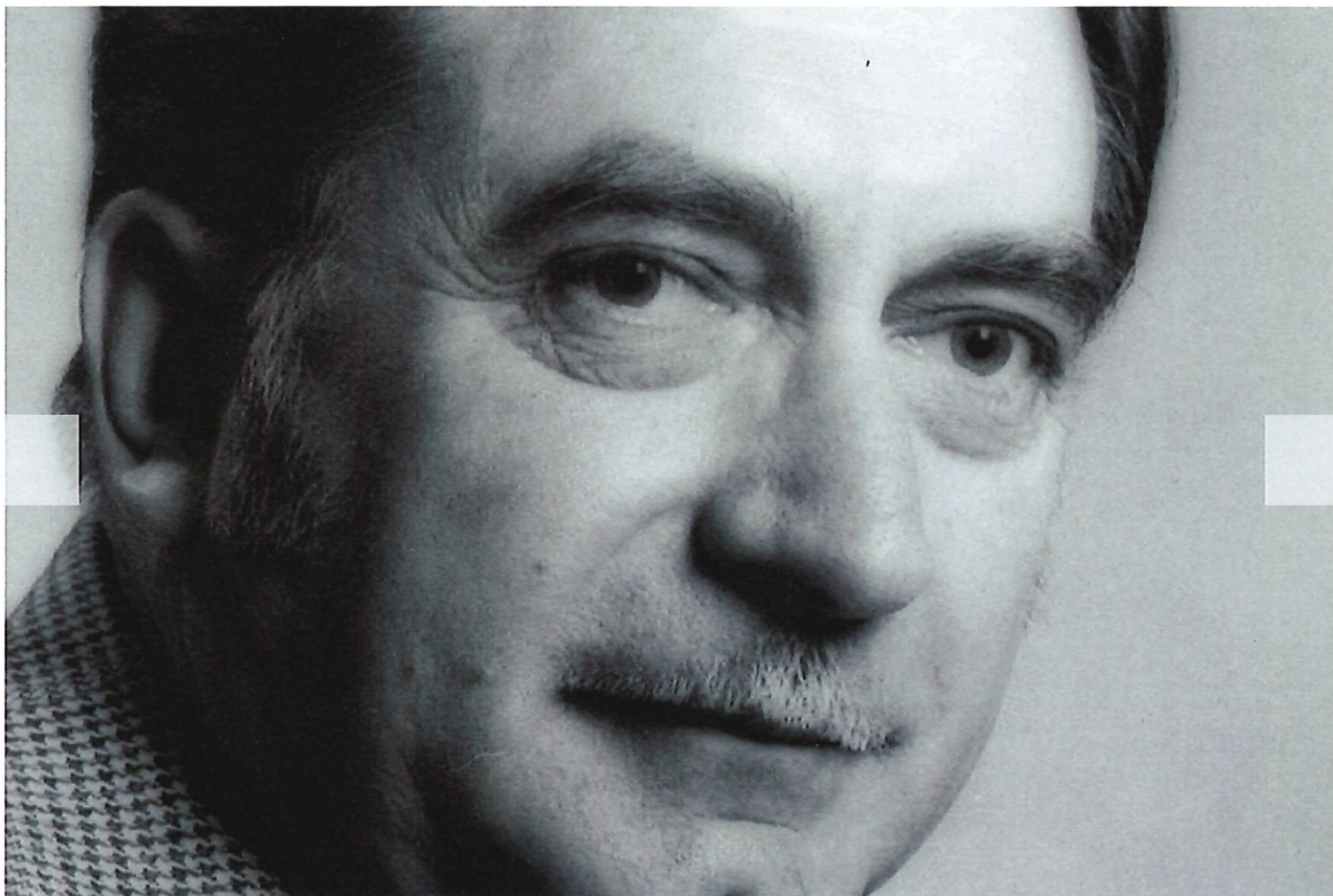


Then & Now: Mike Solski, last of Mine Mill Local 598 faithful



Vicki Gilhula

Aug 4, 2022 12:00 PM



1 / 4 Mike Solski was mayor of Coniston, then Nickel Centre from 1962 to 1978. | City of Greater Sudbury Heritage Image Collection, GPL Main Branch, SOLSKI Collection, SPL 1982-002

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00:04:33

Mike Solski, the former mayor of Nickel Centre, made headlines in 1978 when he was almost killed by an angry property owner who was later found not guilty of attempted murder by reason of

insanity.

