THE SECRET LIFE OF THE DROR PART ONE

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UNCOVER GUN-SMUGGLING PLOT

HOME AND SPORT EDITION

CLAIM BRENS BOUGHT FOR PALESTINE BATTLE

Nab Pair Smuggling Parts Into U.S.—Wealthy New Yorker Said Behind Ring Buying Guns From War Assets

BEVIN STARTLES MOSCOW WHILE ATTLEE WINS AT HOME

DREW SAVES AT EXPENSE OF COMMON MAN—C.C.F.

Stanley H. Knowles, M.P., Declares Drew's Course Grand for Ontario's Wealthy But Bad for Ordinary Folk Who Need Services

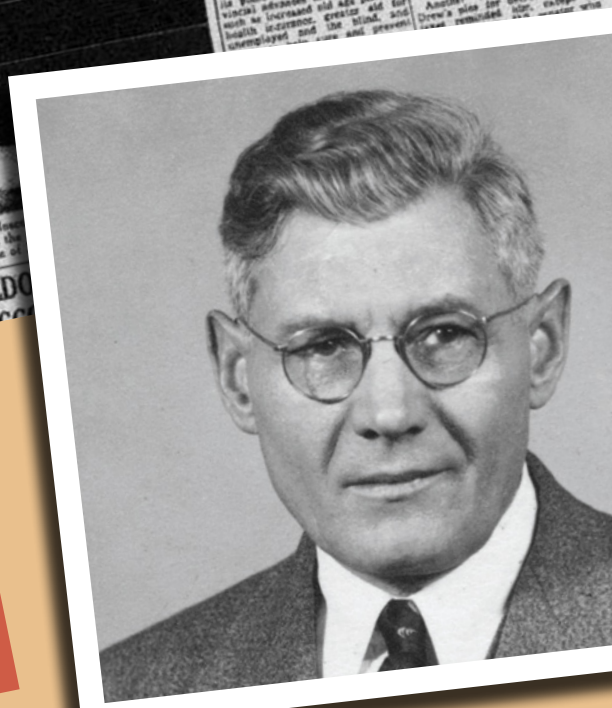
WOMAN DIES, 7 HURT IN PITTSBURGH BLAST

FORGETFUL WOMAN ATE OWN POISON

BOMBSHELL WAS TOSSED at the Big Four council of foreign ministers in Mos... Ernest Bevin, left, charged "millions" of German war prisoners are being held in th... of Clement Attlee, right, won one of its hardest fights with a vote of confidence o...

24-HOUR GUARDS

SAY WASHINGTON TORPEDO



Above: Left: *Toronto Daily Star* front page March 13, 1947. *(Toronto Daily Star)* **Above Center:** Carl Einar Ekdahl. *(Courtesy of John Ekdahl)* **Above Right:** Carl Ekdahl shoulders a Johnson LMG outside the factory. *(John Ekdahl)*

Niagara Falls, N.Y., Monday afternoon, February 24, 1947. Parked by the wintry highway, Carl Einar Ekdahl took a sip of whisky to calm his embattled heart. Beside him sat Norman Grant of Toronto. Ekdahl passed him the bottle. Ekdahl and Grant had cleared U.S. Customs and now waited in vain for Max Brown in the second car. Finally, they accepted Brown wasn't coming.

Max Brown held out for three days in the Erie County jail, refusing even to make a phone call. He had been caught red-handed at the U.S./Canadian border trying to smuggle parts of two machine guns into New York State. The guns had been hastily tucked under the front seat of Max's car and fell easily into view. The plan had been to go on to Ekdahl's Vermont farm and test the guns. But now, Customs, Police and agents of the Alcohol Tobacco and Tax Unit coached Max to start talking. He did not. Max heard how the Gestapo questioned Jews in Europe. His treatment by U.S. authorities was courteous: He could hardly yield to this.

The guns looked wicked... black and steel, pistol grips, perforated barrel jackets, hooked magazines and front sights like sharks' fins. Combined with a hundred fresh rounds of .303, the display evoked mob massacres, assassinations, and blood-drenched insurrection. The authorities learned more about Max Brown. Still in his twenties, he was from Toronto, Canada, a World War II veteran who started the war as an aircraft mechanic and ended it as a pilot and squadron leader. He came home to study at University, and then quit to work for the formation of a Jewish state in Palestine.

Max held out stubbornly, but he knew others were being tracked down and arrested. He hoped his silence would buy time for some to escape and hide the evidence. He had every reason to worry: Their mistakes could doom the nation of Israel before it was born.

