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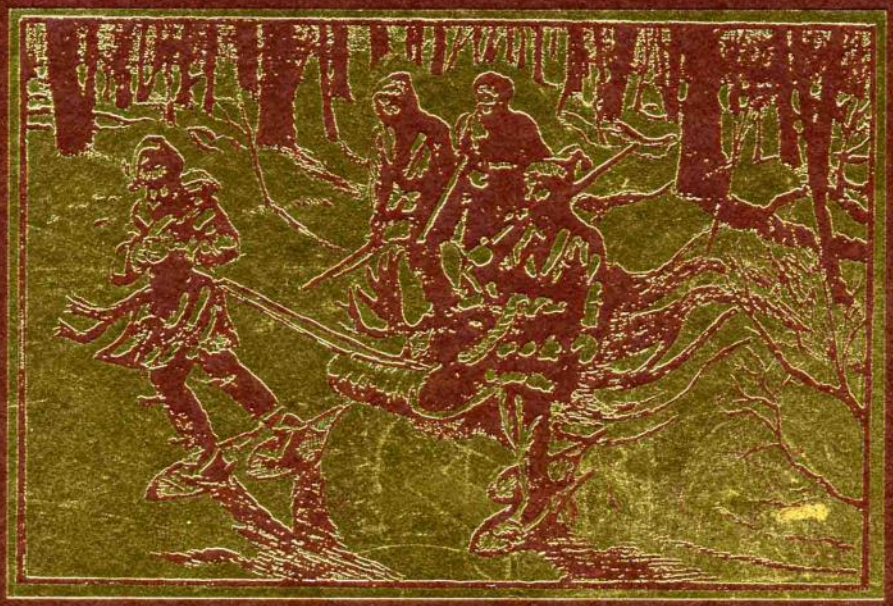
THE DOUBLE GUN



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The Merkel Story

Part I

by J. E. Fender

My first involvement with a Merkel firearm was truly a life-altering event. It began innocently enough on a Tuesday morning in August 1972 in a coutada of the Marromeu District just south of the Zambezi River operated by the Mozambique (or as it was then sometimes known: Portuguese East Africa) safari company, Safrique. Americans contemplating an African safari in the early 1970s would likely have thought first of the traditional hunting countries of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, but the Portuguese African provinces of Mozambique and Angola had well-developed safari outfitters, as I learned from Portuguese Air Force officers at Lajes Field in the Portuguese-owned Azores Islands where I was stationed. For our first safari (and our second as well) my wife, Ruth, and I were fortunate to have selected Jimmy Chalmers as our professional hunter, and as our second week in the bush began Jimmy cautioned that we had to be particularly wary of Cape buffalo on Tuesdays.

Why Tuesdays? Even though the Mozambican government had granted Safrique exclusive hunting rights in the coutada, the vast coutada was much too large for Safrique to patrol effectively, and the Marromeu District was close enough to Beira, the second largest city in Mozambique, that Portuguese residents could drive to the coutada on a Saturday morning, poach a few animals, then return to Beira late Sunday afternoon. Inevitably, the poachers, who were interested only in securing as much meat in the shortest time, would not follow up any animals they wounded. A Cape buffalo wounded on a Saturday or a Sunday would lie up through the following Monday, and festering wounds would make them particularly ill-tempered and aggressive by Tuesday.