Sudbury.com brought you the first part of that story on July 21. [You can read that part here.](#)

It's a wonder someone had not tried to shoot him before. Solski had been a powerful and controversial union leader during the Cold War and [Red Scare](#) following the Second World War.

Solski was a founder and a president of Local 598 of the International Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union, which represented almost 20,000 workers at Inco and Falconbridge. It was the largest single union local in the country.

A vocal opponent to the United Steelworkers of America's campaign to represent the mines' mighty unionized work forces from 1949 to 1962, Solski was seen as an ally of the Mine Mill's national and international leaders, many of whom were accused of being communists. He denied accusations he was under the influence of the Communist Party, but the stain remained even when he ran unsuccessfully as the Liberal candidate in Sudbury East against NDP Elie Martel in 1967.

The late journalist Mick Lowe, who wrote three novels about the "Steel Raids" and who [passed away in 2021](#), interviewed Solski before his death at 81 in 1999. [You can watch that interview here.](#)

Lowe wrote Solski's obituary, which was published in "The Globe and Mail," Nov. 19. 1999.

"Mike well remembered the days when the smelter manager was automatically elected mayor of Coniston, and when shift bosses would arrive at workers' homes unannounced demanding their annual Christmas tribute – cash or a bottle of booze."

Solski played an organizing role at the Coniston smelter for Mine Mill. Some of the meetings were held outside because landlords were too fearful of backlash from Inco to rent space to the organizers. Mine Mill and Smelter Workers Local 598 was certified in 1944.

He was local president in 1958 when members struck Inco for the first time.

"The strike lasted a painful three months, and set the stage for the later raids on Local 598 by the Steelworkers," wrote Lowe.

Solski announced an agreement had been reached with Inco [just days before Christmas](#). A three-year contract and a six-per-cent wage increase over three years was offered. This amounted to pennies on the hourly wage of \$3, but the settlement was considered a victory for the union. Still, Solski lost his bid for local president the next year.

Inco unionized workers voted to join the Steelworkers in 1962 by a thin margin, but Mine Mill Local 598 continued to represent approximately 2,000 hourly-rated employees at Falconbridge until

1993.

So many families depended on the mining companies directly or indirectly during the "Steel Raids," the community was split between supporting Mine Mill, considered radical by many, and the more moderate Steelworkers.

Sixty years later, the divisions have healed but the stories of the bloody and violent struggle are legend. It is considered the most bitter and violent inter-union conflict in Canadian history.

Solski, who was still employed by Inco in 1962, reluctantly joined the Steelworkers.

He ran successfully for mayor of Coniston in 1962, a position he retained until 1972, and was mayor of Nickel Centre from 1973 to 1978. During this time, Solski was vice-chair of the regional government and a member of the Sudbury Regional Police Commission, the Police Governing Authority of Ontario, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, the Sudbury General Hospital Board and the Coniston Hydro Commission.

In 1984, Solski co-authored, with Jack Smaller, "Mine Mill: The History of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers in Canada since 1895."

The Mine Mill Union merged with the Steelworkers in 1967, though Local 598 voted against it and remained the last remnant of Mine Mill until 1993, when it joined with the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW). In 2013, Mine Mill joined Unifor. It has never given up the name "Mine Mill".

Vicki Gilhula is a freelance writer. Then & Now is made possible by our Community Leaders Program.



