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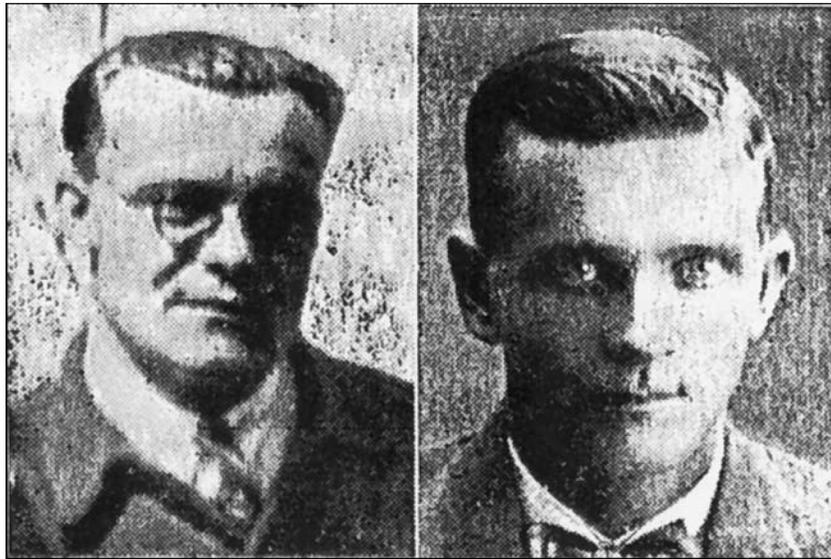
Oral Witness versus Documentary
Evidence: The Case of Rosvall and
Voutilainen*

by Peter Raffo

On 18 November 1929, Viljo Rosvall and Janne Voutilainen disappeared on Onion Lake, some twenty miles north of the city of Port Arthur. Rosvall was an organizer for the Lumber Workers' Industrial Union of Canada (LWIUC), Voutilainen was a trapper who may also have been a member of the union. Both were Finns, and both were Communists. They had been delegated to persuade bushworkers at a logging camp north of Onion Lake to join a strike against the timber companies which had been in progress since 22 October. The camp belonged to the Pigeon Timber Company. The strike had actually begun at Shabaqua, to the north-west of the Lakehead. The two men had last been seen at about 1 p.m. by Pigeon Timber employees who were manning a supply depot halfway up the lake. The jobber in charge of the camp, Leonard "Pappi" Maki, was among them. Five months later, on 19 April 1930, the body of Voutilainen was discovered at the north end of the lake, in shallow water. He had apparently drowned. A few days later, Rosvall's body was also discovered, again in shallow water, about half a mile upstream from Voutilainen's, in a creek which ran into the lake.¹

From the moment when it became clear that the two men had not reached Maki's camp, the certainty had arisen within the ranks of the LWIUC that they had been murdered by Maki and his men, who were "White" (i.e. conservative, nationalist) Finns in bitter opposition to their "Red" compatriots, and at the instigation of the timber companies. The discovery of the bodies in such suspicious circumstances, (the depth of the water, rumours of "marks of violence" and even bullet wounds on the two men), only served to confirm that judgement. Despite the authority of autopsies and two separate inquests, which all led to the official verdict of accidental death by drowning, the belief that these men were martyrs to the bushworkers' cause has never been erased. The "Truth" about the fate of these two men is now probably lost in the past. In its place has arisen what may justifiably be described as

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Viljo Rosvall (left) and Janne Voutilainen.

a Modern-day Myth. A myth is defined as a “traditional narrative usually involving supernatural or fancied persons etc. and embodying popular ideas on natural or social phenomena.” Rosvall and Voutilainen, were real people, of course, but the element of the “supernatural” is nonetheless incorporated into the narrative of this event. During the funeral procession for Viljo Rosvall there occurred the extraordinary coincidence of a three-quarter eclipse of the sun, which began even as the funeral cortege proceeded from the Everest Funeral Home in Port Arthur to the Riverview Cemetery, some two miles away. At the graveside of the two “martyrs”, even the veteran Communist organizer of the LWIUC, Alf Hautamaki, invoked the eclipse as a visible sign of God’s outrage at their comrades’ dreadful fate. The “narrative” element of this myth is maintained in the oral tradition of the left-wing Finnish community at the Lakehead, enshrined in two collections of taped interviews with contemporaries of Rosvall and Voutilainen, conducted in the early and late 1970’s.²

Satu Repo has shown how the story of Rosvall and Voutilainen, as represented by the oral narrative, “has a very special place in the collective memory of left-wing Finnish Canadians”, and of the labour movement in general. If anything, this version of the facts took on a new respectability in the 1990’s. The collapse of Communism as a world force enabled the Canadian labour movement, belatedly, to adopt them with an enthusiasm untainted by the accusation of fellow-travelling. On 4 May 1992 they were ceremonially

inducted as members of the Canadian Labour Congress Hall of Fame. A headstone has been planted on their previously-unmarked graves; an Ontario Heritage historical plaque now commemorates them at the Lakehead.³

But how far does this myth correspond to reality? It is the purpose of this article to examine all the facts of the case, and to offer an explanation of the deaths of Rosvall and Voutilainen based upon the contemporary documentary evidence (as opposed to oral recollections), which has been culled from a variety of sources now available to the historian. In so doing it will be shown that, in most respects, the myth does not stand up to close investigation.

The Modern-Day Myth

Let us begin with what I have chosen to call the “modern-day myth.” It is to be found in a variety of sources, all of which are in one way or another drawn from the oral recollections of members of, or sympathizers with, the LWIUC, which was affiliated as a “fraction” (i.e. branch) of the Communist Party of Canada (CPC). It runs as follows: that Rosvall and Voutilainen were murdered by “Pappi” Maki and a gang of his men at the behest of the Pigeon Timber Company, run by the local “Timber Baron”, Eddie Johnson; that they were found in no more than four feet of water, one or both of them in a creek running into Onion Lake; that, being experienced bushmen, it is unlikely that they would have fallen through thin ice in the first place, and could never have drowned in such shallow water, anyway; that bullet wounds were discovered on both their bodies; that there were additional “marks of violence” on their persons, including broken limbs; that articles of their clothing were found in the bush near the point at which they went into the water; that Maki had already threatened to shoot them if they came near his camp; that the evidence of both bullet wounds and broken limbs was covered up by the doctors who conducted the autopsies; that the killers were spirited away, with the connivance of Pigeon Timber, back to Finland shortly thereafter; and that the OPP carried out a merely cursory investigation into their disappearance. In other words, that there was a conspiracy between all the representatives of the Port Arthur “establishment” and the White Finns to hide the truth about their murders. Included in this charge, then, are Pigeon Timber, Maki and his men, the OPP, the ministries of the attorney-general and lands and forests, the doctors who conducted the autopsies, the coroner who presided over the inquests, the White Finn community in Port Arthur and even the local newspapers, which failed adequately to report the suspicions and disaffec-

tion of the Red Finns in the LWIUC.⁴

More than seventy years after the event, it is now possible to piece together a much fuller account of what happened to Rosvall and Voutilainen. Such an account can depend on a wide variety of contemporary documentary evidence which has come to light since the events of 1929-30. The narrative which follows is based almost exclusively upon these sources.

The Documentary Evidence

The original decision of the LWIUC to call a strike was directed against timber companies in the Shabaqua district. At issue were monthly and piece rates as well as union recognition. In 1926 the LWIUC and members of another, smaller, union with an affiliation to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), had successfully combined to force the companies to concede a \$50.00 monthly wage minimum with a piece rate of \$5.00 per eight-foot cord. But since that date the companies had been cutting back these rates. The strike may have been, therefore, a defensive action aimed at restoring previous gains. From the start, it does not seem to have prospered. This time the LWIUC was acting on its own. Early newspaper reports spoke of actions by the police to break the strike, and of the importation of “scabs” from Winnipeg, both with the collaboration of members of the IWW. The decision, at a mass meeting in Port Arthur on 17 November, to spread the strike to camps on Onion Lake, may have been a last-ditch attempt to rally support to a losing cause. That meeting chose two “delegates” to proceed to the Pigeon Timber Company camp on Onion Lake. Viljo Rosvall was an experienced organizer in the district who had worked at one time for the railway workers. Born in Finland, he had seen service as a “Red” in the Civil War of 1918 before coming to Canada. Janne Voutilainen’s background is less certain. He is usually identified as a trapper rather than a bushworker, although like many of his countrymen in Northwestern Ontario, he may have worked at a variety of occupations depending on the season and the state of the labour market. He was certainly a Communist, however. His role in this affair was to act as Rosvall’s guide. He had trap-lines in the Onion Lake area and maintained a small camp about a mile and a half short of the logging operations run by Maki. Rosvall set off from Port Arthur to meet Voutilainen at Tarmola, a small Finnish community a few miles short of the south end of Onion Lake, on the Sunday evening of 17 November. Early the following morning they would have struck out for Maki’s camp.⁵