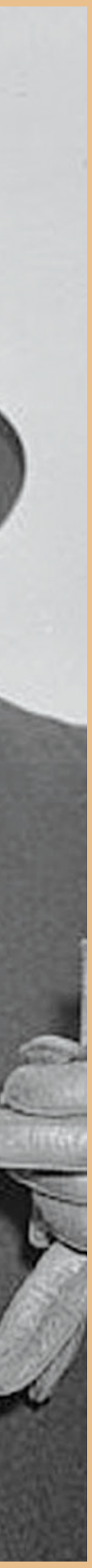
Grant was arrested when he returned home to Canada. By the time the story hit the front pages, several weeks later, the guns were mis-identified as Bren guns. The few people aware it even existed called it 'The Gun.'

Soon, Brown was out on bail; tracks were being covered on both sides of the border, and key players had vanished.

For the authorities, it was difficult to pin down what they were looking at. The guns resembled a lesser known American wartime gun; the Johnson light machine gun. They shared the Johnson's looks and features. The short-recoil principle of operation, side mounted magazine, the rotating multi-lugged bolt head, the round receiver and the distinctive barrel jacket with dozens of holes – even the feed lips built into the gun instead of the magazine. But, something had gone weird in the genes... they weren't Johnsons.

Genuine Johnsons, produced by Cranston Arms in Rhode Island, were slick and smooth. These guns were rough, scaly, hand finished and differed in details. The caliber was a change. The Johnson Model 1941 LMG used the .30-06 cartridge. The mutations before them used British .303. The other differences were more subtle, but the buttstock and forends jumped out for their absence. Instead of American walnut, the buttstocks consisted of tubes of epoxy and textile, capped with a steel plate. This butt plate swung up to store a cleaning kit in the lower tube. The guns more closely resembled the M1944 Johnson, a model that never saw mass production.

The guns did not have Jewish roots. Their story began before World War Two at Springfield Armory in Massachusetts. In the early 1930s, Melvin Johnson, Jr., a bright Army ROTC Cadet and later a reserve Marine Corps Lieutenant, visited the



Armory to report on the upcoming production of the M1 Garand rifle. The gun was not only being made there, it had been designed there. John Garand himself still shepherded every step.

Young Johnson was born into the American aristocracy: Smart and driven to prove himself worthy of any privilege of his birth, he worked and studied hard. He loved guns, but had no formal engineering education. One can imagine Springfield's thrill when a Harvard lawyer critiqued their baby. When Johnson left Springfield, he believed he could do it all better. There's no mention of him being asked to the Christmas party. The U.S. Army adopted the Garand as the standard service rifle in 1936.

While Johnson's world revolved around the best schools, summers at the lake, and his father's law firm, Haim Slavin had been born and educated a half-a-world away in Russia. Fired by the desire to create a Jewish state, he moved to Palestine just after World War One.

The Great War had swept away the Turkish Ottoman Empire. In Palestine, that meant the British now oversaw the pungent rabble.

Before the war, local politics were left to the Arab population. The Arabs had helped the Allies, rallying famously behind Lawrence of Arabia. Promises of an Arab nation were made in return. But, the Allies had also been helped by many Jews. The British made both groups conflicting promises. But, more and more Jews arrived, buying land, starting businesses, and many Arabs wanted Britain to stop the influx. In their efforts to keep violence off the table, Britain forbade the Jews from arming.

In 1929, rumors spread that Jews were desecrating Arab Mosques in Jerusalem. Throughout Palestine, Jews were attacked. At the time, Haim Slavin was an engineer working for the Palestine Electric Corporation. Slavin set up to produce grenades. When the violence ended, hundreds of Arabs and Jews were dead throughout Palestine.

An arms race with the Arabs followed, undeterred by British gun laws. Slavin became more involved in making and acquiring arms for the underground Jewish forces.

Most Jewish guns were bought from Arabs, which had the unwelcome effect of bankrolling the Arabs to buy better weapons. In 1933, what would become Israeli Military Industries was formed. IMI operated underground, in many cases literally. It was, and often still is, referred to in Hebrew as Ta'asiya Tzvait. Literally translated it means 'Military Industry.' It is commonly abbreviated to 'Ta'as.'

Slavin's efforts helped arm the Haganah. The Haganah was the predominant armed group, vetted and controlled by the Jewish Governance, but several other groups operated as well. The Haganah asked Slavin to quit his job and devote himself to preparing arms. Slavin became General Manager of Ta'as in 1937.

An operation in Poland saw munitions welded into hollow spaces of tractors and road rollers. In 1936, the Warsaw operation smuggled 3,000 rifles, 226 machine guns, 10,000 grenades, three million cartridges, hundreds of mortar shells, and three airplanes through British customs.

