

Was "Peter the Painter" in This State?

Echo of Houndsditch Murders

ALLEGATIONS NEVER PROVED

(By ALEC GOLLAN)

The disappearance from London of the notorious "Peter the Painter" after the tragic Houndsditch murders and the Sidney-street battle in December 1910 was followed by the sensational allegation that he was one of a party of Russians camped in the Kellerberrin district.

The suspected man, with a compatriot, was arrested and charged with conspiracy. The pair were committed for trial but the proceedings were dropped by the Crown Law authorities.

PERHAPS the greatest sensation created by a criminal in Western Australia was that which was brought about by the arrest of the notorious murderer, Deeming, at Southern Cross in 1892. Deeming, who was executed some months later in Melbourne, had done to death a number of people in other parts of the world, and was passing as a mining engineer on the Yilgarn goldfield when he was arrested.

There was another sensation, almost as stirring, in 1911, when, following the arrest of two foreigners at Kellerberrin, it was asserted that one of them was "Peter the Painter," an anarchist who was wanted by the London police. It had been the belief that Peter the Painter was the leader of the gang responsible for the Houndsditch murders and the famous Sydney-street battle in December, 1910.

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the following particulars were given in "Lloyd's Weekly":—"About three weeks ago a couple giving the names of Mr. and Mrs. Levi moved into No. 11 Exchange Buildings, while a man giving the name of Cardstein took over No. 9 as for warehouse purposes. These two houses are exactly at the rear of 118a Hounds-ditch, occupied by Mr. H. S. Harris, jeweller, and are only separated from it by a narrow passage and a high wall. In Mr. Harris' safe was jewellery worth between £20,000 and £30,000, and this was the objective of the new tenants of 9 and 11 Exchange Buildings, who had conceived the desperate plan of boring their way through the wall into Mr. Harris' premises.

Suspicions Aroused

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No. 11 noticed that there was little furniture taken in, and that Mr. and Mrs. Levi had several male visitors. They themselves were very seldom seen, and the green shutters of the house were seldom taken down. After a few days mysterious noises began to be heard, and these got so pronounced as to be a nuisance to the neighbors, who, however, beyond grumbling among themselves, appear to have taken no action. But Mr. Isenstein, Mr. Harris' neighbor, thought that the noises were more than mere sounds of men at their ordinary work, and he quietly informed the police that there was something suspicious going on at 9 and 11 Exchange Buildings.

"This was about 10 o'clock on Friday night. A constable was sent to make an inspection, and, in company with Mr. Isenstein, examined the rear of his shop, as well as a dairy carried on by two sisters next door, with no result. The noise in the meantime had ceased. The theory is suggested that, in carrying out their plot, the perpetrators had carefully organised a watch, and consequently they were informed both of the arrival and departure of the constable.

The police, however, determined to increase their vigilance. About a quarter past 11 Sergeants Tucker, Bentley, and Bryant, with Constables Woodhams, Martin and Choat—the officer on the beat—visited Exchange Buildings. They made at once for No. 11. Sergeant Bentley knocked. A woman answered and some short conversation took place. Sergeant Bentley said 'Let us in; we believe there are burglars about.' Receiving a reply in some foreign tongue, he called out 'Fetch somebody who can speak English' and inserted his foot in the slightly opened door.

"At that instant, and without the slightest warning, there was a brilliant flash, followed by a loud report. It seemed to come from the direction

of the window, about a foot to the right of the sergeant, and the gallant officer staggered back with a bullet through the right side of his neck.

"Before he could get clear another flash and report followed, and he received a second bullet a few inches to the left of the first one, and fell over on his back with his head in the gutter.

... IN THE GUTTER.

More Policemen Shot

"What then happened took place all in about 60 seconds. The door was flung wide open, and out dashed three men and a woman. The men—and, it is said, the woman—carried revolvers. These they fired point-blank at every police officer who approached them. Sergeant Bryant was the next to be shot down, a bullet skimming across his chest, and embedding itself in his arm. Constable Woodhams was the next to fall, shot through the left thigh, high up, the bone being badly splintered.

