

## SENSATIONAL BOSTON ROBBERY INVOLVED HOTEL WINCHESTER RESIDENT

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

In 1908, a man named Edmund Guttman was boarding at the Hotel Winchester. Hotel manager Joseph Murray and his wife said Guttman was inclined to say little, kept himself aloof from the other boarders, and was sober and industrious. "They say the man never appeared to have any interest except in his work."<sup>2</sup>

How wrong they were. In fact, Guttman, a Latvian, allegedly fled his homeland during the 1905-1907 revolution in the Russian province, where he was rumored to have killed a man. And he had not left his violent past behind. Two weeks after he left the Hotel Winchester he was found shot dead in Jamaica Plain after a sensational robbery and gun battle.



*The Hotel Winchester in the right background*

On July 22, 1908, the *Boston Globe* carried the first report of a sensational armed robbery in a Boston saloon, involving a running gun battle with police, the wild shooting of officers and civilians during the flight through Jamaica Plain (leaving two killed and about 20 wounded), a massive police cordon around the Forest Hills Cemetery, and the eventual discovery in the cemetery of one of the robbers, shot dead.



*Photograph of Guttman in the papers after his body was found in Boston*

For days there were stories—with changes and contradictions from one day to the next—about the events, the victims, the search for the two escaped robbers, arrests, exonerations, new suspects, a missing mysterious woman, and, of course, the robbers.<sup>3</sup>

The only "desperado" positively identified was the dead man, Guttman,<sup>4</sup> who reportedly had been living at the Hotel Winchester for four months but disappeared two weeks before the shootings.

Guttman arrived in Boston on the S.S. *Ivernia* from Liverpool on Dec. 20, 1906. Soon afterward, as the Boston police and press pieced together his story from the Lett community, he worked in a mica mine in New Hampshire. But he soon returned to the Boston area.

As of June 1907, Guttman was living in Winchester. He said so in his Declaration of Intention, in which he renounced his allegiance to the czar, denied being an anarchist, and declared his intent to become an American citizen.

of December, anno Domini 1. 906; I am not an anarchist; I am not a polygamist nor a believer in the practice of polygamy; and it is my intention in good faith to become a citizen of the United States of America and to permanently reside therein:  
SO HELP ME GOD.

Edmund Guttman  
(Original signature of declarant)

Subscribed and sworn to before me this 20th  
day of June, anno Domini 1907

[SEAL.]

*The signature of Edmund Guttman on his Declaration of Intention*

In 1908, the papers reported, Guttman was employed in the extermination of gypsy moths in the Middlesex Fells. As the gypsy moth wars had been going on for almost 20 years and would continue for as many more, there was work available for many. In 1908 that included at least 16 Latvians.



*Spraying trees in the gypsy-moth-ridden Middlesex Fells, this unidentified man was doing a type of work supervised by Edmund Guttman while he lived in Winchester.*

Charles Price, former superintendent of the Fells, reportedly said Guttman had been hired over a year earlier. "Gutman was selected as the most intelligent of the body and appointed foreman of one gang." Gossip among the men, Price said, had been that Guttman had killed someone in his homeland and had been compelled to flee the country. Some of the gang liked him; some did not.

A photograph of the 16 Letts in the Fells was reproduced in the *Globe*. Reportedly all the men were accounted for except two, said to be Guttman's closest friends and both missing after the robbery. Later, however, that line of suspicion was deemed false.

It was not until 1914 that news reached Boston police about who the men with Guttman were and what happened after they fled the Forest Hill Cemetery. And they then discovered why Guttman was found dead in the cemetery.

The two who escaped went back to Europe. "Anarchists of the most desperate type, criminals with a long list of deaths to their reckoning," according the *Globe*,<sup>5</sup> they were involved in a jewelry

robbery and killings in London in 1910. The resulting manhunt led to the Siege of Sidney Street, a gunfight between a force of combined police and Scots Guards—called in by Home Secretary Winston Churchill—and two Latvians. One was shot, while the other was killed when the house caught fire.