While Slavin was running clandestine factories, Johnson challenged the now entrenched M1 Garand. Both rifles are .30-06 semiautomatics, but, the Garand is gas operated and the Johnson powered by recoil. In Johnson's design, the bolt and barrel, locked together, recoil for a fraction of an inch and then part company with the delay allowing pressure in the barrel to drop. This wasn't new, but Johnson refined the bolt head to use eight locking lugs instead of the usual two so the bolt only had to rotate a few degrees.

Recoil operation meant the gun didn't have a piston and cylinder running under the barrel. There was no sensitive mechanism near the muzzle and this allowed Johnson to leave the barrel in the open. The gun pointed naturally and didn't channel dirty gases to the interior. Detractors said the barrel was unprotected.

The Garand was loaded with steel clips containing eight rounds. The entire clip was pushed into the gun, and, when empty, popped out with the last empty case. The problem was the soldier's dilemma when he'd fired four or five rounds in action. He then had to choose between making himself vulnerable while he unloaded the gun to make room for a new eight round clip, or, chance facing an enemy with only the three or four rounds remaining. Also, the Garand often caused a painful injury when the bolt slammed forward to punish an unskilled loader. Johnson's first solution was to use a box magazine.

But before an important test, untrained soldiers loaded the magazines backwards, creating havoc. Johnson answered with a rotary magazine. It could be topped up whenever the soldier wanted, and the feed lips, so easily damaged in removable magazines, were machined into the gun itself. It was difficult to mess up.

On the downside the removable barrel was lauded as a solution to over-heating, but, no-one carried a spare barrel, and it is possible to fire the gun with the barrel unlatched... with catastrophic results. Small parts were easily lost in field stripping. The barrel-mounted bayonet was light so it wouldn't interfere with the recoil operation. It was light, and comical.

The Garand's 'en-bloc' clip and the Johnson rotary magazine are both designs of Ferdinand Ritter von Mannlicher. Mannlicher designed a machine rifle in 1883.

Left: Melvin Johnson, Jr. and the Chief of Staff, General C. Marshall. *(Library of Congress)* **Above:** Haim Slavin engineered the Dror and much of Israel's military industries. Working secretly in the United States and Canada he acquired hundreds of tons of machinery and weaponry critical to Israel's' victory in 1948.

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The Johnson LMG shares a remarkable, although coincidental, resemblance.

In 1937, Johnson hired the Marlin Firearms Company to make four Johnson prototypes. Johnson was assisted by the very Carl E. Ekdahl who found himself parked on a New York highway a decade later. Ekdahl was born in Helsingborg, Sweden on March 12, 1892 and came to the U.S. in 1910, already a skilled tool and die maker. He gravitated to Gun Valley was soon a gunsmith, engineer and designer for several firms. He married Hilda Bjork and worked at Marlin during World War One. He was there in the 1930's to help prototype the Johnsons. By the time he and Johnson met, Carl and Hilda had three children, C. Elise, born 1917, Carl Gustav born 1920, and Thora, born 1923.

In the summer of 1938, an Army test was scheduled to compare the Garand to the Johnson. The test went well for Johnson. Johnson brushed up his design. The results were executed by another manufacturer, Taft-Pierce. As well as the new military prototypes, Taft-Pierce also made a handful of sporting rifles. Although Johnson deliberately designed his gun to be within the capabilities of smaller shops, the cost still depended on economies of scale and the sporters were prohibitively expensive.

The test of the improved models proved the Johnson to be a good rifle, but the argument was trumped by reality: The Garand in full production. Nice, but, no thanks, was the Army's answer. But as the Garand went into service, it had teething problems. These were seized on by Garand's political enemies. The anti-Garand forces said the Johnson hadn't been fairly tested and the Garand was being shoved down the troops' throats. Johnson personally tried to take the high road, but a bill was introduced in Congress to halt Garand production and force adoption of his weapon. All the arguments ended in a shoot-off in May 1940. The grasp at a political straw came to nothing. It was not about the guns; it was really just the timing.

World War Two raged in Europe and other countries cried for semiautomatic arms. Holland had fallen to the Nazis and the government in exile functioned from London. The Dutch had colonies in the Pacific. Japan was eyeing the Dutch resources and the Allies were eager to see the Dutch defend them. The Netherlands Purchasing Commission was shopping in the U.S. The Dutch ordered just over 10,000 Johnson rifles and several hundred light machine guns.