Some time around mid-day on 18 November Leonard Maki and his

men saw the two delegates walking on the ice on the east side of the lake. Maki claimed that he called the men over to warm their hands at his fire, and, rather improbably, that a friendly exchange followed during which he told the delegates that his men were satisfied with the conditions of work in his camp and that Rosvall and Voutilainen were wasting their time trying to organize them. He further claimed that he warned them of the dangerous state of the lake further north, but that they proceeded anyway. He and his men followed their path between twenty minutes and one hour later (his evidence on this point appears to have been inconsistent), saw no signs that they might have fallen into the lake, and heard no cries for help.⁶

Whatever transpired thereafter, it seems that the delegates met their fate at 2.40 p.m. That was the time registered on Voutilainen’s watch when his body was discovered five months later (it is, of course, conceivable that the watch was stopped at 2.40 a.m.) Nonetheless, at 4 p.m. one of the workers at Maki’s camp was setting out to meet them when he ran into Maki, who was, he said, carrying a gun. The jobber announced to Paavo Vaananen that he had met the delegates and “turned them back.” Vaananen stated that he was “so scared” by Maki’s mood that he, too, turned back. The next day there was a heavy fall of snow in the district, which would make impossible any attempt to trace the path that the two men may have taken.⁷

News that the organizers had failed to make their destination would have taken some time to reach Port Arthur. But by 24 November it was clear that something had gone wrong. On that day two members of the union met Maki on the steps of the Finnish Consulate in Port Arthur, where he told them that in his opinion the two men had travelled on to Voutilainen’s camp after leaving him. The first public acknowledgement of their disappearance was recorded in the *Port Arthur News Chronicle*, on 27 November.⁸

No sooner were Rosvall and Voutilainen reported missing than the Red Finn community and the LWIUC assumed that they had been murdered. A group of union members, four in number, then visited Maki’s camp in search of information – or evidence. They met Maki, who told them that he did not think the two men could have drowned in the lake. In response to the growing clamour within the bushworkers’ community, Constables Higgins and Blair of the OPP, and Walter Sangster of the provincial forestry department, went to Onion Lake in early December to investigate the case. They questioned Maki, and perhaps other bushworkers. Their report does not seem to have survived, so it is impossible to say how thorough this investigation was. Union members always claimed that it was a perfunctory and unsatisfactory mission, and that only Maki himself was interviewed. The

conclusion of the investigation evidently was that Rosvall and Voutilainen must have drowned and that no further action would be possible until the spring thaw revealed the location of their bodies.⁹

In the meantime the strike was losing its momentum. Reports in the Finnish-language press suggested that the IWW was actively trying to end it, even that some of its members were recruiting scab labour for the “bosses”. But it is also clear that the disappearance of the delegates had turned the leadership of the LWIUC in a new direction. They now had the powerful issue of an alleged murder to hand, and if the strike was failing, their cause could be re-charged by the conviction that a huge injustice had been perpetrated, and was already being covered up by the authorities. Even before the strike was called off on 17 December, steps were being taken in Port Arthur to recruit a helping hand from Toronto.¹⁰

On 11 December Joe Farbey, an organizer with the union, wrote to A.E. Smith, the secretary of the Canadian Labour Defence League (CLDL), which was a national organization dedicated to offering legal support to the Canadian labour movement. It was also an affiliate of the CPC. Farbey reported the loss of the two men, stated that the local police and legal profession were unwilling to take their disappearance seriously, and asked specifically for the help of J.L. Cohen. Cohen was a lawyer well known to the union, who worked for the CLDL. Farbey included in his letter a rough sketch of Onion Lake, with details of the path taken by the organizers and the locations of the supply depot and of both Voutilainen’s and Maki’s camps. Cohen responded to this appeal immediately, writing to the attorney-general of Ontario and the minister of lands and forests, to apprise them of the case and to request that they intervene at Port Arthur to ensure that the local authorities would pursue a thorough investigation. The following day, he sent details of the case to a number of Toronto-based newspapers, and wrote to W.T. Burford, the secretary of the All-Canadian Congress of Labour. His assistant at the CLDL, H.J. McDonald, spoke to Inspector Killing, the commissioner of the OPP, and later informed him that Alf Hautamaki was available in Port Arthur to explain the circumstances of the case and to inform the police of the suspicions already harboured by the union. Killing assured him that Constable Higgins would be making a thorough investigation.¹¹

News of the “murders” at Onion Lake was spreading rapidly by this time. Between 17 and 31 December a series of almost identically-worded resolutions proclaiming the injustice and the “cover up” were passed by labour organizations and union locals in Ontario, Manitoba, BC and

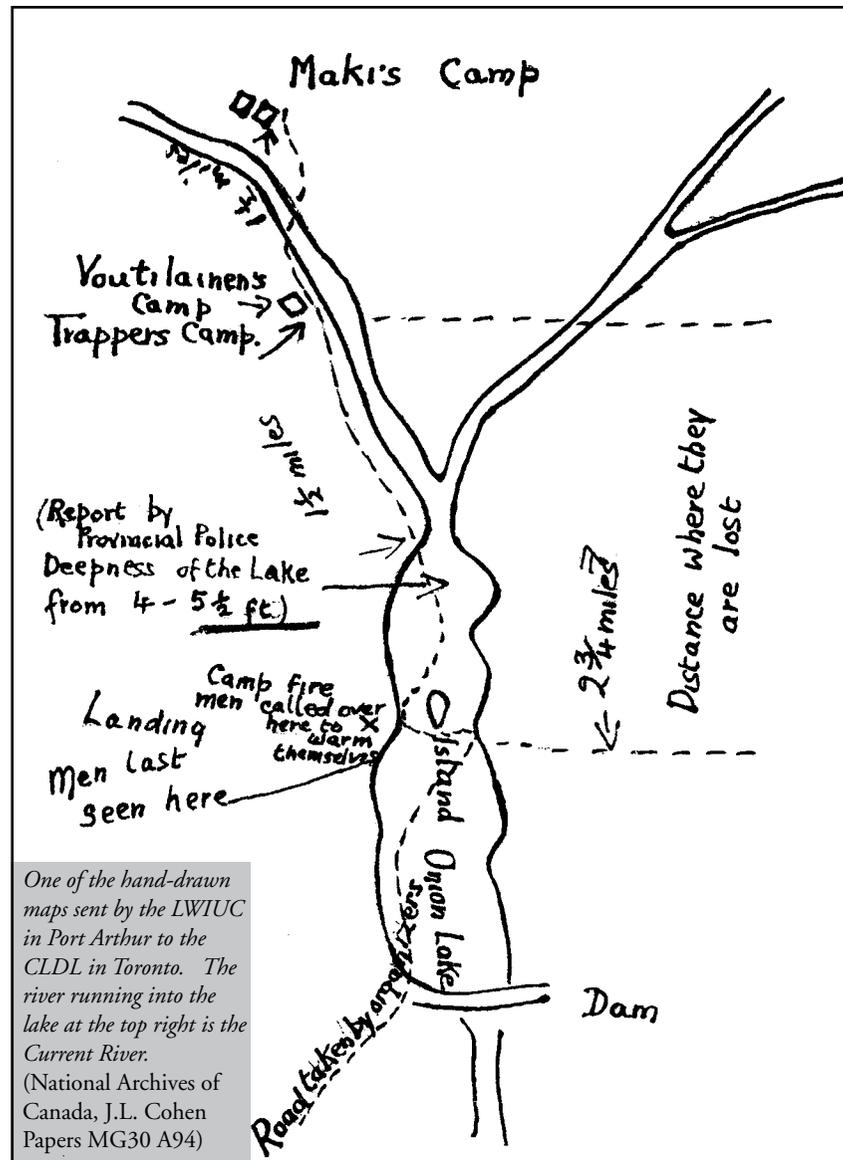
Vancouver.¹²

On 18 December, the *Port Arthur News Chronicle* claimed that Higgins had investigated the case at Onion Lake between 5 and 7 December, and that the crown attorney in Port Arthur, W.F. Langworthy, had questioned Maki himself. On 20 December, the deputy attorney-general, E. Bayly, informed Cohen that OPP inquiries had resulted in the suspicion that the two men must have drowned in the lake. The following day, Cohen wrote to Farbey, warning the union against libelling Maki by publicly charging him with responsibility for their deaths, which appears to have been exactly what they had been doing in a series of handbills posted around Port Arthur.¹³

Convinced that Rosvall and Voutilainen had been murdered, and fearful that during the winter months Maki and his men might try to take the bodies of their fallen comrades away from Onion Lake, the LWIUC now proceeded to set up a small observation camp in the bush near Maki’s operations, which was to be manned until the spring thaw by union observers. Reporting to Smith at the end of December, Farbey accused bushworkers employed by Pigeon Timber of trying to chase his men away from the camp. Two of their number were now permanently placed there. He also stated that OPP officers had come to the union hall to talk with Hautamaki, but had missed him. They had not returned.¹⁴