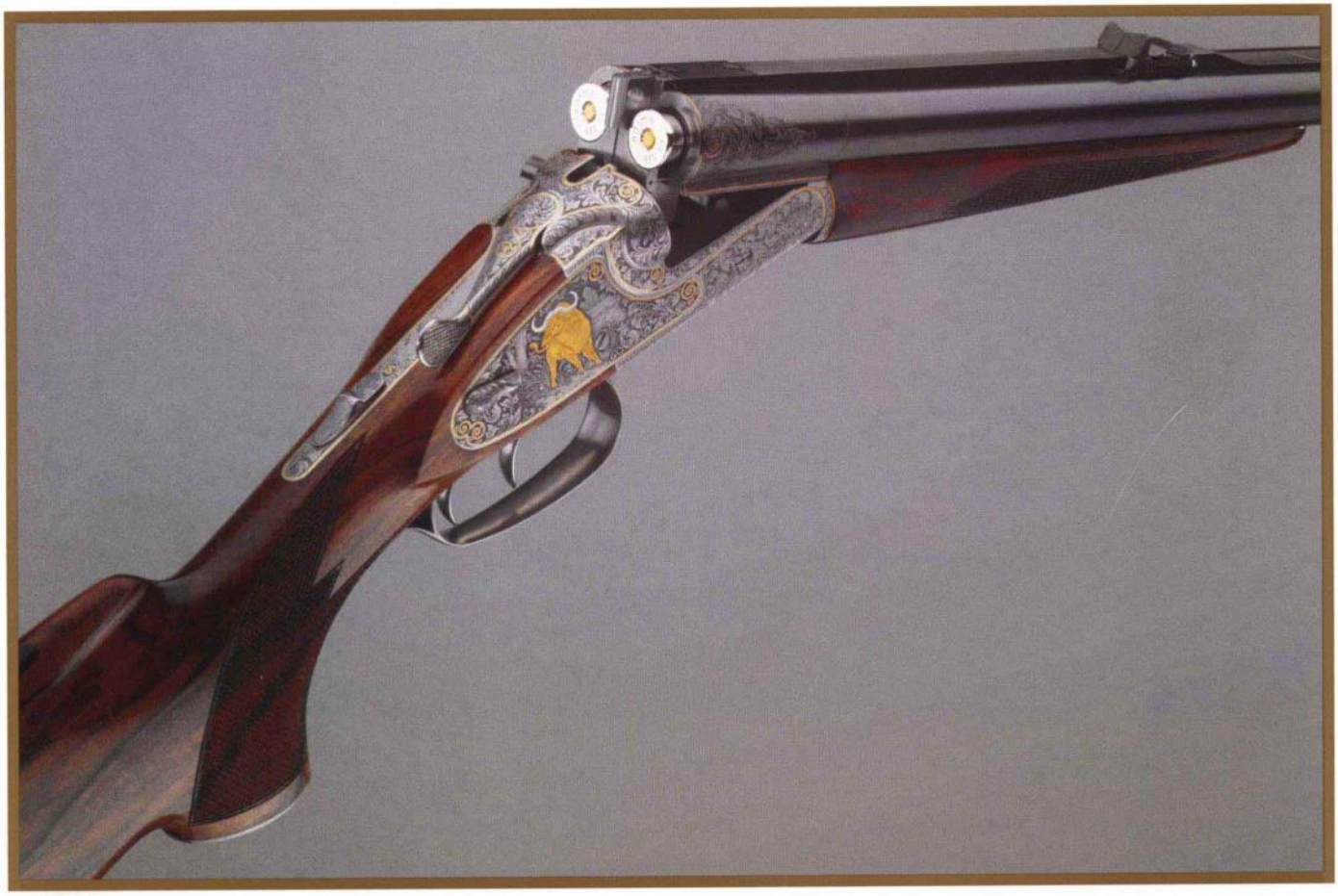
On this Tuesday morning with very little wind, Joâo, a local guide, was in the lead following a lion's spoor on a trail just wide enough for single-file travel that wound through high elephant grass. Joâo was closely followed by Zeca and Amerigo, two of Jimmy's permanent staff; I walked behind Amerigo, and Jimmy Chalmers walked a yard or so behind me. Suddenly, as the narrow path curved to the left, Joâo, Zeca, and Amerigo vanished, melting silently into the high grass, and a buffalo that had been lying down at the trail's turning was immediately on its feet and launched directly toward me!