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Aug 4, 2022 12:00 PM



2 / 4 Local 598 president Mike Solski (left) welcomed American singer/actor and activist Paul Robeson when he performed at the Mine Mill Hall in 1956, with Nels Thibault and Lawrence Brown. | Image: Solski Collection

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3 / 4 Coniston Council in 1967 (l-r) Joe Barbe, Gino Sartor, Olious Halverson, John Fera, Tom Paradis, Phil Gniazdowski and mayor Mike Solski. | City of Greater Sudbury Heritage Image Collection, CT0094EN

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4 / 4 Almost 75 per cent of Sudbury's workforce were affected by the 1958 strike by Mine Mill members that last three months.
| Supplied

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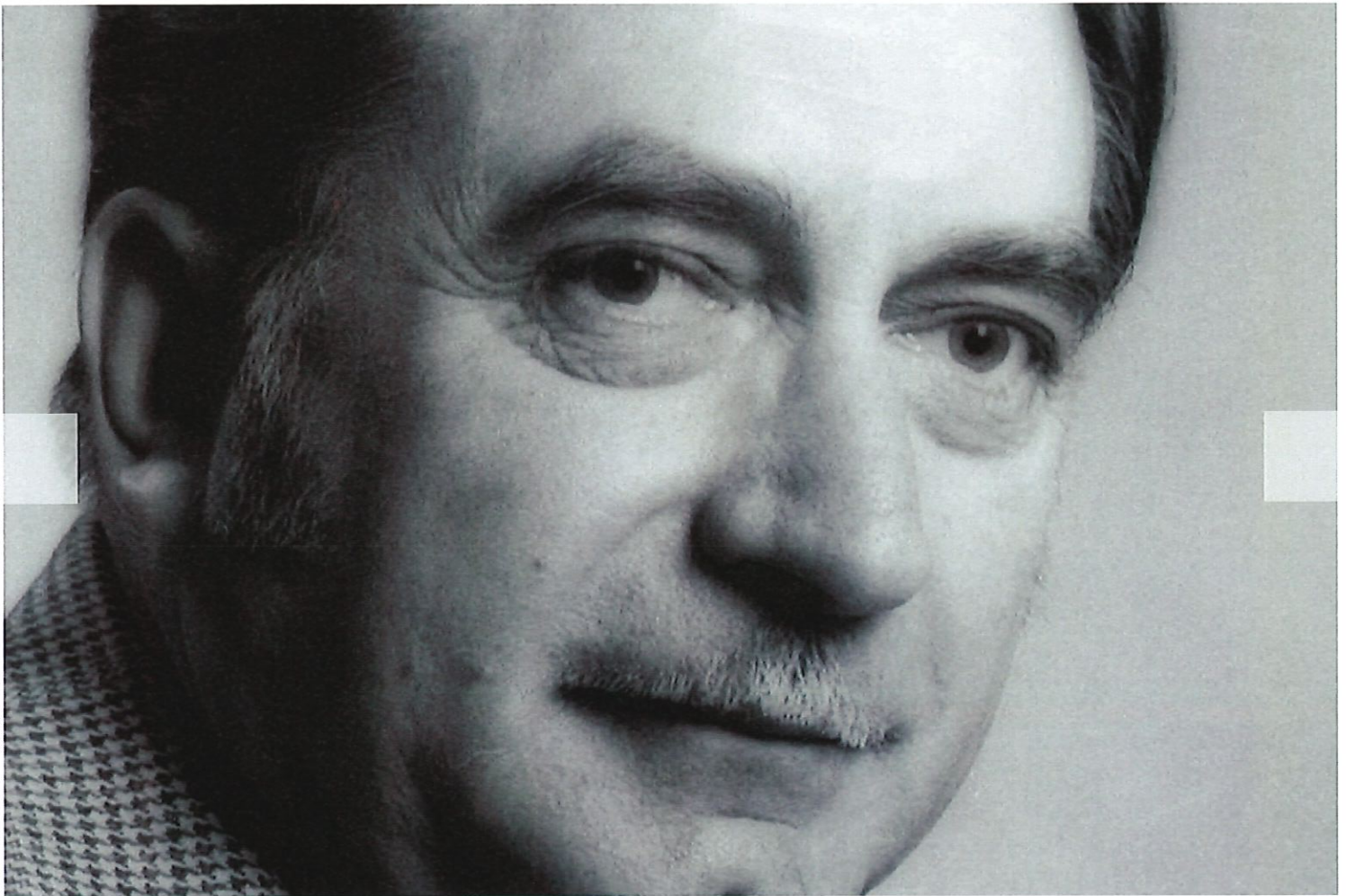
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Then & Now: The attempted assassination of Nickel Centre's mayor