Between January and March 1930, Cohen and McDonald in Toronto harried the attorney-general’s office with further information about the situation in Port Arthur, gleaned from material sent to them by the LWIUC. Farbey had forwarded photos of the lake, another more detailed hand-drawn map of the area, and a series of affidavits collected from members of the union which all served to attest that foul play had, indeed, taken place. The affidavits described some of the suspicious activities of Maki, including an apparent death threat against any bushworkers who might attempt to organize his camp. Cohen demanded that a reward be posted for information about the deaths, and, later, that as soon as the spring thaw was under way a net be cast across the dam at the south end of Onion Lake in order to catch the bodies of the two men as they floated downstream.¹⁵

For his part, Bayly continued to assert both that investigations were continuing and that the burden of the evidence continued to suggest that there was “no reason whatever” to suspect foul play. He asked Langworthy in Port Arthur to comment on the charges that were so rife amongst the Red Finn community. Langworthy replied that he had been consulted “several times” by the OPP, that Maki had come to see him, and that they had discussed the matter very thoroughly. The OPP, he stated, had “used every effort” to get



One of the hand-drawn maps sent by the LWIUC in Port Arthur to the CLDL in Toronto. The river running into the lake at the top right is the Current River. (National Archives of Canada, J.L. Cohen Papers MG30 A94)

to the bottom of the case.¹⁶

At the end of February, A.T. Hill, the Northwestern Ontario regional organizer of the CPC continued the correspondence with Cohen, Joe Farbey in the meantime having left the district. Hill asserted that the situation was now becoming critical. Maki had ceased hauling logs three weeks ago. The thaw would begin soon, and with it the running of the logs down the

river system to the Lakehead. The union was going to have to increase the numbers of its men stationed on lookout in the bush, and it was running out of money to provide for them.¹⁷

On 19 April the body of Janne Voutilainen was discovered by trappers walking along the north end of the lake. First reports in the press mis-located the corpse. The *News Chronicle* had the body "lying face down in a creek, at the South end of the lake", but this is not credible. A suggestion, which seems to have emerged some considerable time later, that both the organizers' bodies were found in a creek halfway up Onion Lake on its western bank, is also easy to refute. The report submitted by Constable Higgins, who went with Constable Blair to pick up Voutilainen's body and transport it back to Port Arthur, states that two trappers, "Wallenins and Syriata", were walking on the north end of the lake when they discovered it, in "two feet of water", five feet from the shore, with his packsack on his shoulder. This testimony was corroborated at the inquest on the death of Rosvall, which is described below.¹⁸

Both local daily newspapers claimed that Voutilainen's watch had stopped at 2:40. The *Port Arthur News Chronicle* also made a point of denying a "rumour on the street" that there was evidence of a bullet wound on the body: "The only marks were abrasions on the left side of the chin and on the face, caused, it is thought, by the ice pressing on the face as the water seeped away." Higgins' report does not mention the condition of the body, except to make reference to the later verdict of the autopsy, which was that there were no marks that would indicate foul play.¹⁹

Gust Sundquist, a union organizer, wrote to A.E. Smith on 21 April describing the discovery of Voutilainen in a "creek" in two feet of water. While it is certain that Rosvall, when his body was later found, was in a creek, Higgins' report seems to suggest that Voutilainen was actually in the lake. Sundquist went on to say that the union would have a doctor present at the "inquest" (he must have meant the autopsy) – a certain Dr Eakins. He also stated that the undertaker at the Everest Funeral Home had called for Hautamaki to view the body before the autopsy was performed, and that he and Hautamaki would go there the following morning. The men who brought the body back to the Lakehead with Higgins, he said, had noted "some marks of violence", but he was not specific about their nature and did not mention bullet wounds.²⁰

On 22 April the autopsy took place, conducted by Dr Crozier, in the presence of the coroner, Dr Laurie, and Eakins. In a statement to the press, Laurie said that in his twenty-six years as a coroner he had never known

another doctor's presence requested at an autopsy performed by a doctor appointed by the coroner, "but in view of the many rumours of foul play ... I permitted it in this case..." He went on to say, "There were no marks on the body or any indication that would lead even to a suspicion of foul play. Dr Crozier found death by drowning the cause of death in which Dr Eakins and myself, after a minute examination of the body, both concurred." He admitted that there were abrasions on "the left side of the chin and on the face caused, it is thought, by the ice pressure on the face as the water underneath seeped away." An inquest, held on 23 April, rapidly confirmed that verdict.²¹

On that day Rosvall's body was found, about half a mile away from where Voutilainen had been discovered. If there is good reason to believe that Voutilainen was not found in a creek, but at the head of the lake, photographic evidence makes absolutely clear that Rosvall's body was, indeed, caught in the ice in a stream or creek running into Onion Lake. His rifle was a few feet away from him, suggesting that this was the point at which he, and perhaps Voutilainen also, had entered the water. An autopsy was performed on the body of Rosvall some time later, and again by Dr Crozier, whose verdict was the same as that on Voutilainen. In this case the presence of Dr Eakins was, apparently, neither requested nor authorized.²²

However, the inquest on the first corpse triggered immediate action by the LWIUC. Fearful that the verdict of accidental death would influence



The body of Rosvall, by the side of the 'creek'. Note the height of the bank above the canoe, and wood debris scattered all the way up to the tree-line. Courtesy of Thunder Bay Finnish Canadian Historical Society, LULA MG8,D,1,2,G, 125B



The body of Rosvall on the sled beside Onion Lake. Note how far in retreat from its high-water mark the lake seems to be. (TBHMS 980.84.39b)

a second jury to a similar decision on Rosvall, the union immediately contacted the CLDL, demanding that Cohen be sent to Port Arthur at once. In response, Smith cabled Hautamaki that Cohen was out of town. Hautamaki cabled back to ask the League to try to postpone the inquest on Rosvall. In fact, the inquest was postponed twice, first until 28 April then until 5 May, apparently to allow Cohen to represent the union at the proceedings. On 28 April, Cohen informed Hautamaki that he would arrive in Port Arthur on 3 May, and asked for as many details as possible about the deaths, as well as a list of potential witnesses, in order to prepare for the inquest.²³

On 28 April a funeral was held in Port Arthur for Viljo Rosvall. Janne Voutilainen was probably buried before this date, but it is not clear from the record. The event was a remarkable one, on two counts. Beginning at the Everest Funeral Home, and headed by a brass band playing funeral dirges, the cortege proceeded to the Finn Hall on Bay St, where it was saluted by a huge gathering of workers and the general population, who thereafter lined the streets on its two mile journey to the cemetery. Newspaper accounts put the figure of mourners at about 2,000, but subsequent claims range between 1,000 and 5,000 depending on the political perspective of the observer. That it was the largest funeral in Port Arthur's history to that date, and ever since, can hardly be doubted. One event in particular has leant mythic proportions

to the popular memory of the proceedings. Soon after the funeral began there was an 85% eclipse of the sun, casting a brooding shadow of divine judgement on the whole affair, at least in the minds of sympathizers with the union cause. It certainly lent eloquence to the eulogy of Alf Hautamaki, delivered at the graveside, and it features prominently in the oral record as a moment of wonder and even political significance. One after another, atheistic communists speak with awe of the event, as if indeed the Almighty was lending His verdict to their own conviction that murder had been done to their fallen comrades.²⁴

Before Cohen arrived in Port Arthur, Sundquist reported to him that the union had four witnesses who would say that the depth of the water where Rosvall had been found was no more than four feet. He said that other witnesses were available who would say that, on 17 November 1929, there was no ice on the water where the bodies had been found, and that even on 20 November the ice that was by that time forming was still weak. He further stated that these men would say that at no time in their experience of that district did the level of the creek rise above five feet.²⁵

The Inquest on Viljo Rosvall

Jacob Cohen arrived by train at the Lakehead on 3 May to prepare himself for the inquest on Rosvall, which was scheduled for 8 p.m., 5 May. There are a number of press reports of the inquest, in both English and Finnish, and we have two accounts of the proceedings penned by Cohen himself. One was written soon after his return to Toronto, in a report to the LWIUC; the second retrospectively, in 1947, when he wrote to the successor union in Port Arthur, the Lumber and Sawmill Workers. At that time he seems to have been contemplating writing his memoirs and was trying to clarify some points in his own mind about the events of nearly twenty years before. Sadly, a transcript of the proceedings at the inquest does not appear to have survived. But, in addition to the press reports and Cohen's accounts of the inquest, there are also available for examination Cohen's own notes, made both in his hotel room before the event and during the hearing itself.²⁶

The oral testimony of largely Red Finn bushworkers, which was gathered forty years and more after 1930, speaks not only of "marks of violence" on the bodies of Rosvall and Voutilainen, but also of bullet holes in the heads of both organizers. That record is contradictory. Sometimes the bullet is in Rosvall, sometimes in Voutilainen, sometimes in both. By far the most colourful and dramatic account of the whole affair is to be found in an interview with Ivar Seppala, recorded in 1972. He claims, not only to have seen the



Transporting one of the bodies from sled to a truck. (TBHMS 980.84.40)

bullet hole in Voutilainen's head before his autopsy, but also to have placed a matchstick in it to measure its depth. Another recollection has the respondent placing a matchstick in Rosvall's head. These accounts are joined by a third testimony, written in the late 1970's, which makes, extraordinarily, the same claim! In addition, Seppala and others state that, during the autopsy on Voutilainen, the wound was deliberately concealed by an incision made by the doctor across the scalp of the victim.²⁷