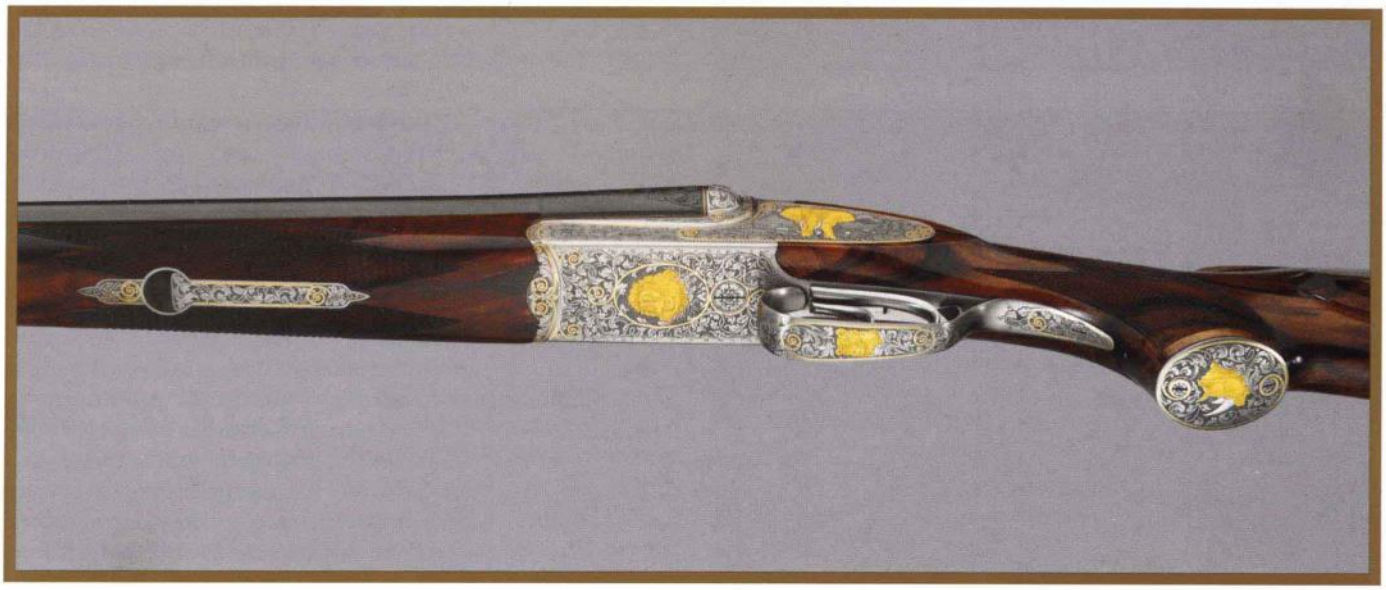
I managed one shot from my Savage 110 in .338 Winchester

Magnum before the buffalo struck solidly in my midriff with its boss. Thankfully, the buffalo did not lower its head to grind me into the ground, but lifted and threw me aside with a powerful upward toss of its head and a partial turn of its body. As soon as my body was no longer between Jimmy Chalmers and the buffalo, Jimmy fired one 500 grain Kynoch solid from his .470 Nitro Express Merkel over and under into the buffalo's now exposed right foreleg. Jimmy's Merkel was inches from the buffalo and so close that I clearly saw the burning gases at the muzzles singe the hair on the shoulder. The buffalo's forelegs crumpled, it lost interest in me, now lying on my back atop the only camel thorn bush anywhere on the trail, and Jimmy fired the second Kynoch solid directly into the hump where the neck joined the shoulders, severing the spinal chord and killing the buffalo so quickly that it never gave a death bellow.