"Sergeant Tucker, racing to the help of his comrades, was stopped with a bullet through the heart, and, staggering a few paces, fell to the ground dead. Constable Choat collapsed in the roadway, writhing in agony from no fewer than eight bullet wounds. At this moment a dramatic incident happened.

"While one member of the gang was shooting at Constable Choat, the others were making their escape at the end of the cul-de-sac into Cutler-street. One dashed past the two contestants with the extraordinary coincidence that he got within the line of fire of his companion's revolver, and received in his back one of the bullets that had already passed through poor Choat's body.

"He was so near the murdered policeman that the bullet had sufficient time to pass upwards, penetrate the lung, and enter his breast just under his first left rib. As the man was falling, he was seized by Constable Choat's murderer by one arm. A third member of the gang grasped the other arm and, with the woman following, they all dashed away, and in a moment had disappeared in the network of narrow streets and alleys with which the neighborhood is honeycombed.

Reserves Called Out

"On the arrival of the heads of the city police from Old Jewry, a hurried telephonic despatch was sent to all the city police stations calling out the reserves and every available officer that could be spared. As they arrived, they were promptly posted so as to form a complete cordon round the area of the

complete cordon round the area of the tragedy.

"First, attention was given to the fallen officers. Sergeant Tucker was dead, but all were taken to hospital, where it was soon seen that Sergeant Bentley and Constable Choat were mortally wounded. They died next day. Meanwhile, under the direction of Superintendents Ottaway, Nichols and Stark, and Chief Inspector Hayes, a complete search of Exchange Buildings, and the adjoining warehouses, and the new buildings in the course of construction in Cutler-street was made, and many proofs of the daring scheme of burglary were found. On Saturday afternoon came a sensational sequel to the shooting. From an unknown source there came to the Leman-street police station, Whitechapel, the following message:

"Man wounded in city fight is dying at No. 59 Grove-street, off the Commercial-road, E. Send at once if you wish to take him alive."

"An hour after the arrival of the detectives, the man, who was a Russian Pole, about 28 years of age, died without recognising anyone around him."

Sidney-street Battle

That sensational happening in London a quarter of a century ago, which has been outclassed since then by many of a similar nature in America, was followed up by a still further thrilling episode which has come to be known as the Sidney-street battle. The pursuit of the Houndsditch desperadoes drew the police attention to a house in Sidney-street in which two foreigners had taken up residence.

It and several adjoining places were surrounded, and then two constables entered the house in which the two suspects were. They succeeded in getting into the ground floor, where they found a woman named Gershon. Immediately afterwards, shots were fired from the upper floor, and a sergeant was badly wounded. A retreat was forced, but the police in the streets opened fire on the building. Shots were fired from the upper storey and throughout the whole of one night a fusilade continued.

Next morning reinforcements

Next morning reinforcements were requisitioned, and a detachment of Scots Guards was sent from the Tower. For another day the men in the building were besieged, and towards midnight, a fire raged at the back of the building.

When this was suppressed about three o'clock on the following morning, and entry was made, the charred remains of two men were found. It was first thought that one of these was that of a notorious "Peter the Painter," but this proved to be incorrect.

Man of Parts

Peter the Painter had been in London for nearly 12 months before the Houndsditch tragedy, and it was believed that he was responsible for it. It was also believed that he was one of those besieged in the Sidney-street house. He was a great organiser among the anarchists, and he often paid visits to Paris, Brussels, and Switzerland. He was a voluminous contributor to anarchist papers published secretly in Zurich and New York. He was about 30 years of age, and had left Riga in 1907.

Trials that followed the Hounds-ditch shooting led to the exoneration of Peter the Painter. It was also shown that he was not in the Sidney-street affair, but the man was so notorious that his name was blazoned throughout the world as a desperate criminal.

Lettish was his native tongue, but he had command of several other languages, including English. Large rewards were offered for his apprehension. He disappeared, but police in all countries were keenly watching out for him.

Dreger Leaves W.A.