The contemporary documentary evidence, however, refutes all such claims. In Cohen's notes and accounts of the inquest, there is never any mention of bullet wounds. It is surely inconceivable that, had there been witnesses who had actually seen bullet holes in the head of either Rosvall or Voutilainen, such testimony would not have been given to Cohen. Even if he had decided not to use these witnesses at the inquest – perhaps because they referred to Voutilainen's corpse rather than Rosvall's – he would surely have insisted on a sworn affidavit to that effect. In fact, Cohen came to the inquest armed with a number of affidavits from trappers and union members. These affidavits, however, were only concerned with the movements of Maki on the day of the deaths, with his apparent threat to "shoot the delegates", with the location of Rosvall's body in the creek and with the depth of the water. Not a mention in any of them of a shooting. Sundquist and Hautamaki appear to have viewed the body of Voutilainen before the autopsy,

along with an undetermined number of bushworkers. They were not called as witnesses by the union lawyer. It might be suggested that, by the very nature of an inquest, Cohen would have no opportunity to call witnesses of his own. But we know that he was, in fact, allowed this privilege, and used it – to present testimony on the condition of the ice in the November of 1929, for instance. In other words, the entire evidence for a shooting rests on Maki's alleged threat (of which more later), and the subsequent oral witness of contemporaries, recorded more than forty years later.²⁸

The oral record speaks to a great conspiracy, a “cover up” of all the evidence of murder in the bush. But the contemporary record of the inquest suggests otherwise. In the first place it was delayed twice in order to allow Cohen to be in attendance to represent the LWIUC. In the second place, Cohen was allowed, by his own admission, extraordinary latitude during its proceedings. He was granted an official presence by the coroner, Dr Laurie. He was allowed to cross-examine crown witnesses. He was allowed, even, to present his own witnesses. At the beginning of a detailed six-page report on the inquest, which he sent to the union on 8 May, Cohen acknowledged these concessions:

... an inquest is ... a government inquiry in order to ascertain as far as possible, how, when and where any individual body is found dead under unusual circumstances ... and being in the nature of an inquiry ..., no private interests have any standing or function at these proceedings. In extra special cases a courtesy is sometimes allowed to legal representatives of any person intimately or peculiarly affected by the situation in question, and this privilege is, as a rule, limited to being present at the inquest, and it is very seldom if at all that any scope for cross examination is permitted such outside representative.

There is no evidence of a cover up here, rather a strong suggestion that the medical and legal authorities went out of their way to ensure that the suspicions of the Red Finn bushworkers were allayed. Cohen himself was aware, from the outset, of the essential weakness of the union case, and was anxious to remind them of it:

... after going very carefully into the evidence available at the moment, I advised your committee, that even assuming scope on our part as to the inquiry, although we could disclose a number of very suspicious circumstances which would at least make it difficult to decide that death actually resulted from accidental drowning, we would still fall short of any definite proof of actual wrong doing.²⁹

Quite clearly, Cohen had no evidence whatsoever for a *prima facie* case of murder, either of Rosvall or of Voutilainen. Indeed, he went on in that

same report to attest to his belief that, although there seemed to be a ready willingness on the part of the crown witnesses to “minimize any facts which would tend to cause any doubt as to the finding on the doctor's post mortem ... I would not by any means go so far as to suggest that this ... indicated that they in any way knew or even really thought that death had resulted from violence....”³⁰

The tactic developed by Cohen for his cross-examination of witnesses was, clearly, dictated by this reality. He chose to concentrate his questions to Dr Crozier on the credibility of evidence for the verdict of ‘death by drowning’, and not to raise directly the issue of murder. According to his later account, Cohen spent much of the train journey to Port Arthur engrossed in:

several bulky tomes on medical jurisprudence which I had borrowed from here, there and everywhere. Since I knew nothing of the subject on which I would be engaged, I read and re-read the sections of these volumes which dealt with symptoms of drowning. By the time I reached Port Arthur I was almost an expert on the subject.... If, in fact, foul play and not accidental drowning was the cause of the death of these men, it would have to be established by the testimony of the very doctor who had performed the autopsy and who had already committed himself to the opinion.³¹

Crozier had based his verdict on two counts: that the left cavity of the heart was empty of blood while the right cavity was full – which he claimed was one symptom of drowning – and on the “sodden condition of the lungs.” In his first cross examination of the doctor, Cohen asked him if the symptoms were not perfectly consistent with the theory that Rosvall might have been unconscious when he hit the water, the implication being that he had been struck by an assailant. Crozier did not deny the theory. Cohen then moved on to the question of “marks of violence” on the body. Crozier agreed that Rosvall's right eye and surrounding area were blooded, but suggested, according to Cohen, that “the wound and the blood condition in and around the eye resulted from the body lying in that position, namely leaning to the right.” Cohen says that he was able to establish, from later witnesses, that the body was lying on its left side, and that this should have been obvious to the doctor from the direction in which Rosvall's nose was turned. However, not even the indefatigable labour lawyer could make much out of this, although he tried his best in his report to the union: “I cannot understand the fact that the doctor hazarded the explanation which he gave as to the condition of the right eye. His frank position should have been that he did not know what it was instead of very definitely ascribing a

cause of inconsequential nature.”³²

Cohen then moved on to another instance of what he called “a lack of frankness” on the part of Crozier. His autopsy had stated that the contents of the stomach were “normal.” The lawyer seized on this, recalling Crozier to the witness stand to test him on it. The existence of water in the stomach and in the lungs would have been a definite symptom of drowning. Cohen describes the doctor as becoming “flustered and irritable” at this line of questioning, stating that there was, in fact, some water. “I then suggested that there was evidently so little water that he had not thought of mentioning it in his report” According to accounts in the press, Crozier claimed that, after lying in the ice of winter for over five months, it was not likely that water would have remained intact in either stomach or lungs.³³

There then followed the most dramatic moment of the proceedings, vividly recalled by Cohen. Clearly irritated by his persistence, or perhaps by something the lawyer said, Crozier:

... sprang out of the witness box, and in a most abusive and hysterical tone called out that all other signs would have disappeared, which, of course could not be the case with respect to water in the stomach, and, without waiting for completion of his examination, the doctor ran to the door and called out some further abusive remarks from the door. It was, of course, very evident to the whole court room that this man was either labouring under some peculiar excitement or was partly intoxicated, but the whole exhibition was so startling and hysterical and disgraceful in its nature that it was marked by the whole court room, and certainly does not help to make one confident in the examination of the body by the doctor.³⁴

In further pursuit of his strategy to cast doubt on the evidence for drowning, Cohen cross-examined both Constable Higgins and Leonard Maki. In Higgins’ case the issue was the depth of the water at the point where Rosvall had drowned. Higgins said, according to Cohen, that the water would have been eight feet deep at the time of death. Cohen produced two witnesses, “Jarvis” and “Harris”, to refute this claim. Jarvis said he had measured the water before Rosvall’s body was taken from the creek. Harris, a trapper with eighteen years’ experience in the district, said he had passed this spot two weeks before the disappearance of the two men. Together they confirmed the Red Finn view that the water at this point “was never more than three and a half feet deep and that even in the centre of the creek it would not vary from this measurement by more than six inches.” Cohen noted that “... it seems odd that two men would fall into four feet of water and both drown.”³⁵

As for the testimony of Maki, Cohen tried to cast doubt on his assertion

that the exchange that occurred between himself and the two men on 18 November had been a friendly one, and on the meaning of his words later in the day to Paavo Vaananen – attested to by the latter’s affidavit – on meeting the bushworker outside his camp: “I turned them [the two organizers] back and told them that I did not need them at the camp.” Although Maki admitted that Vaananen had been persuaded by him to return to the camp, he refused to confirm the exact nature of his statement, saying to Cohen, “What is the difference what I said?” The lawyer noted, “I left Maki’s cross examination at this point, his answer indicating very definitely his unwillingness to give evidence freely and frankly as to the occurrences.”³⁶

Summarizing the course of the inquest, Cohen went no further than to say to the union:

... I would certainly not regard the evidence as positively indicating foul play In my opinion ... the jury should not have been able to go, or have been counselled by the coroner and the crown attorney to go farther than to find the fact that these men had died and been found in the water, that there was some indication of drowning, but that beyond that, namely as to the question of accidental drowning, the jury should not have gone.³⁷

The jury, however, after no more than twelve minutes’ deliberation, recorded a verdict of “accidental death by drowning.”³⁸