Johnson never planned to enter the gun making business; he wanted to sell the design and have an established gun-maker do the work. But, maker after maker was simply too busy already and the order was too small. The Dutch promised a larger order. Universal Windings of Providence R.I. figured they had the resources and created Cranston Arms at their factory in Cranston, R.I.

Universal Windings had no experience with barrel making, but knew enough to see a quagmire. The problem defaulted to Johnson. Johnson recruited the helpful engineer he had met at Marlin. Carl Ekdahl, now at Harrington and Richardson, left to accept Johnson's offer.

Most important to this story were the Johnson light machine guns. The Johnson Model 41 LMG has a 21-inch barrel, 42-inch overall length and a trim 12.5-lb. weight. Like the rifle, the LMG functions by delayed recoil and features a nearly straight-line design to minimize muzzle climb. The Johnson fire selector is on the left – up for safe, back for full-auto and forward for semi-auto. On full-automatic, the gun fires from an open bolt allowing cooling, but, flip to semi-auto and the gun fires from a closed bolt so there is no loss of accuracy from the action slamming forward to fire.

The single column magazine holds twenty .30-06 cartridges. A spring steel gate holds them in until the magazine is inserted in the well on the left side of the gun. Insertion lifts the magazine's gate, allowing the cartridges to push into the gun and up against the feed lips. The magazine well is long enough to let the shooter load five more cartridges through the trademark loading gate on the right.

By 1943 Ekdahl and Hilda were living near the Cranston factory in Rhode Island. Ekdahl was suddenly stricken by a severe heart-attack and retired. He and Hilda moved to their farm in Vermont where he recuperated.

Only about 2,500 Johnson rifles reached the Pacific before the East Indies fell to the Japanese. With thousands of guns now orphaned and embargoed, production stopped. Around 30,000 rifles and 3,000 LMGs languished in storage.

The thousands of unused guns didn't escape notice. The Marine Raider Battalion bought several hundred rifles from the Dutch and it didn't hurt that Johnson was now a Captain in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve. Even the U.S. Army joint U.S./Canadian First Special Service Forces (FSSF), received a handful of Johnson 1941 light machine guns.

Some Marines loved the Johnson rifles and the FSSF liked their machine guns. Most soldiers took what they were handed. While the guns are not weighed down by praise, any new gun seeing combat and coming away liked has done very well.

The Allied use of the guns affected neither the war nor the fortunes of the company: when the war was over, the Marines and First Special Service Force turned their Johnsons back in. The Dutch again took possession of the East Indies and the remaining guns finally crossed the Pacific.

Johnson developed a promising hybrid of the LMG and the rifle. Argentina pursued this model as far as a prototype but made no purchase.

The story might have ended there, but for Haim Slavin reading his newspaper in

a Tel Aviv café in 1945. Whole American munitions factories were on sale. As General Manager of Ta'as, he wrote his friend, David Ben-Gurion, the head of the underground Jewish Governance.

Efforts to mobilize American Jews were already underway. In New York lived a prominent leader named Rudolf G. Sonneborn. He supported a Jewish state in Palestine and spent months there in his youth. He had recently hosted a gathering of influential American Jews and introduced them to David Ben-Gurion.

When Ben-Gurion sent Haim Slavin to the U.S. in the fall of 1945, he sent him to Sonneborn.

Opposite Page: Carl and Hilda Ekdahl likely posed for this photo at the time of their marriage. *(Courtesy of David Nordin)* **Above:** Melvin Johnson (left) and Carl Ekdahl hold prototypes made at Marlin Arms. The distinctive rotary rifle magazine and the side-mounted machine gun magazine have not yet been incorporated. *(Courtesy of John Ekdahl)* **Below:** British soldiers struggled to keep the peace in Jerusalem, 1920. *(Library of Congress)*

Left: Rudolph Sonneborn, the 'wealthy New Yorker' mentioned in the *Toronto Daily Star*'s headline poses in Israel with a Sten after the 1948 war. *(Wikipedia)* **Above Right:** Before joining Johnson, Carl Ekdahl was with Harrington and Richardson in the early 1940s. He is pictured on the left alongside H&R President Carney, center, and General Manager Loose. *(H&R brochure)* **Right:** Two members of the First Special Service Force cleaning a Johnson M1941 at Anzio. *(Library and Archives Canada)*

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Everything Slavin and Alper could gather in ended up going to Schalit in the windy building on Park Avenue. Out of sight and late at night, Schalit's people cut and torched apart old machinery, stuffing the interiors with contraband.

But, it wasn't enough for Slavin. He dreamt of arming every settler, every soldier, every brother and sister. Slavin had stood guard himself, alone in the shadows of stony hillsides on sharp cold nights. He knew the touch of a gun's steel, or the solid weight of a grenade, was often the lonely sentry's only friend and comfort.