Vicki Gilhula

Jul 21, 2022 11:57 AM



1 / 2 Mike Solski was mayor of Coniston, then Nickel Centre from 1962 to 1978. | City of Greater Sudbury Heritage Image Collection, GPL Main Branch, SOLSKI Collection, SPL 1982-002

The attempted assassination of the mayor of Nickel Centre was national headlines in the fall of 1978.

An angry property owner carrying a 45-calibre automatic military pistol critically wounded Mike Solski as he chaired his last meeting as mayor.

The man entered the Nickel Centre council meeting room on the evening of Nov. 15 with a letter addressed to council.

"I have something else for you," the shooter, a former Inco employee, told Solski as he fired three shots.

Mayor-elect Garry Lacey was nearby and knelt by the bleeding Solski whom he had defeated in the municipal election just three days before.

Councillor John Fera grabbed the man's arm and shook the gun loose from Romeo Kerim, who was charged with attempted murder."

"I only want to kill him, not you," Kerim told councillors Gary Foley and Stan Hayduk, recreation director Ed Boland and public works superintendent Don Henderson as they pinned him down until the police arrived.

The 59-year-old Solski was hit twice and taken to hospital in critical condition with wounds to his stomach and shoulder. He recovered, but his right hand was partially paralyzed.

Before his trial, Kerim, 63, fired his lawyer and chose to defend himself — as he said he could not trust anybody — despite concerns expressed to the jury by the judge.

Kerim testified he shot the politician, but only wanted to break his hand.

During the three-day trial held in Toronto in June 1979, a psychiatrist testified Kerim had been suffering from paranoia for some time. He was obsessed with the idea that Solski was the person responsible for a "conspiracy" with the Nickel District Conservation Authority and Inco to expropriate his property.

Kerim was found not guilty of attempted murder by reason of insanity and sent to Penetanguishene Mental Health Centre.

Solski, who was born in Coniston and lived in his family home his entire life, was elected mayor of the small community east of Sudbury in 1962 and served until 1972. He became the first mayor of the new municipality of Nickel Centre and was the first vice-chair of the Regional Municipality of Sudbury.

After the shooting, he received \$13,493 from Nickel Centre and \$30,000 from the regional government on compassionate grounds. He also collected \$200 a week from a municipal insurance policy.

At the time of his death in 1999 at the age of 80, Solski was a member of the Sudbury Municipal Restructuring Association, which called for the amalgamation of the municipalities in the Regional Government of Sudbury into a one-tier government.

Once called a communist, Solski ran unsuccessfully as the Liberal candidate in Sudbury East against Elie Martel of the Ontario New Democrat Party in 1967.

After retiring from politics in 1978, he wrote a history of Coniston. He was also the co-author of "Mine Mill: The History of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers in Canada since 1895".

The Coniston branch of the Greater Sudbury Public Library is named the Mike Solski Library in his honour.

Solski had an eventful career as a union leader prior to entering municipal politics which will be explored in the next edition of Then and Now.

Vicki Gilhula is a writer in Greater Sudbury. Then & Now is made possible by our Community Leaders Program.

Sources

The Globe and Mail, Accused called insane at time mayor was shot, June 6, 1979

The Globe and Mail, 'I have something for you,' man who shot mayor said, by Tony Van Alphen, Nov. 17, 1978



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