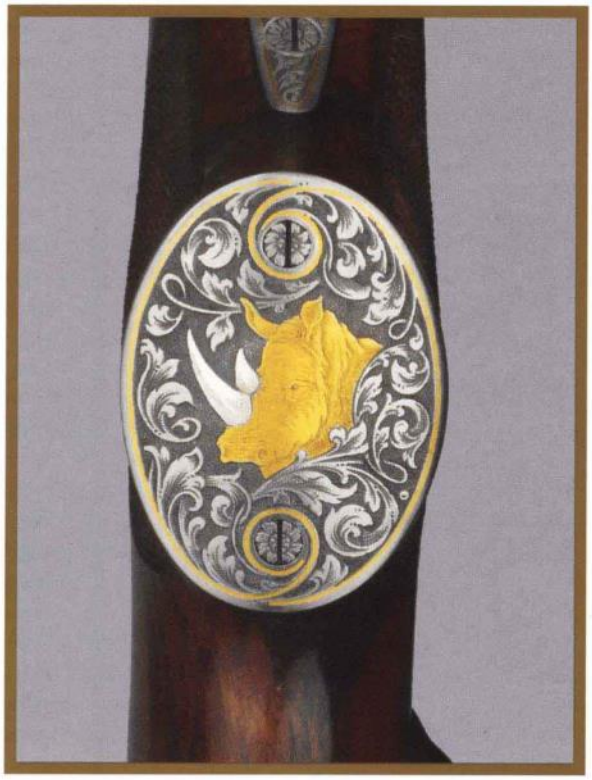
This vignette occurred much faster than the telling, with no more than 7 to 10 seconds elapsing between the buffalo's getting to its feet until it was definitively dead. Joâo and Amerigo miraculously appeared and pulled me out of the thorn bush, while Zeca cast about in the elephant grass to the left of the trail to locate my rifle, then walked back to bring up the truck. While waiting for the truck, Jimmy and I examined the buffalo, a young, soft-bossed bull, perhaps three years old. We found a suppurating wound in the muscle of the buffalo's left rear leg. Knowing that the buffalo had suffered grievously and to no good purpose, I felt a strong surge of sympathy for the magnificent animal—but I also had no doubt how this vignette would have ended, not with a bruised midriff, a couple of cracked ribs and some interesting scratches, had Jimmy Chalmers not had the .470 Merkel over and under that his staff called the "machete" in his hands that lovely, long-ago August Tuesday morning.

The origins of the firearm manufacturer known today as Merkel Jagd-und Sportwaffen GmbH (Merkel Hunting and Sporting Firearms *Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haftung*—meaning a privately held German company) is a fascinating story which the *Double Gun Journal* is pleased to share with its readers. "The Merkel Story" actually began shortly after the beginning of the Second Millennium CE during the final phase of the three-age system of human technological prehistory, the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, and the Iron Age, with the Iron Age as an archaeological term for cultures using iron as the principal material for cutting tools and weapons. The nomadic "hunter-gatherer" tribes wandering about the European landmass had been settling into fairly stable agricultural communities, and the Suhl area of the state of Thuringia in what we know as the present-day country of Germany was rich in iron ore and hardwood trees suitable for reduction to charcoal, the preferred fuel for smelting ores. (Coke, a natural coal-based form of charcoal, was not employed as a smelting fuel until hardwood forest depletion as the Industrial Revolution progressed.)