Weighing the Evidence

Thus far, even the most friendly reading of the Red Finn case for murder suggests no more than that there were some suspicious circumstances surrounding the deaths of Rosvall and Voutilainen. The various accounts attributed to Maki as to that famous meeting at the supply depot on the lake, which are contradictory both as to the time of the delegates’ departure and to the length of time it took for he and his men to follow them, might be suggestive of obfuscation or even of a guilty conscience, but only if one is predisposed to believe that he played a sinister role in the subsequent proceedings. The fact that no one in his party saw holes in the ice where the two men died so soon after the meeting, can be, and certainly was, stretched into further evidence of collusion. But it’s a long stretch! None of the accounts that we have of that meeting are at first-hand, least of all by Maki himself. Union members who spoke with him after the event say that he claimed to have followed the two organizers twenty or so minutes after their departure from the sub-camp. Cohen, in his account of the cross-examination of Maki, says that the jobber stated that, after their meeting on the lake, he and his men followed Rosvall and Voutilainen some forty minutes later. The Finn-

ish consul in Port Arthur, Mr Korte, wrote in his report to the consulate-general in Montreal that Maki's party stopped by the depot at mid-day and prepared and ate their meal before the delegates were invited to join them. The union men left the camp at 1 p.m. and Maki and his men followed at least one hour later. The contradictions cannot be reconciled, obviously. On the other hand, one would expect consistency in his account if, indeed, Maki was guilty of murdering the two men soon after the meeting took place. Furthermore, there is the tantalizing mystery of whether the deaths took place in the afternoon at 2:40 – or at 2:40 a.m., in the darkness of the following night.³⁹

The cursory nature of the investigation undertaken by the OPP can be made to look equally suspicious. Nonetheless, it seems that Higgins and Blair spent three days in the bush around the camp, which is not an inconsiderable amount of time, and the commissioner of the OPP in Toronto, when he was made aware of the case, did instruct the local force to investigate the charges laid by the union.

On the other hand, even if we can dismiss the accounts of bullet wounds, we know that the three doctors who examined Voutilainen – and Crozier at the inquest on Rosvall – did not deny the fact that there were marks on the head of each body. There also remains the issue of the depth of the water, either at the head of the lake or on the creek, where the bodies were found. Nobody tried to deny that the water was shallow when the corpses were discovered. Finally, Cohen's description of the atmosphere of the inquest, where there seemed to be a ready willingness on the part of the doctor, the crown attorney, the coroner, and even the jury itself, to accept without question the verdict of the autopsy on Rosvall, is entirely credible. One might counter that particular suspicion, however, with the evidence of the equal predisposition on the part of the LWIUC, to believe in murder most foul.

It must also be said that, had the Red Finn community been aware of some other facts in this case, their suspicions would have been even further confirmed. These concern the personal background of Constable Higgins, and the questionable role played in the whole proceedings by Crown Attorney William Langworthy. Neither man, it can be stated with certainty, was a friend of the bushworkers. Both were closely connected to the local Conservatives and the "Timber Barons".

Higgins' history is an interesting one. According to his OPP file, he had only recently joined the force, in March 1929, and at the surprisingly late age of forty. Previous to that, he had served overseas during the war as a sergeant in the military police. Prior to his appointment to the OPP, he had

been a forest ranger and camp foreman with the Newaygo Timber Company of Port Arthur, in Nipigon. His application for membership in the force was supported in high local places; by the Conservative members of both the dominion and the provincial legislatures for the district - D.J. Cowan and J. McKirdy, respectively. After his appointment as a full-time officer, an exchange of letters occurred between the district inspector of the force and the commissioner of police in Toronto. The local man, W.G. Ingram, arguing against the placement of Higgins in the Nipigon area and recommending instead Sioux Lookout, stated that, in his previous employment in the bush "he had to more or less mix with an element which his new duties as a Provincial Constable forbid." Replying to this, the commissioner accepted that Higgins had been forced to mix with "undesirables", but, after some hesitation and in a further response, he advised Ingram that the man "has come to us so highly recommended that it would ... be a slight on his character if he was not posted ... to Nipigon ...". In the event, and probably as a compromise, the new constable found himself stationed in Port Arthur. One can only surmise the meaning of this exchange, but the obvious conclusion must be that the "undesirables" with whom, as camp foreman he was "mixing", were Communist trade unionists. Recommendations by local Conservatives, his Catholic religion, and his roles as fire ranger and foreman, all speak to Higgins' natural antagonism towards the Communist bushworkers in the Port Arthur region. He was unlikely to be persuaded that the "Timber Barons" had employed Maki and his men as their surrogate killers.⁴⁰

The role of William Langworthy in this affair is still more fascinating. It will be remembered that, as crown attorney in Port Arthur, it was to him that the attorney general's office had turned for information concerning the charges of the Red Finns. It was Langworthy, indeed, who had stated categorically that Maki was above suspicion. And well he might, for by 1928 at the latest, Langworthy was deeply involved in the affairs of the Pigeon River Lumber Company, to which the Pigeon Timber Company was affiliated. In January 1929 Langworthy, members of his family, and a couple of associates had made application to form "Pigeon River Land and Lumber Company", with a capital stock of \$5,000 in preferred, and \$5,000 in common, shares. Consent for this proposal was given by Pigeon River Lumber Company and by Pigeon Timber. E.E. Johnson, an American living in Port Arthur, was the secretary of the former, and the president of the latter, companies. Langworthy served as the attorney in Ontario for all of them. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that he both dismissed the Red Finn charges in the case of Rosvall

and Voutilainen, and that he prosecuted with vigour the case for a verdict of “accidental death by drowning” as crown attorney at the inquest.⁴¹

Does this all add up to a case for the charge of collusion by the authorities to subvert the course of justice? At the least it supports Cohen’s perception that those who conducted the inquest were predisposed to dismiss any suggestion that the verdict of the autopsy was wrong, but that is about as far as this can be taken..

Two Vital Questions

It is now time to look at what additional evidence can be gleaned from the historical record, to support or to cast doubt on the charge of murder in the bush. Some of this material is direct and persuasive, some of it more allusive. Together, they make a strong case against the Red Finn “myth”, as recorded by the oral histories. They concern, in particular, the issues of the condition of the ice on Onion Lake and the critical question of the depth of the water – not when the bodies were discovered, but when they went into the water in November 1929.

What was the likely condition of the ice on Onion Lake on 18 November 1929? If that can be established it will help in any assessment of the probability of the two men accidentally falling through it to their deaths. One of the arguments against that likelihood, presented at the time by the LWIUC and always raised in the oral record, can be readily dismissed. The suggestion is that two experienced bushmen, one of them a trapper in that region, would never have made the fundamental error of falling through thin ice by accident. But the fact is that in the fall of 1929 there are reports in the local newspapers of other experienced trappers disappearing, presumed drowned. Indeed, Constables Higgins and Blair were reported, only a few days after the discovery of Rosvall and Voutilainen, fishing out the body of a trapper who had gone through the ice north of the Lakehead, near English River, at the same time as Rosvall and Voutilainen.⁴²

If it can be established that the ice on the lake was formed, but nonetheless precarious, it would lend some credence to the verdict of the inquest jury. Maki, in his various testimonies, always stated that he had warned the delegates about the dangerous condition of the ice on Onion Lake further to the north of the supply camp where he met them. According to Cohen, the jobber claimed in his evidence to the inquest that he himself had fallen into shallow waters close by his camp after meeting the organizers.⁴³

Weather records kept in Port Arthur seem to support the contention

that anyone walking on Onion Lake that day in November was courting disaster. The records of the local weather office were taken from a site in Port Arthur at that time, which is some twenty miles, as the crow flies, south of the point where the two men died, and between three and four hundred feet above the level of Lake Superior. Both the distance from the warming effects of Superior, and the height of the land around Onion Lake, would make readings taken in Port Arthur significantly milder than the likely actual temperature in the region of the Pigeon Timber bush camp. The records for November 1929 show a warmer than average fall season for the city of Port Arthur. Between 1 and 18 November the mean temperature fell below zero Celsius only twice in the first week of that month. The minimum temperature recorded fell below zero only on nine days prior to their deaths, including 17 and 18 November. Furthermore, on 16 November, two days before the tragedy, the maximum temperature was recorded at plus 13.3 degrees. Only on 19 November, the day after they died, did the weather in the region take a determined turn towards winter, when the mean was registered at minus 6.4 and the minimum at minus 8.9. There can be no doubt that the Onion Lake region would have been colder on all of these dates. Nevertheless, these records unequivocally suggest that the ice on Onion Lake would have been less than secure on 18 November, just as Leonard Maki claimed.⁴⁴

And so we come to the most important question of all – arguably the issue upon which the cases, both for and against the charge of murder, must depend. How deep was the water, at the head of the lake and in the creek to its north where the delegates died, on 18 November 1929? Constable Higgins apparently claimed in his evidence to the inquest that it would have been eight feet deep. In his report to the OPP which recorded the recovery of Voutilainen, he said that the body was in shallow waters, but that in November the water would have been much higher. In fact he said that, earlier in that spring of 1930, the level of the lake had been reduced by the opening of the floodgates of the dam at its south end in anticipation of the spring log drive from the bush camps. The contrary claim, not only of the oral record, but of the contemporary trappers’ evidence to the inquest, was that the waters of the creek running into the lake never rose much above four feet. A four foot measurement makes death by accidental drowning highly unlikely; any depth from eight feet upwards makes it far more credible.⁴⁵

Records exist of the rise and the fall of the water level of Onion Lake at that dam at its south end. The Onion Lake dam was but one of a series of control dams along the Current River, which served to help generate electric

power for the city of Port Arthur at its mouth on Lake Superior. The dam at Onion Lake was also used in the spring to release an extra flow of water through the river down to Port Arthur in order to facilitate the log drive that began regularly around the time of the spring thaw. At Onion Lake an inspector, E. Dufault, who was a resident of Tarmola (his wife was the teacher in the local elementary school), checked the levels at the dam about once a month throughout the year. His task was to open and to close the dam, on the demand of the public utilities commission, and so to build up the lake levels during the winter and to allow them to fall during the summer, when electricity demand would be so much lower. Dufault's records and notes can be found in the City of Thunder Bay Archives, and they make for suggestive reading.

