. Sorg's guards then marched her from St. Mary's Street to Town Hall, where she told Police Justice George Huber that her counsel, Senator George Davis, would not be back from Albany until February 10 and that she would not answer any questions without her attorney. Huber concluded there was sufficient evidence to warrant her imprisonment and ordered her jailed in Buffalo until Davis appeared. Mother, son, Assistant D.A. Haller, and a dozen deputies again boarded a yellow trolley which lurched off on the half-hour ride to Buffalo.

"Handsome George" Davis performed brilliantly at Lena's February 10 hearing before Police Justice Huber. First off, he finessed the problem of young George Sorg's continued incarceration with an expedient nick-of-time gimmick. He would waive examination of Mrs. Sorg and let her case go to a grand jury on the condition that George was released. D.A. Kenefick was only too glad to agree. He had a convincing array of evidence and did not want to argue Sorg's case in Lancaster Town Hall where she may have had supporters.

Thirteen people appeared before the Erie County Grand Jury once the Sorg case was taken up on February 14 but their testimony was not published. In addition to widow Sorg, her sons George and eleven-year-

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old Frank were called. Vengeful Lettie Sorg, the victim's sister, must have been chosen to accuse Lena of murdering both her father and her brother. Dr. Ewell described his autopsy findings. Seven male neighbors were also questioned with the dead man's cousins, Diemert and Feuerstein among them. Despite Kenefick's lineup of damning statements, no verdict about Magdalena Sorg's culpability was forthcoming.

Her children scattered, Lena lived in the "women's ward" of Buffalo City Jail for six days before the Grand Jury began considering her case and another nineteen days elapsed before a verdict. During deliberations, the entire matter ceased to be sensational and disappeared from newspapers when the gunboat U.S.S. Maine exploded in Havana Harbor on February 15, 1898, killing 266 Americans. From then on, the public cared only about news of events which led to President William McKinley's "splendid little war."

On February 18 and 25, deputies with sidearms and shotguns escorted the widow Sorg on round-trip trolley rides to Justice Huber's court in Lancaster where the Managing Clerk of the DA's Office

asked for adjournments which were quickly granted. On Monday, February 28, two or three newspapers ran a statement by "Handsome George" Davis regarding problems with the hatchet as the murder weapon. Microscopic scrutiny of the barnyard tool by a Doctor Parmenter had yielded nothing and chemical testing for blood traces were underway.

On March 4, 1898, Senator Davis showed up bright and early at City Hall. He told reporters he was "trying to find out what the Grand Jury was doing," but he probably knew very well. The Grand Jury soon appeared before County Judge Emery with a "no bill." There would be no indictment of Magdalena Sorg. District Attorney Kenefick's circumstantial case went up in smoke when no trace of blood had been found on the hatchet. Lena said, "It is good to get some fresh air again." Predictably, Kenefick said he had wanted things to go that way. "If Mrs. Sorg had been indicted, tried, and acquitted," said the District Attorney, "she could not be tried again even if there was new evidence or a confession." Standing nearby, "Handsome George" had a reply for the D.A.

"The People's case was so weak," said the senator, "that a jury appointed to receive only evidence against the poor woman still exonerated her."

E P I L O G U E

"Handsome George" Davis was continually re-elected to the state senate until 1910 and he was "mayor of Lancaster" when he died in 1920. His grand stone mansion stood at the intersection of Central Avenue and Broadway until dismantled during 1930 to make room for a Standard Oil gas station, where the Mobil pumps stand today. Load after load of its bricks were used to build up the banks of Plumb Bottom Creek. Assistant D.A., Haller and Detective Cusack appeared in news coverage of President McKinley's assassination. Daniel J. Kenefick went on to the state supreme court and rewrote Buffalo's city charter in 1926. Despite his 1848 birthday, "Judge" George Huber lived to 1946 and held nearly every village and town office in Lancaster. He was reputedly a favorite hunting companion of Grover Cleveland.

George Sorg



George Sorg worked as a coachman in 1902, residing in Buffalo at 190 Franklin Street until 1917 when he became a fireman with "Chemical #5" and moved to 280 Elm Street. He last appeared in the 1939 City Directory.

The Sorg buildings still stand where Aurora crosses Slate Bottom Creek and the Lancaster town line. Though Michael Sorg's lurid funeral drew a remarkable crowd and was covered by several newspapers, his grave cannot be located today. No one at Saint Mary's Church was inclined to so much as acknowledge an unconsecrated burial by recording it back in 1898.

Mrs. Sorg and all her children returned to their residence on Aurora Road for a year or two. Magdalena and the children were living in Buffalo by 1900, changing addresses almost yearly until 121 West Avenue, where Lena remained with Estelle from 1917 until her death due to nephritis on December 5, 1921. By then Estelle was 29 and listed in the City Directory as a "saleswoman." George Sorg worked as a coachman in 1902, residing in Buffalo at 190 Franklin Street until 1917 when he became a fireman with "Chemical #5" and moved to 280 Elm Street. He last appeared in the 1939 City Directory.

The grave of suspected murderess Magdalena Sorg is in the United French & German Cemetery, section 14, lot 150. Her funeral mass was said at Immaculate

Conception Church and the Ray Funeral Home buried her. A stone emblazoned with a large "Sorg" lists all four lot occupants - Mother Magdalena M. 1857-1921, Son Eugene 1895-1949, Son Daniel R. 1888-1952, and Daniel's wife Minnie 1881-1975. In 1965, "the surviving heirs of Miss Estelle Sorg" signed a statement allowing Minnie's burial. Estelle's heirs were listed as Isabelle S. Smith, Frank J. Sorg, Leona M. Marchese, and Julia S. Dodge. Here were all of the Sorgs except for Louisa. Leona -- oldest child and the one subject to "fits" -- was still around at age 87!



RESIDENCE OF THE LATE EX SENATOR GEO. A. DAVIS, LANCASTER, N. Y.

WHAT'S GOING ON

IF YOU HAVE RECOLLECTIONS/MEMORIES/ARTIFACTS/PICURES OF THE BOWMANVILLE NEIGHBORHOOD, YOU ARE INVITED TO ATTEND OUR SUNDAY AFTERNOON PROGRAM APRIL 18.

THE ANNUAL GERANIUM SALE IS MAY 21 AND 22 AT THE CLARK STREET MUSEUM. ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON MAY 23 THERE WILL BE A PROGRAM ON THE HULL HOUSE AND THE RESTORATION EFFORT.

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