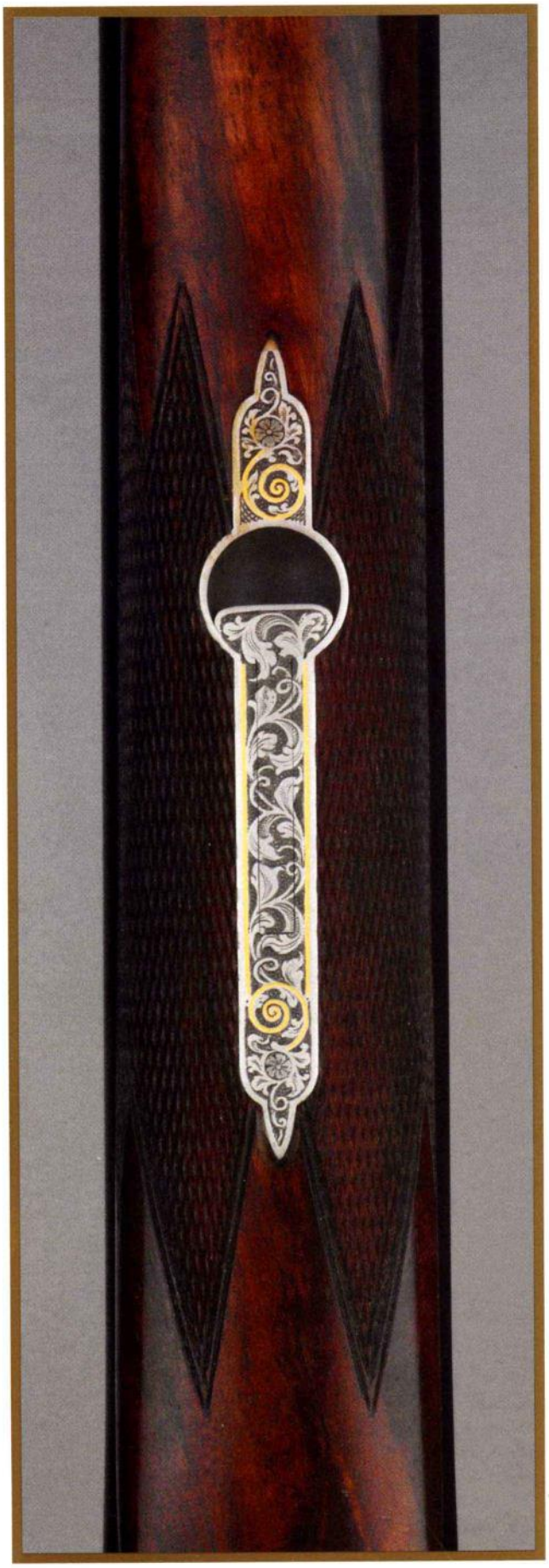


Suhl has an informative museum of the history of firearms' manufacture in the area, and since your correspondent minored in geology in undergraduate school, I was impressed that the exhibits begin with the primitive (and dangerous) tunnel shaft ore mining and smelting operations. Iron ore mining and smelting into tools and edged weapons in the Suhl area was first mentioned in 1239, and the first recorded reference to crude muzzle-loading firearms (hand cannons) attempting to harness the combustion of the mixture of charcoal (C–which provides fuel for the chemical reaction), sulfur (S–also a fuel, but lowers the temperature required for ignition), and potassium nitrate (KNO^3–which supplies oxygen for the chemical reaction) in Suhl is dated approximately 1490. Suhl's coat-of-arms dates from 1318, and initially incorporated two hammers, an acknowledgement of the city's process in metallurgy (the current coat-of-arms displays one hammer).



The Merkel family name has deep roots in the Suhl and Zella-Mehlis region with the first mention of the name dating from census records of the 1500s. However, the origins of the eponymous firm known as Gebrüder Merkel (Merkel Brothers) began with the marriage of a young engraver named Friedrich Ernst Ferdinand Merkel to Auguste Louise Funk, the daughter of a highly respected gunsmith. This union was a fruitful one, with Friedrich and Louise rearing a total of 13 children (seven of them boys). All of the boys entered the firearm manufacturing trade in Suhl. The eldest son, Ernest August, established the gunmaking firm of E. A. Merkel, and brought two brothers, Otto Gottlieb and Louis Franz Ferdinand, into the firm. Bernhard Engle began his own firearm manufacturing company as B. Merkel, and was also an enthusiastic hunter whose field experiences led to refinements in the firearms he made.

On 1 September 1898 the three remaining brothers, Albert Oskar, Gebhard, and Karl Paul Merkel incorporated Gebrüder Merkel, a company for the purpose of "joint manufacture of firearms and other articles". Albert Oskar and Gebhard were already master gunsmiths trained in the Suhl tradition, and Karl Paul was a master stock maker. In the Germanic culture a person with two given names is traditionally addressed with both names, and the names Albert Oskar and Karl Paul have caused some chroniclers of Gebrüder Merkel firearms to list four founding brothers, but in actuality there were only three. Each of the three Merkel brothers contributed unique talents to their company: Gebhard emerged as the principal firearms designer; Albert Oskar excelled at business management and administration, while Karl Paul oversaw manufacturing processes, final assembly, form, fit, and function, and



