

The Shooting of Peter Switzer

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In January 1922 a Palatine farmer, Peter Switzer was shot while attending his sister's funeral in Co. Limerick and died of his wounds three days later. It transpires that there was a long history of antagonism toward the family. The author had a personal motive for researching the circumstances surrounding this atrocity and found, in the process, it was likely to have been a reprisal for an unfortunate event that occurred almost two years earlier in April 1920.

On 10 January 1922 an elderly farmer, Peter Switzer, was shot at his sister Susan Switzer's funeral in Castletown, near Pallaskeny, County Limerick and died of his wounds three days later in Barrington's Hospital. Over twenty years earlier Susan had bravely defended the family home when it was raided for arms during the Land War, firing shots against the attackers. This was merely one incident in a long sequence of such raids on the house dating back to the 1820s nor was it to be the last. The family was of Palatine¹ origin and had lived in the townland of Moig, Pallaskeny since the eighteenth century where Peter was born in 1847. By 1911 he was a bachelor (aged 64) living on the family farm with his two sisters Susan (60) and Eliza (58) – all three were members of the Church of Ireland and unmarried. Their other sister Rebecca had died in 1902, aged about 58, and received a generous eulogy in the local, though admittedly Protestant and Unionist, newspaper:

Sincere and unfeigned regret was caused at Pallaskeny and neighbourhood when the death was announced of Miss Rebecca Switzer, Moig, at the County Infirmary, Limerick, where the deceased lady was undergoing an operation. By her genial and obliging manner she won the affection and esteem of all classes and creeds, and the poor and needy of Pallaskeny and neighbourhood have every reason to lament her demise, as her purse was ever open to them, and she was never so happy as when doing something to make the lives of her poorer brethren a happier one.²

While this may indeed have been the case, the view of a member of the community, that by this period the Palatines in Ireland were regarded 'with affection as a quiet, gentle, industrious people who, despite religious and racial differences, were always on the friendliest terms with their Irish neighbours'³ was not entirely true, as the fate of Peter Switzer shows. In fact there had been a long history of attacks on them. For example, in the 1820-5 period during the Rockite rebellion many Palatine homes were raided for arms, some were burned and some families had to leave. Again in 1829 during the tithe

¹ For a history of the Palatines see Patrick J. O'Connor, *People Make Places: the story of the Irish Palatines* (Newcastle West, 1989).

² *Limerick Chronicle*, 8 March 1902.

³ B.W. Switzer, *Switzers All My Fathers Were* (Brantford, 1975).

agitation there was some ill-feeling towards them but when that issue was settled 'this gradually died out'.⁴ Most of the attacks on Palatine homes involved a raid for arms, as happened again on the night of 26 August 1840 when the Switzer home was raided for arms by a party of 25 men and a gun and a bayonet were taken.⁵ Two men were subsequently convicted for this and sent to Van Diemen's Land [Tasmania].⁶

In the previous year the house had also been visited by a large group of men but for a different and intriguing reason. They had come to the back door but quickly reassured Mrs Switzer,⁷ whose husband Peter was away, that they intended no harm to her.

They stepped into the kitchen, handed a threatening notice to a servant boy, Michael Knockton and left, closing the door behind them. Mrs Switzer denied any knowledge of who they were and the maid, Johannah Danagher, claimed to have been hanging a pot on the fire at the time so that she did not see them. After this, Knockton left Switzer's and the police could not find him. The Revd William Greene, curate of the parish, who lodged with the Switzers, was upstairs at the time and he neither saw nor heard the men. Despite the fact that there was a registered gun and a blunderbuss in the house, the acquisition of arms did not appear to be the reason for this visit.⁸

The reason for the visitation was contained in the note handed to Michael Knockton which read as follows:

'Take Notice Mr and Mrs Switzer that it is our intention to preserve you and your family out of all danger is to happen, therefore I require of you to dispatch Michael Knockton out of your service for betraying a young woman of good character which is our intention not to allow him in any house in the parish on which account we intend to have revenge. Signed general Rock'.⁹

Some forty years later, on 10 December 1880, when his two older brothers were away, and Peter Switzer was at home with his widowed mother and three sisters, another raid for arms occurred. A group of up to sixty men, carrying guns and with blackened faces arrived at the house and when they were refused admittance fired through the doors and windows.

They also seized every agricultural implement they could lay hands on – crowbars, ploughshares, &c. – and commenced to batter the door. Miss Susan Switzer, with heroic daring, seized a double-barrelled gun, and from a window fired upon the crowd, whose fury was now redoubled. A fresh attack was made on the door, and an entrance was effected.

Susan Switzer was reportedly struck several times 'with the butt end of a gun; while 'her little brother, who acted with great bravery in repelling the attack, was savagely maltreated.' In fact, Peter was then a man of 33, which suggests the newspaper account needs to be treated with caution. The raiders left with two guns, leaving the house badly damaged as a result of the attack.¹⁰

⁴ Máirtín Ó Corrbuí, *Kenry: the Story of a Barony in County Limerick* (Chlóbhuail, 1975) p. 85.