On 7 November 1929 the water level registered two feet nine inches below the spillway of the dam. Dufault had put two logs into the spillway the day before, to block it, and noted that "the water will soon be running over the top of the dam." On 21 November, three days after the disappearance of Rosvall and Voutilainen, he noted "four inches of water running over the top of the spillway. I put in one log more in Onion Lake spillway on Nov 19." On 15 April 1930, four days before the body of Voutilainen was found, the water level had sunk to twenty feet below the spillway. Dufault wrote that he had shut all the gates on the dam a couple of days earlier, when the level was twenty-five feet down. Three weeks later, on 9 May, the waters had risen back to a level two feet below the spillway. Thus, the level of the water on Onion Lake was at its *maximum* between 7 and 21 November, and somewhere close to its *minimum* up to 15 April, 1930, and the difference between the two was twenty feet. Although it would be rising after 15 April towards its near-maximum on 9 May, it must have been considerably below that level on 19 April.⁴⁶

So, Higgins was wrong in his statement that the waters had already been released by 19 April (Dufault took logs out of the spillway much later, on 6 May, to "help the drivers"). Nonetheless his conclusion that the lake level was significantly lower in April than it had been in November was quite correct.

What, then, are we to make of the testimony of trappers at the inquest that the depth of the creek leading into the lake was never more than four feet? Bearing in mind that Rosvall's body was found only a relatively short distance from Voutilainen's, which was in the lake, such statements seem hardly credible. It is conceivable, of course, that the contours of the region were such that, as the lake level rose and spread northwards, the rise in the

level of the creek waters would be less than twenty feet. But such a conclusion is impossible to verify today, because the dam is breached and no longer in use: in effect "Onion Lake" is now more of a wide section of the Current River, similar in width and length to what it might have been before the dam system was created. At its north end is a mile of swampland which would certainly have been under water in 1929, but we do not know how far north it would have stretched, and thus we do not know the exact topography of the end of the lake, near Maki's camp. Nor do we know the exact location of that "creek".⁴⁷

However, there is additional contemporary evidence which entirely supports the view that Rosvall (and therefore Voutilainen as well) fell, one way or another, into deep waters. This evidence is, indeed, more or less conclusive. A series of photographs of the recovery of Rosvall's body were taken in 1930. They show the corpse by the side of what is undoubtedly a small creek, perhaps thirty feet wide. They show a large group of men beside the body, and the rifle that was discovered in the creek in front of them. They show the body wrapped in a white cloth on a sled by the side of the lake itself, and they show the party en route across the lake, returning towards Port Arthur. It is perfectly evident from these pictures that the levels of both the creek and the lake were considerably lower on 23 April 1930 than they must have been earlier in November 1929. Certainly more than a foot or



Bushworkers with the corpse of Rosvall, his rifle lying in front of him. The figure on the extreme right, in plaid shirt, is probably constable Higgins. Courtesy of Thunder Bay Finnish Canadian Historical Society, LULA MG8,D,1,2,G, 126

two. For example, the far bank of the creek, which rises up to the tree-line a good distance away, is strewn with broken logs and deadheads. The rise of the bank is way above the head of a bushworker paddling a canoe on the creek. Where Rosvall is pictured on the sled by the lake itself, the fall away to the edge of the lake is considerable, and the sled is surrounded by broken logs and detritus. Quite clearly, the *whole of the area surrounding the point of entry of Rosvall's body had been under water* before he was discovered, and what applied to Rosvall must also have applied to Voutilainen.⁴⁸

Why would the witnesses called by Cohen to attest to the maximum depth of the water in the creek lie, or at best exaggerate the truth? One can only speculate. They were members of the LWIUC, dedicated Communists and part of a tight-knit minority community living in an alien land. They were convinced of the wickedness of the “bosses”, and, from the day of the disappearance of their comrades, already proclaiming that they had been murdered. They were a political fraternity not only divided from their fellow “White” Finns, but also from their fellow socialist bushworkers in the IWW-affiliated union, and who had worked against them from the beginning of the Shabaqua strike. In so many ways they were unlikely to accept evidence that contradicted their conviction of foul play, and therefore they were, perhaps, the more willing to “construct” evidence that supported that belief.

A Verdict

Nothing in this analysis of the tragedy of Rosvall and Voutilainen proves conclusively that they were not murdered. Arguably, now and in the future no evidence will ever be able to prove a negative statement such as this. Perhaps convincing material will be discovered at some future date that will support the Red Finn suspicions. But until it is, the verdict must surely be that the documentary evidence, hard and contemporary, strongly supports, even if it does not prove, the view that these men died by drowning accidentally, in the course of their mission.

Postscript

Further evidence from the documents must be added to this account, and in the form of two questions to which answers may be suggested. Why should anyone want to kill the delegates in the first place? Why might the union, or its leaders, be pre-disposed to make them martyrs?

The strike at Shabaqua was failing. Reports in the Finnish-language press, White and Red, make this clear. It had begun at a bad time, just before the Wall Street stock market began its catastrophic collapse towards

“Black Monday” on 29 October. It posed no threat to the timber companies, nor to the “Anglo-Saxon” power structure of the Lakehead. The bushworkers were disunited, and an earlier strike in 1928 had failed. The anti-communist witch-hunts, which were to characterize political events in Canada in the early thirties, had not yet begun. Furthermore, although conditions in the bush camps of Northwestern Ontario were deteriorating, and there was undoubtedly a “class struggle” of a kind taking place, there is little evidence that this struggle had ever taken an overtly violent course. Oral recollections speak of “gunshots” in the bush, as camp owners and jobbers tried to scare away union organizers, but they do not mention any injuries, let alone deaths. It seems to be true that “Pappi” Maki was a hard man, perhaps one of the worst of his kind as is sometimes claimed, but he was also a minister of the Lutheran church with no subsequent blemish on his character. As to the charge, supported in an affidavit in Cohen’s possession, that he had threatened to “shoot the delegates” if they came near his camp, this too is open to serious question. The affidavit was signed by Oscar Maijala and dated (incorrectly, it seems) 10 January 1929. In it Maijala states that he was in a store in Port Arthur when he heard Leonard Maki say “that if delegates came to his camp he would turn them back or else shoot them in the head.” Maijala then says that he heard this conversation “shortly before or after New Year’s day (sic) 1929.” That is to say, fully ten months before the Shabaqua strike began, and almost eleven months before Rosvall and Voutilainen died! Such a conversation may well have taken place, but it did not refer to the events under review. The circumstances of the strike, in other words, do not suggest any reason why the “Timber Barons”, or Maki himself, would feel it necessary to kill the delegates.⁴⁹

The second question leads towards an admittedly speculative conclusion. Why would the union welcome, or perhaps even need, the opportunity to make martyrs out of this tragedy? The answer may well be as follows. It concerns the role of Alf Hautamaki in the affair. Hautamaki was the national general-secretary of the LWIUC. It was under his leadership that the union, in partnership with its IWW “brothers”, had won concessions from the lumber companies in 1926. Soon after this victory, however, the economic climate had begun to turn. He had organized another strike in the northwestern region in 1928, which failed. In fact, by 1929 Hautamaki was in trouble. There was a growing disaffection with his leadership at both the local and the national levels, in the union and in the CPC. Much of the criticism centred on his drinking, but there were tactical issues as well.

Everything came to a head at the Fifth Convention of the LWIUC, held at South Porcupine from 6 - 8 April 1929, six months before the Shabaqua strike began.

According to the official report of this meeting, where the districts of Port Arthur, Sudbury and Northern Ontario were represented, "the convention was faced with several serious problems." These included "faulty strike and organization policies", "internal friction (particularly within the Party fractions)", and "the question of broadening the union beyond its present limits of almost solely Finnish membership ...". Paid-up members were down to 100 out of a figure of 12-1300 "good standing memberships." Three strikes called in 1928, one of them apparently in the Onion Lake district, had failed, partly because of "internecine war" between the LWIUC and the LWIU.