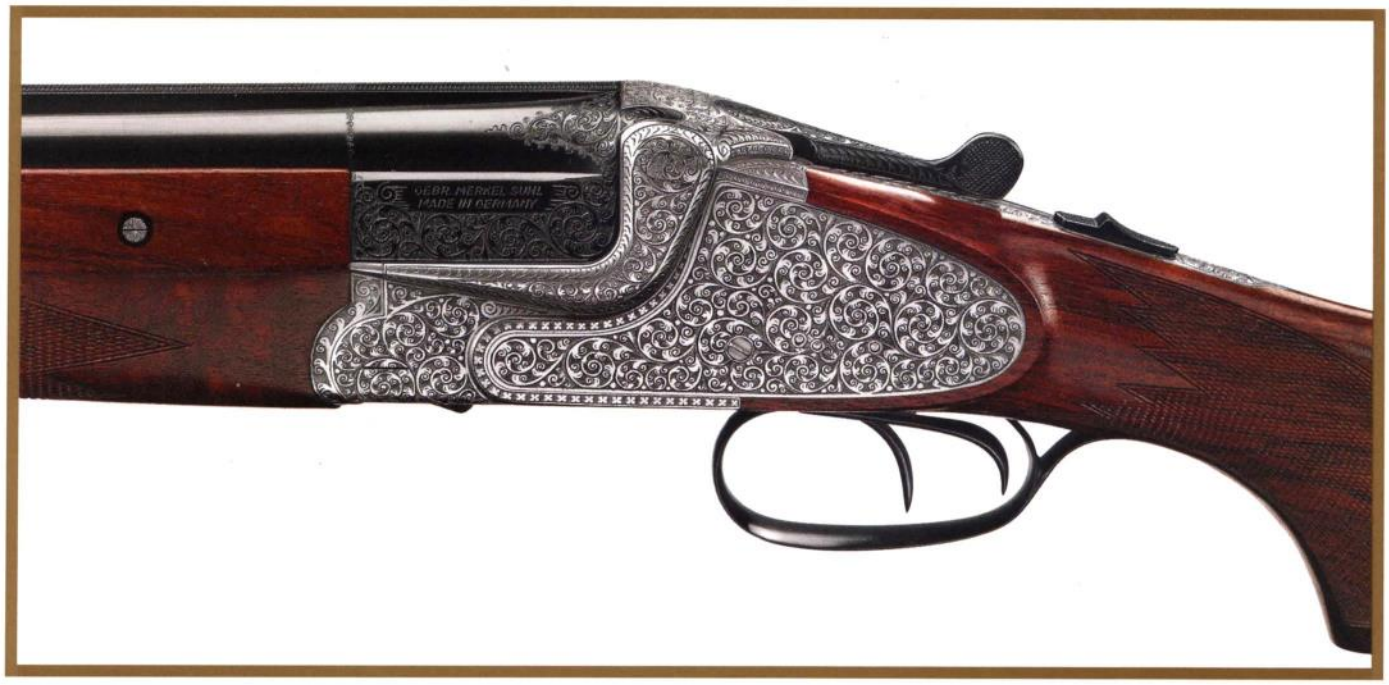
Hussey obtained patents for their over-and-under firearm designs.

It is worth noting that Gebrüder Merkel early on used the term "Bock" to identify the company's over and under firearms, and in 1931 Merkel registered "Bock" as a trademark. However, long before 1931, "Bock" had become a generic term for "double barrel over/under firearms," so Merkel's efforts to assert "brand identification" were as unavailing as efforts to retain the trademarks for aspirin, Thermos, or iPad.

While I am sure Gebrüder Merkel manufactured over and under shotguns in the 16 years between the company's founding and the onset of World War I, your correspondent has never had the opportunity to examine one. I believe Merkel's design of its *Bock Doppelflinte* naturally evolved from the design and manufacture of the *Bock Büchsflinte* over and under combination shotgun and rifle. Gebhard devised and patented a unique barrel-joining system utilizing a combination of hard and soft solder. This barrel-joining system has been further refined and is still in use today at Merkel. Someone at Gebrüder Merkel (most probably Gebhard) was quite taken by the shotguns manufactured by the British gunmaker W.W. Greener. Gebhard admired the trim lines of the Greener side-by-side double shotgun, but most particularly Gebhard admired the hammerless double barrel shotgun cross-bolt mechanism combined with the bottom holding down bolts that William Wellington Greener patented in 1876 as the "Treble Wedge-Fast Hammerless Gun" perhaps better known as the "Facile Princeps." This was one of the strongest double barrel side-by-side shotguns ever designed, and once the British patents expired was widely copied by other gunmakers—including Gebrüder Merkel, some of whose copies were virtually indistinguishable from Greener shotguns, down to the Greener-style safety incorporated into the left wrist of the buttstock. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, William Wellington Greener must truly have been flattered if he ever saw a Merkel copy (and given that he lived until 1921 he very likely may have).