With information supplied by London police and Scotland Yard, Boston police were convinced that these two were the men wanted in Boston. Further, they learned that Guttman was not killed by police bullets but by fellow robber Poolka Mourrivitz,<sup>6</sup> “the reason being that the older man with poor feet and a weak heart confessed himself unable to keep their pace. Mourrivitz feared he might be captured and might confess and would take no chances.”

“The older man,” according to the Declaration, was born in 1881, making him 27 when he died, though his death certificate estimated his age at 35 and the *Ivernia’s* passenger list would have him 24.

There the story—one full of conflicting evidence, contradictory testimony, and unanswered questions—ended in the *Globe*, but another chapter was added by the *Winchester Star* in 1936.

### **DANGER AMONG THE HIRED HANDS**

When Guttman embarked on the *Ivernia* in 1906, his occupation was given as farm laborer. In fact, in addition to the gypsy moth crews, he did find employment on a couple of farms in Winchester.

It was customary for farmers to take on seasonal labor. The 1936 *Star* article reported that one day a stranger who spoke Russian, German, and French but not English went to the Symmes farm and asked for work through a Russian workman employed there named Felix.

He was hired and, according to the *Star’s* anonymous source, proved to be an excellent worker. “His intellect seemed much above the average farm laborer and he learned our language with amazing rapidity.” He was Edmund Guttman.

“He became friends with one of the family and told him in confidence he had left home because he had killed a policeman but this was passed off as idle boasting.”

Hired hands lived in a house on Everell Road. “Strange looking visitors began to come to visit Guttman, including a giant blond Russian with staring blue eyes.” Though they were polite to the Symmes family, Felix finally told one of the family that “the business of Gutman and his friends was to kill people.”

That family member decided to find out for himself. “Taking a pail of chicken feed as an alibi he went quietly to the hired men’s house one night and looked into the window. There was Gutman and his long-haired friends in violent conversation.”

A few days later Felix left. Guttman also left, to work on the James Russell farm near the Medford line. Then he went to work in the Middlesex Fells.

“One morning about daylight the same member of the Symmes family was out hunting on their farm near what is now Pierrepont road. Hearing a shot he hastened on and saw Gutman and his wild gang creeping through the grass and brush in military formation such as we learned from the European armies in the World War.”

The men apparently talked about kidnaping the onlooker. One had a revolver, which Guttman took from him. “Gutman then burst into violent orders and holding the revolver stood behind the Symmes. His words were evidently that he would shoot the first person who touched him.

“Then in English Gutman said that he had saved his life as he was his friend and to hurry away as these were bad men and that if he valued the farm buildings to say nothing of the affair to the family. This member of the family guessing that all was not well had cocked both barrels of his shotgun with his thumb unnoticed and now backed away from them. However, he said nothing about it all to the family and the buildings were not burned.”

A few months later, Guttman lay dead in the Forest Hills Cemetery, apparently shot by one of his partners in crime.

What was being plotted in the Fells and in the house used by the farmhands? Who and what was Guttman? Standard language in the Declaration of Intention which Guttman signed includes the statement, “I am not an anarchist.” Was this a lie?

The truth in the whole sad story is elusive. What it does point up, however, is that much may be hidden and unsuspected under the surface of the most common and familiar of settings and circumstances. And it shows that there are many small pieces in the history of Winchester that connect it to events in places both near and far away.

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2019 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Sept. 2, 2016. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

<sup>2</sup> *The Boston Globe*, July 25, 1908.

<sup>3</sup> A fuller history of the crime may be found in the *Boston Globe* and in an article titled “One Dead and Eight Wounded in Tavern Robbery” posted on the Jamaica Plain Historical Society’s site.

<sup>4</sup> The spelling “Gutman” was used in the papers

<sup>5</sup> *The Boston Globe*, Feb. 6, 1914.

<sup>6</sup> The name Mourrivitz was totally unlike any of the suspects named in the 1908 newspapers.