Appropriately, considering its murky parentage, the conception of 'The Gun' occurred in a cheap hotel room. Levine brought Ekdahl to meet Slavin. How the meeting between Slavin and Ekdahl came about remains vague. In *The Pledge*, author Leonard Slater says Levine contacted Ekdahl saying he was a 'friend of a friend.' Johnson may well have given a tacit okay to the plan, but, the mysterious 'friend' set things in motion.

There was a man who fit the 'friend of a friend' description. One of Johnson's corporate neighbors employed an engineer named David Dardick. Dardick would

Sonneborn introduced Slavin to Harry Levine, a factory owner and wartime partner in a firm making Oerlikon parts. Levine was in his late forties, with children, widowed, and now remarried. He seemed an unlikely fit for subterfuge and that made him a perfect fit. He became the legal front man for Slavin's company; Machinery Processing and Supply.

Slavin bought a vacant building at 4366 Park Avenue, New York. He hired two key men; Philip Alper, a 22 year old engineer from Berkeley, and Elie Schalit, also in his early twenties. Schalit handled the shipping while Slavin and Alper shopped. They visited Worchester, Buffalo, Detroit, Chicago, Rockford, and Cincinnati and stormed Colt's one-day sale. Slavin bought barrel making machinery and equipment to make 81mm mortar bombs. Alper bought six tons of machines and all the tools to make .303 from Remington's Bridgeport plant. As a large number of Haganah weapons were in .303, the .303 was becoming Israel's predominant cartridge.

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later develop the unique gun named for him and worked closely with Johnson. Dardick was a Russian born Jew like Slavin, and the very kind of man Levine might reach out to. This is purely speculation and based largely on Ekdahl bringing an intriguing package to the hotel room.

Ekdahl handed Slavin a Johnson Light Machine Gun. There were a number of examples still kept at Johnson's office. Since Ekdahl no longer worked there, if the gun came from the office, some insider must have loaned it. But, Ekdahl is also said to have owned one or more Johnsons after the war and it may well have come from his own collection. We may never know. The collection went to Carl G. Ekdahl but was broken up after his death.

Ekdahl checked off the gun's features: It was lighter than almost any other light machine gun, but it fired full-sized rifle cartridges to hurl back an enemy charge. With the flick of a switch, it became an accurate semi-automatic, able to snipe across the hilltops. Slavin knew that with a gun like this, every man, woman and child would feel the strength of a lion.

Ekdahl proposed they redesign the machine gun, incorporating several changes he suggested, and the latest features of the Johnson LMGs. At a stroke, they would vault ahead of the world's armies and produce the most advanced design on the planet. Built in secret under the haughty noses of the British, The Gun would be a triumph of courage, engineering and 'chutzpah.'

Slavin didn't need the sales pitch. He needed Ekdahl. Ekdahl took Slavin home with him and introduced him to Hilda. There were no kids still living at home, but Slavin was sick and worried about bringing in his flu. Hilda took him in and put him to bed with tea and aspirin. The reception touched the hardened Slavin deeply. Ekdahl was not Jewish but Slavin took him into his trust. For the next days he sat propped in bed going over the drawings with Ekdahl. When they finally talked money, Ekdahl agreed to a fee of $17,000.

Part two of The Secret Life of the Dror will continue with the continuing history of the development and deployment of this historic weapon.

Acknowledgement and thanks are due to Leonard Slater, author of The Pledge, *Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, authors of* O Jerusalem *and to Bruce N. Canfield, author of* Johnson's Rifles and Machine Guns *with Robert L. Lamoreaux and Edward R. Johnson, (Andrew Mowbray Publishers). A special thanks to Carl Ekdahl's descendants, John Ekdahl, David Nordin and Kirsten O'Brien for their guidance, information and photos of their Grandfather, to Richard Collins for providing the 2nd model Dror, Charles Taylor of Movie Armaments Group in Toronto, Canada for use of the facilities, Graham Robertson for his photo, and G. N. Dentay, Paul Wassill and R Blake Stevens, Collector Grade Publications, for their invaluable editorial input.* SAOJ

1945

W HAVEN EVENING REGISTER, THURSDAY, MARCH 15,

Native New Havener Wounded At Iwo
Where He Fought With U. S. Marines

Above: Carl Ekdahl studies blueprints. *(Courtesy of John Ekdahl)*
Right: The Ekdahl's only son, Carl G. Ekdahl, survived shrapnel wounds on Iwo Jima and was featured in the *New Haven Register*. *(New Haven Register)*