The four years and three months that World War I raged brought death to over 8.5 million people, and a northeastern Europe reduced to rubble. The victorious nations did not view the defeated nations with any charity, and the German nation was held to be the most responsible for the war and its consequences. The Treaty of Versailles signed on 28 June 1919 by the "Big Three" of Great Britain, France, and the United States imposed crippling territorial, military, and financial conditions upon Germany—including the forcing of Germany to admit full responsibility for starting the war—the infamous "War Guilt" clause. The Treaty's conditions were particularly galling to the Germans who, after agreeing to the Armistice in November 1918 had been led to believe they would be consulted by the victorious Allies on the contents of the Treaty. While readers of the *Double Gun Journal* must leave discussions of the war's causes and its consequences to the professional historians, we can appreciate the vicissitudes imposed upon the German populace.

Gebrüder Merkel had emerged from the war with its manufactory largely intact—because, as in the subsequent World War II the company's equipment had not been engaged in



On this and facing page: Merkel 303 with Arabesque Scroll

armaments' production. However, the company's external markets had been destroyed, but more importantly, a large percentage of the military-age men from the Suhl area were among the two million soldiers killed fighting for their country. Fortunately, the indefatigable Gebhard Merkel was still in control of his eponymous company, and he had a design for a new over and under double gun that would re-establish the Merkel marque.

The Merkel over and under double barrel shotgun emerged in the form we know it today in 1924 as the Model 303, and it was a radical departure from anything connoisseurs of fine shotguns had seen. The three-piece fore-end was certainly a departure from the traditional detachable fore-end, but the bolting system of the Model 303 had never been seen before. We know it as the

Merkel DeLuxe in the Erfurt Design

Kersten double cross-bolt extension. How Gustav Kersten and Gebrüder Merkel brought their respective designs together to form the modern over and under Merkel shotgun cannot be discerned from the existing records, though more probably than not, the collaborative effort occurred shortly *after* World War I, rather than *prior* to the War. Gustav Kersten was a talented gunsmith and firearm designer who deserves to be better known. His ancestors reportedly were of Swedish lineage, and Gustav had become a master armorer in the Prussian Army (explaining how Prussia existed within the greater German Reich formed by Otto von Bismarck is difficult without a detailed study of German unification—for our purposes the "Prussian Army" at the beginning of the 20th century is subsumed within the greater "German Army").

Gustav settled in the small town of Straßburg some 270 kilometers southwest of Suhl, and his design and manufacturing originated there. Like Gebrüder Merkel, Kersten was familiar with the Greener bolting system, and used the Greener system as the platform for his own

innovations. Kersten was active prior to World War I, and examples of his bolting systems can be found via an Internet search. In *The British Over-and-Under Shotgun*, Boothroyd mentioned in his correspondence with Herr Kreuper that the German Proof and Test Institute had "owned an over and under shotgun with a Kersten action (built by Kersten himself) for over 20 years which had fired several hundred thousand shots." Boothroyd opined, "This gun must have been built about 1906." While this early Kersten bolting system was undoubtedly very strong, it would have been nothing like the Kersten system incorporated into the Model 303.

Gustav Kersten had patented his latest design, the "Double Cross Bolt" (sometimes referred to as a "Double Greener" or "Double Kersten Lock") system, and in some way Gebhard learned of it. From the scant facts available your correspondent has been able to deduce that Gustav Kersten *was not* an employee of Gebrüder Merkel, but Gebhard incorporated Kersten's locking system into the Model 303. Whether Gebhard paid Kersten a royalty for every firearm produced with the Kersten system or purchased the rights to the design, given the passage of some 90 years, is a moot question. As a historical note, the Kersten Double Cross Bolt system was also used in the Beretta SO sidelock introduced in the early 1930s.

The genius of the Kersten Double Cross Bolt system is the fabrication of one round cross-bolt that passes through *two* extensions that project from either side of the upper barrel. The cross-bolt must be *round* for effective transmission of recoil force around the entire diameter of the bolt. Couple this top-bolting system with Purdey-style double underbites and a knuckle pin hook and the result is one of the strongest—if not the strongest—double gun bolting systems ever devised. In point of fact, while this bolting system is still retained on the high-end Merkel double guns, today's less-expensive Merkel over and under double guns, while retaining the Kersten Double Cross Bolt system, dispense with the Purdey double underbites and utilize simple lumps that fit into recesses precisely machined into the frames.