⁵ National Archives of Ireland. OP 1841, 17/3789.

⁶ *Limerick Chronicle*, 7 April 1841.

⁷ Mother of Peter, Susan, Eliza and Rebecca.

⁸ Vivien Hick, 'The Palatines: 1798 and its aftermath', *JRSAI*, cxxvi (1996) pp 5-36:27.

⁹ National Archives of Ireland. OP 1839, 17/685.

¹⁰ *Weekly Irish Times*, 18 December 1880.

Forty years later there was to be another serious event at the Switzer house in Moig that would have fatal consequences. On the night of 17 April 1920, members of the Ballysteen Company of the 4th West Limerick Brigade of the IRA carried out a raid for arms.¹¹ Reports of the attack appeared in various newspapers¹² with the *Limerick Chronicle* confirming that one of the attackers had been fatally wounded but that none of those in the house had been injured.¹³

The man shot was Dan Neville a Lieutenant in the Ballysteen Company of the IRA whose body was immediately taken to a nearby forge and laid out.¹⁴ In order to keep the young man's death a secret from the police, he was buried temporarily on his own land until he was interred some six or seven weeks later at Castletown cemetery, within the Pallaskenry Volunteers area.¹⁵ Four others were wounded in the raid.¹⁶ When the matter was reported to IRA HQ, the Chief of Staff Richard Mulcahy ordered that no reprisals be taken.¹⁷ Some retaliation did take place, however, as shown by a witness statement to the Bureau of Military History :

After the shooting, Switzer, who was an elderly man and a fighting Protestant, used come to church armed. We did not shoot him but we took him by surprise one Sunday morning and got two revolvers off him. Then we drove him in a pony and trap to his house and demanded more arms. He refused, but his womenfolk, thinking he would be shot, brought us out a shotgun and ammunition. We then released him unharmed.¹⁸

However, some twenty months later the fatal shooting at his sister's funeral occurred:

The cortege was nearing the burial ground, Castletown, when two shots were discharged at Mr Switzer from Castletown woods. At the time, Mr Switzer was seated in a motor car with the driver, and received shot wounds to the head, from which he bled profusely. He was taken back to his home, where he was medically treated, his condition being considered too serious to remove him to Limerick for hospital treatment.¹⁹

His condition deteriorated and he was brought to Barrington's Hospital in the city on Thursday 12th and died there the following day. An inquest was opened at the Hospital, on Sunday, under the auspices of the City Republican Police,²⁰ Jurors were summoned to attend an inquest on Monday 16 January but they failed to turn up²¹ and no police enquiry

¹¹ Thomas Toomey, *The War of Independence in Limerick 1912-1921* (Privately Printed, 2010) pp 326-7.

¹² *Nenagh Guardian*, 24 April 1920, *Freemans Journal*, 20 April 1920 and *Irish Times*, 24 April 1920 which noted that a gun, a woman's hat, and a man's hat, turned inside out, were also found at the scene.

¹³ *Limerick Chronicle*, 20 April 1920.

¹⁴ Toomey, *War of Independence in Limerick*, p. 327.

¹⁵ Bureau of Military History 1913-21, W.S. 811: File No. S.2087.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ John O'Callaghan, *Revolutionary Limerick: The Republican Campaign for Independence in Limerick, 1913-1921*. (Dublin, 2010) p. 113.

¹⁸ James Halpin, then 62 years of age, who had been Officer Commanding the Pallaskenry Company of the IRA: Bureau of Military History 1913-21, W.S. 811: File No. S.2085.

¹⁹ *Limerick Leader*, 11 January 1922.

²⁰ Limerick City Archives, IE LA L/PC. The Limerick City Police Force was soon replaced by the Garda Síochána, which was founded on 8 February, 1922, and deployed all over the country over the next few months.

²¹ *Limerick Leader*, 16 January 1922.

was subsequently held and no one was ever charged with the shooting.²² Peter Switzer was buried in the cemetery attached to St Mary's Cathedral in Limerick where he lies in an unmarked grave.²³ The youngest sister Eliza died in 1929, aged 75, bringing to an end that line of the Switzer family.

²² No inquest reports were located for either Dan Neville or Peter Switzer. The Coroners Inquests for Limerick in the National Archives do not include 1920 or 1922 although there are reports for 1919 and 1923. The Coroner's Office in Limerick does not hold older records (J. McNamara, personal communication) nor does the County Registrar (P. Meghan, personal communication). Despite the lack of an official police investigation, an inquest - perhaps secluded - was seemingly held after his burial as his death registration recorded that certification was received from John McNiece coroner for city of Limerick: 'Inquest held January 21, 1922'.

²³ *Limerick Chronicle*, 17 January 1922.