But the most important issue was identified as revolving around "the personality of comrade Hautamaki." An "organized opposition to Hautamaki" had developed, with several units of the party and four union locals "under the control and direction of the Party members" having, in the previous three months, nominated opposition candidates to his leadership. As a result of this, the party fraction at the convention passed a unanimous resolution "on the question of policy and secretaryship." Hautamaki was accused of being drunk on the platform of a meeting at Timmins, conduct described as being "reprehensible." He had laid himself open to "severe censure", and, although it was acknowledged that there was no suitable candidate to replace him, he was to be forced "as a measure of necessary self-criticism ... to make an open declaration on the floor of the convention, acknowledging that he has been guilty of misconduct, placing himself squarely in the hands of the convention, and pledging his word that ...the mistakes ... will not be repeated." He was instructed to make this declaration "not as a trade union official ... but as a Communist acknowledging errors ... and placing himself at the disposal of his organization."

The report of the convention went on to establish a firm rule against the union's involvement in strikes that were not directed and organized by its leadership, arguing against the automatic support of what it described as "neutral" strikes. It called for a new strategy, designed to bring into the union more of the existing body of 35,000 lumber workers across the country, and in particular, members from other ethnic minorities such the French-Canadians and the Slavs.⁵⁰

Following this convention, Gust Sundquist in Port Arthur wrote to the party leader, Tim Buck, complaining bitterly at the re-election of Hautamaki:

"All the delegates ... knew, or at least should have known, that the organization has been going from bad to worse for a year or so. And they also knew that it is impossible to alter the situation as long as Hautamaki ... [is] ahead (sic) of the organization. For the simple reason that Hautamaki has lost all respect in the eyes of the workers."⁵¹

For Alf Hautamaki, therefore, the strike which followed this personal humiliation may have been seen as an opportunity to redeem himself in the eyes of the CPC and of the local lumber workers in the LWIUC. In line with the policy directive of the party fraction at the South Porcupine convention, he was bitterly opposed to any cooperation with the LWIU, which he described in the communist jargon of the times as a "sustaining ring." It is not surprising, then, that the lumber workers of the Lakehead, some of who, like Sundquist, wanted to cooperate with the IWW-affiliated union, were so divided over the Shabaqua strike.⁵²

The developing failure of that strike would have left Hautamaki even more insecure in his position. The deaths of Rosvall and Voutilainen in such suspicious circumstances gave the union, and Hautamaki himself, the opportunity both to extricate themselves from a failing cause and to find a new, and more dramatic one. They had their "martyrs".

One does need to ascribe cynical motives to the furore in the Red Finn community over the disappearance of these two men, nor even to Hautamaki himself. The reality of their isolation from the dominant, non-Finn culture of the Lakehead; their political idealism as well as their internal splits; their natural antagonism to, and suspicions of, the "bosses", all speak to a predisposition to believe that Rosvall and Voutilainen had been murdered. Perhaps no hard evidence to the contrary – such as that presented here – could have convinced them that a vast conspiracy to subvert the course of justice had not taken place.

And so, in all probability, this "modern-day myth" was created out of the debris of their hopes and their communal sense of betrayal. That myth, enshrined in the oral record of Red Finn bushworkers, who over the years added detail after detail to the narrative of events, grew into a cultural and political "Truth". It could be said to have become an icon of their ethnic and political group-consciousness. We can understand, surely, their readiness to believe, and even to construct, "evidence" for their men being shot in the head by the ruthless White Finn Maki, at the instigation of the "Timber Barons". We can well imagine how bushworkers who saw the bodies came to say, in the fullness of time, that they had actually measured the depth of the wounds with matchsticks, and that the doctors

had hidden the wounds by deliberately making their incisions over the bullet holes. We can surely sympathise with their willingness to believe that Rosvall and Voutilainen could never have drowned, in creek or lake. However, the end result of all the elements of this version of the events is the intrinsically implausible charge, that all the representatives of the Port Arthur Anglo-Saxon establishment colluded with White Finns in the murders and the subsequent cover up.

The mythic quality of this narrative is well illustrated by accounts recorded two generations after the event. In one, that of Ivar Seppala, a complete, detailed, and highly dramatic account of the murders is given, based upon his alleged (and extremely fortuitous) meeting with one of the killers – “Jak Woikomber” – some time later, in Finland. A confession of guilt is offered to Seppala, followed by a vivid description of the attack on Rosvall and Voutilainen. The delegates are ambushed, they struggle, one of them is shot in the head, the other fights on and is eventually struck down, and both are pitched into the lake waters through a hole cut in the ice. Maki is described as the instigator of the crime, in the pay of Pigeon Timber. A second story, more credible, but with an element of the supernatural to it, describes how, some time after the deaths of the men, a play was written by Hautamaki about the event, and performed at the Finn Hall in Port Arthur. Reino Keto recalls playing the role of Viljo Rosvall, and says his makeup was so realistic that, after the performance (which was accompanied by a choir) and when he came to mix with the audience, many of them wanted to touch him, as if he was the very incarnation of their dead comrade. As Satu Repo describes it, “Brought up on folklore and religious beliefs, even the Communist Finns found it hard, at times, to banish the ghost of supernatural beliefs. Miracles, especially if they were seen at first hand – the darkening of the sun, the vivid ‘Rosvall’ – could at least temporarily shake their materialistic world view.”⁵³

Conclusion

According to the contemporary historical record, the likelihood is that Rosvall and Voutilainen were not murdered. The oral record – the myth – does not stand up well to close examination. Practically none of its details are sustained by the facts of the case that have here been established. Perhaps what really happened was that Rosvall and Voutilainen were anxious to get ahead of Maki’s party and to reach the bush camp as soon as possible, and so they proceeded without due caution. Perhaps they were chased, or believed that they were being chased. Perhaps they waited until after Maki’s party

had passed by them, hidden in the bush. It might even be that they waited until the early hours of the morning of 19 November to try to sneak into the camp to make contact with their comrades. But crossing the hidden flow of that creek over ice that was already dangerously thin (and which would have been thinner still there), they plunged into deep water to their deaths, Rosvall’s body remaining near the place of entry, Voutilainen’s carried by the swift current of the creek under the ice to the point of confluence with Onion Lake.⁵⁴

Not martyrs so much as tragic, and brave, victims.

Notes

¹Contemporary accounts tend to put the distance of Onion Lake from Port Arthur at twenty miles, which would have been roughly the distance to the north end of the lake. The distance to the south end, as the crow flies, is twelve miles. Today the lake is six miles long. In 1929, when a dam at its south end was in operation, it would have been longer and wider. “Pappi” means “Reverend”. Maki was a minister of the Lutheran Church. *Vapaus* (a Finnish-language Communist newspaper), 6 November 1929, states that the decision on the strike was made on 6 October.

²The definition comes from *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986). The oral histories are: *The Thunder Bay Labour History*, 1972 [hereafter TBLH] at the Challis Resource Centre, Confederation College, Thunder Bay, and The Finnish Collection at the Multicultural History Society of Ontario in Toronto [hereafter MHSO].

³S. Repo, “Rosvall and Voutilainen: Two Union Men Who Never Died,” *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 8/9 (Autumn/Spring 1981/82), 79-102; *Lumberworker*, June, 1992. The CLC Hall of Fame refers unequivocally to its “martyrs”; the Ontario Heritage plaque is more circumspect., stating that “local Unionists and many Finnish-Canadians suspected foul play.”

⁴In TBLH; interviews with: Helmar Borg, Mike Comishin, Ray Koski, Antti Pitkanen, Norm Richards, John Johnson, Einar Nordstrom, Ivar Seppala. In MHSO; interviews with Reino Keto, Aarne Luoto, Einar Nordstrom, Toimo Poyhola, Ivar Salminen, Edwin Suksi.

⁵On the decision to call the strike, and on the disunity of the lumber workers: *Vapaus*, 6, 18, 27 November, 6 December 1929, *Canadian Utisset*, 28 November 1929. The IWW union was called, confusingly, the Lumber Workers’ Industrial Union (LWIU). On wage rates in the bush, 1926-29: I. Radforth, *Bushworkers and Bosses: Logging in Northern Ontario 1900-1980* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1987), 123-124 and Appendix 6; Repo, 81. On the backgrounds of the two union delegates: Erick J. Korte (Finnish Consul in Port Arthur) to Consulate General (Montreal), 6 May 1930, copy and translation in the author’s possession [hereafter Korte Letter]. Korte was no friend of the unions. On Rosvall’s journey to Tarmola: taped interview with Aino Waatainen, 3 June 1992, in the author’s possession. As a young girl, Aino spoke with Rosvall at Tarmola on the evening of 17 November.

⁶J.L. Cohen to LWIUC, 8 May 1930, J.L. Cohen Papers at the National Archives of Canada, MG 30 A94 Vol I File 10 [hereafter Cohen Papers]; *Port Arthur News Chronicle*

[hereafter *PANC*], 27 November, 18 December 1929, 21 April 1930; *Fort William Times Journal* [hereafter *FWTJ*], 18 December 1929, 22 April 1930. On the inconsistencies in Maki's accounts, see below.

⁷Affidavit of Paavo Vaananen, 26 December 1929, Cohen Papers. On the apparent time of death: *PANC*, *FWTJ*, 22 May 1930. See also interview with Taimi Davis, 2 June 1992, in the author's possession.