In 1907 Ernest Dreger, a native of Lettland, Russia, came to Western Australia. He worked as a farm laborer and clearer in the wheat belt for about 18 months. Towards the end of 1908 he came to Fremantle, where he got a job as a fireman on a German steamer bound for Rotterdam. After being paid off, he went on to London, and he arrived in the world's capital in June, 1909. Being in bad health at that time, he went into the Greenwich Seaman's Hospital, and there met a man who said that his name was Marek, and that he

that his name was Maren, and that he too, was a native of Lettland.

Some of the people who came to see Maren called him Peter Jansen, and others called him John Jansen. After they had left the hospital Dreger and Maren went to the Scandinavian Sailors' Home, and there they became very friendly. Dreger went on a voyage as a fireman to South Africa, and when he returned to the home a letter from Maren awaited him there. It informed him that he could find his friend at a boarding house conducted by people named Ligum. Another boarder there was one who called himself George Rosenberg, but who was afterwards known as Frederick Johnson. Dreger became very friendly not only with Maren, but also with Rosenberg and members of the Ligum family, particularly with Miss Sarah Ligum. He helped Maren financially and entertained him and also Miss Ligum at various places.

Dreger fell in love with Miss Ligum, and he proposed to her that he should return to Western Australia, obtain employment here, and send for her to follow and marry him. The girl accepted this idea, and Dreger, in May, 1910,

signed on as a fireman on the *Port Chalmers*, bound for Australia. The girl and Maren induced him to make arrangements so that Rosenberg could stow away on the vessel, and he agreed to send tickets home for Miss Ligum and also for Maren.

When the *Port Chalmers* reached Albany, Rosenberg, who from then on was known as Johnson, went ashore, but Dreger stayed on the ship until she reached Port Adelaide, where he was signed off. He eventually reached this State in August, and, a month later, he sent to London tickets for Miss Ligum, Maren and for two of his (Dreger's) brothers. The ticket for Maren was made out in the name of August Maren, because by letter the man had informed Dreger that he had again changed his Christian name. Another Lettander named Peter Older came from Adelaide with Dreger, and the two men went to Kellerberrin, where they obtained employment on farms.

In December Johnson joined them and the three were there when the Houndsditch murders and the Sid-

Houndsditch murders and the Sidney-street battle occurred in London.

The four for whom Dreger had sent tickets to London arrived as immigrants in this State on the R.M.S. *Otway* in March, 1911, and they all went to the Kellerberrin district—the girl and Dreger's two brothers to the farm where Dreger was working, and Maren to that adjoining, upon which Johnson and Older were employed.

Leader of Russians

After Dreger had left London and was engaged in carrying out his promises to them, Maren and Miss Ligum went about together a good deal. They attended a club, and at several meetings Maren addressed those present in the Lettish language. Until the Houndsditch murders Maren continued to stay with the Ligums but when they occurred he left and went to live with a man named Muller in the East End of London.

A Jew named Louis Ereberg, alias Liede, told the Ligums of the movements of Maren and informed them that he intended to inform the police that Maren was assisting anarchists.

Dreger's two brothers went from Riga to London to join the other two who were to come to Australia with them, and stayed for two days with Maren before they sailed. One of them—Adolph Dreger—was told by Maren voluntarily that the police were looking for him, but that they could not find him as they did not have a proper description of him.

On the voyage out, and after the vessel had passed Port Said, Maren told Adolph Dreger that some Russian friends of his, then in London, intended to rob a "gold magazine" there in order to get money to support their friends in Russia. Maren said that he was a leader of the Russians in London, and that picked men would rob the magazine. In due course, the quartette arrived at Fremantle, where they were met by Ernest Dreger and taken by him to Kellerberrin.

Dreger and Maren Fight

Only a few days elapsed before Maren

Only a few days elapsed before Maren began to quarrel with Dreger, his benefactor. The latter took exception to the attention the other was paying Miss Ligum, and to the fact that he was urging the girl to leave Dreger and live with him. The whole party, under the leadership of Dreger, left Kellerberrin for Doodlakine, about 20 miles further east, where they entered into a clearing contract on the property of Mr. J. H. Prowse, the present member for Forrest in the House of Representatives.

Maren was sullen and jealous of Dreger, and he did not hesitate to assert that he had a better claim to the affections of Sarah Ligum than had the man who had brought them to Australia. There were bitter rows, and these ultimately led to a fight between Dreger and Maren.

While that battle raged Dreger called both Maren and Johnson "Russian Anarchist Brutes." Johnson, ungrateful for what Dreger had done for him, sided with Maren. It was the desire of Dreger to get work for his two brothers away from the other Russians, and for that purpose he paid a visit to Northam. On his way he met two travellers in a railway carriage, and one of them had a rifle and a shot-gun. He offered to buy the rifle, as he wanted it for shooting kangaroos, but the man would not sell. He agreed to Dreger's offer of £1 2s 6d for the shot-gun. When he took the weapon back to the Doodlakine camp with him Dreger showed it to both Maren and Johnson.

Miss Ligum was the cause of another fistie battle between Dreger and Maren a few days later, and the trouble became so serious that Johnson went to Kellerberrin and sought the intervention of Constable McKay. When that officer visited the camp he noticed the gun that Dreger had bought and recognised it as one that had been stolen from a Kellerberrin resident named Clothier.

At the request of McKay, he was accompanied to Kellerberrin by Dreger, who was then arrested and charged with the theft of the gun. Against him both Maren and Johnson gave evidence. They asserted that the accused man had paid several visits to Kellerberrin for the express purpose of getting a gun.

Dredger was sentenced to three

Dreger was sentenced to three months' imprisonment. While he was in prison he wrote to Sarah Ligum, imploring her to keep away from Maren, and also to prevent his (Dreger's) brothers from going near the man.

When Sarah Ligum asked Maren the cause of Dreger's imprisonment he said that it was for threatening to shoot Johnson. The girl then left the camp and came to the Salvation Army in Perth for protection. A few days after Dreger went to jail his brother, Adolph, discussed the situation with Maren. The latter said that he would give evidence against Johnson if the latter was charged with giving false evidence.

When Adolph Dreger discussed with Johnson the imprisonment of his brother, Johnson said that Maren had induced him to give false evidence so that Ernest Dreger would be imprisoned because Maren thought that his life was in danger as long as he was at liberty. Johnson expressed sorrow for what he had done.

Rumors Cause Sensation

When Ernest Dreger came out of prison he made such statements that the Criminal Investigation Branch, which was then in the control of Inspector Connell, took a hand.

He alleged that Maren was identical with Peter the Painter. After much inquiry cablegrams were sent to Scotland Yard and it was determined to arrest both Maren and Johnson.

Detective-Sergeant Harry Mann went to Kellerberrin, accompanied by Detectives Fraser and Ebbeson, and eventually Johnson was arrested at a farm 15 miles from Doodlakine, and Maren at another farm 40 miles from Merredin. The Russians were brought to Perth, and the rumors that Peter the Painter had been located in Western Australia and arrested after communications between the local authorities and Scotland Yard caused a great sensation. Maren and Johnson were charged that they conspired together and falsely swore in the Kellerberrin Police Court that Dreger went to Kellerberrin for the special purpose of receiving a gun. Crowds attended the Police Court in Perth when

tended the Police Court in Perth when the men were brought before Mr. A. S. Roe, P.M.

Proceedings Abandoned

During the proceedings before Mr. Roe, which were protracted, Maren protested more than once that he was not identical with Peter the Painter, and the magistrate assured him that he was not being charged with anything other than conspiracy. All of the particulars that have been here related were revealed during the hearing of the charge in the lower Court.

Maren showed some resemblance to the descriptions of the famous anarchist. He was assertive when before the Court and exclaimed that he was being treated worse than a man would be in a Russian Court.

There was much secrecy with respect to the communications between the local authorities and the headquarters of police in London. Eventually both Maren and Johnson were committed for trial on the charge of conspiracy.

Then Maren complained of the delay in bringing him to trial in the Criminal Court and stated he felt he "would die in his cell."

It was nearly two months after the arrest of the two Russians before the Crown Law authorities decided to abandon proceedings. The accused men were liberated and nothing more was heard publicly of the accusation that Peter the Painter, who had disappeared from London after the Houndsditch murders and the Sidney-street battle, had been located in Western Australia.