⁸Affidavit of Sulo Lahti and Vaino Pasanen, 26 November 1929, Cohen Papers; *PANC*, 27 November 1929; *Vapaus*, 27 November 1929.

⁹On the visit of the union men to Maki's camp: Affidavit of Edward Perkio, 26 December 1929, Cohen Papers. On the visit of Higgins to Onion Lake: *FWTJ*, *PANC*, 12 December 1929. See also "Memo to Mr J.L. Cohen. Re: Voutilainen and Rosvall", 17 December 1929 (unsigned), Cohen Papers. Internal evidence, and other references within the File, make it clear that the author of this memorandum was H.J. McDonald, in Cohen's office. McDonald interviewed Commissioner Killing of the OPP in Toronto on 16 December 1929, see Cohen to LWIUC at Port Arthur, 30 December 1929, Cohen Papers.

¹⁰*Vapaus*, 27 November, 6 December 1929; *Canadian Utisset*, 28 November, 12 December 1929.

¹¹J. Farbey to A.E. Smith, 11 December 1929; Cohen to Attorney-General, 16 December 1929; Cohen to Minister of Lands and Forests, 16 December 1929; Cohen to *The Mail and Empire*, 17 December 1929; Cohen to *The Toronto Daily Star*, 17 December 1929; Cohen to W.T. Burford, 17 December 1929; McDonald to Inspector Killing, 18 December 1929; Cohen to LWIUC, 30 December 1929. Cohen Papers..

¹²Department of Attorney-General for Ontario, RG 4-32, 1929/3738, Provincial Archives of Ontario [hereafter A-G PAO].

¹³*PANC*, 18 December 1929; E. Bayly to Cohen, 20 December 1929; Cohen to Farbey, 21 December 1929, Cohen Papers; Repo, 98.

¹⁴Interview with Taimi Davis, 2 June 1992; Farbey to Smith, 30 December 1929, Cohen Papers; Korte Letter. Korte gave a probably highly-exaggerated account of the union "vigil" in the bush. He wrote of the LWIUC men harrassing men at Maki's camp, overturning log piles in search of the bodies of the two men and illegally shooting game.

¹⁵Farbey to Smith, 27 December 1929; Smith to Farbey, 30 December 1929; Farbey to Smith, 31 December 1929; Cohen to Farbey, 31 December 1929; Cohen to Bayly, 5 January 1930; Cohen to Bayly, 13 January 1930; Bayly to Cohen, 30 January 1930; Smith to Cohen, 28 March 1930. Affidavits of a) Erkki Haara, Aatu Pitkanen and Hjalmar Nummela, b) Edward Perkio, c) John Vallenius, d) Paavo Vaananen, 26 December 1929, Cohen Papers.

¹⁶Bayly to W.F. Langworthy, 14 January 1930; Langworthy to Bayly, 22 January 1930; Bayly to Cohen, 30 January 1930, A-G PAO.

¹⁷A.T. Hill to CLDL, 27 February 1930, Cohen Papers.

¹⁸*PANC*, 21 April 1930; W.G. Ingram (District Inspector, OPP), "Memorandum for the Commissioner, 26 April 1930", enclosing a "Memorandum for the District Inspector" from James Higgins, Provincial Constable #276, 23 April 1930, A-G, PAO [hereafter Higgins Report]. Interview with Ray Salminen, 11 June 1992, in the author's possession. Salminen claims, unconvincingly, that the creek on the west bank of Onion Lake was "Barnum" (now Elbow) Creek.

¹⁹*PANC*, *FWTJ*, 22 April 1930; Higgins Report.

²⁰G. Sundquist to Smith, 21 April 1930, Cohen Papers; Higgins Report. Dr. George Eakins (1882-1967) was a prominent figure in Port Arthur. A Liberal candidate in the provincial election of 1926; member of the Port Arthur city council, 1921-23 and 1942; President of the TBHMS, 1933-34.

²¹*PANC*, 27 April 1930; *FWTJ*, 23 and 24 April 1930; Korte Letter.

²²*FWTJ*, 24 April 1930; Korte Letter. According to Korte, six union witnesses viewed Rosvall's body before the autopsy. At least four lumber workers have claimed, subsequently, to have been amongst those who saw the body of either or both of the men before the autopsies were performed. They give graphic accounts of the wounds and of the attempts by the doctors to hide them: R.Keto, MHSO; Ray Koski and Ivar Seppala, TBLH; Taimi Davis. See also: *Viikkosanomat*, 2 January 1979; Repo, 98.

²³The exchange of cables, and Cohen's letter of 28 April 1930, confirming the postponement of the inquest and his arrival in Port Arthur in time for it, are in Cohen Papers.

²⁴There are various newspaper accounts of the funeral, including both English-language dailies, 29 April 1930; *Vapaus*, 29 April 1930. For the oral record: R. Keto, MHSO; R. Koski, M. Comishin, H. Borg, TBLH; A. Waatainen and T. Davis.

²⁵Sundquist to Cohen, 29 April 1930, Cohen Papers. Sundquist was wrong, however, about the evidence that these witnesses would present as to the condition of the ice on Onion Lake. See below.

²⁶*PANC*, *FWTJ*, 6 May 1930; *Canadian Utisset* 8 May 1930; Cohen to LWIUC, 8 May 1930. Cohen's notes are, in part, written on the stationary of the Prince Arthur Hotel; Cohen to A.T. Hill, 14 January 1947, and J.L. Cohen, "Lumber Camp Organizers of Northern Ontario Murdered or Drowned?" n.d., but January 1947, Cohen Papers [hereafter "Lumber Workers Organizers"]; Korte Letter.

²⁷Ivar Seppala, TBLH; Ray Koski, MHSO; *Viikkosanomat*, 2 January 1979.

²⁸See Cohen's notes on the inquest and his two accounts of the proceedings. See also, the affidavits noted in footnote #15 above, Cohen Papers.

²⁹Cohen to LWIUC, 8 May 1930, Cohen Papers.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹"Lumber Camp Organizers", Cohen Papers.

³²Cohen to LWIUC, 8 May 1930; "Lumber Camp Organizers", Cohen Papers.

³³*Ibid.*; Korte Letter. See also *PANC*, *FWTJ*, 6 May 1930; *Canadian Utisset*, 8 May 1930.

³⁴Cohen to LWIUC, 8 May 1930, Cohen Papers. His account in "Lumber Camp Organizers" is even more dramatic, painting a picture of his own small person trembling in confrontation with a man 100 pounds heavier and one foot taller than himself.

³⁵Cohen to LWIUC, 8 May 1930, Cohen Papers. Cohen's notes for the inquest make it clear that 'Harris' was in fact a trapper called Joupi Harra.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸The reported length of time for the jury decision varies from eight to twelve minutes. See the various newspaper accounts and Korte Letter.

³⁹Cohen to LWIUC, 8 May 1930; Affidavit of Edward Perkio, 26 December 1929; Sundquist to Cohen, 29 April 1930, Cohen Papers; Korte Letter.

⁴⁰OPP Records, RG 23-1-2, File 4-722, "James Higgins" (Microfilm Reel 36/323),

Provincial Archives of Ontario.

⁴¹Box XIX, Archive #82a and 82c, Pigeon River Lumber Company Files at the Chancellor Paterson Library, Lakehead University.

⁴²*PANC*, 21 November 1929; *FWTJ*, 26 April 1930.

⁴³Cohen to LWIUC, 8 May 1930, Cohen Papers.

⁴⁴The weather conditions for the days in question are taken from the computer files at the Thunder Bay Weather Office.

⁴⁵Cohen to LWIUC, 8 May 1930, Cohen Papers; Higgins Report.

⁴⁶Port Arthur PUC Files, Series 88, TBA 4199, 4204, Onion Lake Dam Reports, 1928-31, in the Thunder Bay City Archives.

⁴⁷Onion Lake may have been as much as nine miles long in 1929. Korte Letter

⁴⁸The photographs, some of which are reproduced here, are in the Thunder Bay Museum. TBHMS, 980.84.

⁴⁹Affidavit of Oscar Maijala, 10 January 1929 (sic), Cohen Papers. For a description of Leonard Maki as one of the 'worst' of the jobbers in the district: Helmar Borg and Ivar Seppala, TBLH.

⁵⁰"Report of the Fifth Convention of the Lumber-Workers Industrial Union of Canada Held at South Porcupine, April 16 - 18, 1929", RG 4-32, File 3188/1931, MS 367, Reel 1; "Resolution on the Party Plenum, and the Tasks of the Party in this District, #6", RG 4-32, File 3188/1931, MS 367, Reel 3, Provincial Archives of Ontario. "Neutral strikes" were described as those initiated spontaneously at the local level, without the direction or leadership of the LWIUC. Abandoning the policy of automatic support for such strikes was a move directed against the rival LWIU.

⁵¹Sundquist to Tim Buck, 21 April 1929, RG 4-32, File 3188/1931, MS367, Reel 1, Provincial Archives of Ontario.

⁵²Hautamaki to Buck, 9 July 1929, Ibid.

⁵³Seppala, TBLH; Repo, 97.

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