The result is a high-profile action body that, because of its strength in resisting the radial, axial, and bending forces always present in double barrels that pivot upon their frames, is a frame-barrels' combination that can be trimmed to a relatively light overall weight—which enhances the handling and pointing qualities of an over and under shotgun.

Gebhard Merkel was also responsible for the unique three-piece wood fore-end of the higher-grade over and under firearms. Some shotgunners dismiss this fore-end as a needless affectation, but consider: the two pieces of

On this and facing page: A Combination Gun in the Suhl design.

wood affixed to the top barrel provide a much closer wood-to-metal fit than the typical fully detachable fore-end. The undersides of the two pieces are relieved, so a few ounces of weight are saved, and when the third, detachable, piece of wood is snapped into place the result is a minimal and graceful diminishing underline leading from the fore-end iron to the under barrel. Less is actually more, since the shotgunner's leading hand lies much closer to the axes of the barrels than is the case with thicker fore-ends. If the reader still believes the three-piece fore-end is an affectation, the firm of Browning introduced a three-piece fore-end in 1977 for some models of its famous Superposed over and under shotguns on the premise that the upswept fore-end provided a superior hand-to-barrel relationship.

The Merkel firm, now known as *Suhler Waffenwerk Gebrüder Merkel, Suhl,* prospered greatly in the years between 1924 and 1939, although Gebhard Merkel died in 1933 and did not live to see his over and under firearm design awarded a *Grand Prix* at the *1937 World Exhibition* in Paris. The quick-handling and superb point qualities of the Merkel over and under shotguns were quickly noted by competitive shotgunners at the beginning of the 1930s who wished to better their scores at the trap field or the live-pigeon ring. The great American trapshooter, E. W. (Ted) Renfro from the unincorporated town of Dell in extreme southwest Montana was enticed to the Continent by Merkel, whose shotguns he employed to great effect in the live-pigeon rings of Monaco. Perhaps the best German trapshooter of the 1930s, Kurt Schöbel, campaigned Merkel over and under shotguns extensively in Olympic Trap.

The .470 Nitro Express Merkel that Jimmy Chalmers used to such good effect in 1972 was made during this period "between the wars."

"Between the wars" it surely was, for in 1939, little more than 20 years following the end of World War I, an even more deadly and sinister war initiated by Adolph Hitler to

dominate the globe engulfed most of the world. Nazi Germany's rapid rearmament in the years after Hitler declared himself *Führer* and seized complete control of the government, industries, and populace was largely the result of *Organization Todt*, named for Fritz Todt, Hitler's first Minister of Armaments. Immediately following Todt's death in a mysterious plane crash in February 1942, Hitler appointed Albert Speer to lead *Organization Todt*. *Organization Todt* integrated all facets of German industrial production (as well as those of subjugated countries) into the production of armaments. Firearm manufacturers that had been involved in previous military arms production were ordered to produce war materiel. Other firearm manufacturers in Suhl, Krieghoff, Sauer, Anschutz, and Walther, had produced military arms—but not Merkel. Merkel was ordered to produce components for vehicles and optical equipment, and a few basic parts, but no major assemblies, for firearms requisitioned by the *Wehrmacht*. And, because Suhl was not a major center of war-materiel production, the city was never bombed by the Allies.

World War II ended for Suhl on 3 April 1945 when elements of the XII Corps constituting part of General George Patton's mighty Third Army driving northeast day and night after capturing Frankfurt am Main at the end of March paused briefly in Suhl. One month and 5 days later (the official German "unconditional surrender" to the Allies occurred on "V-E Day"7 May at General Dwight D. Eisenhower's headquarters in Reims, France—55 miles East of the Compiègne Forest where the Germans had surrendered to the Allies of World War I on 11 November 1918—but news of the end of the war in Europe was not broadcast widely until the following day).

The three major Allied Powers (the USA, the UK, and Soviet Russia) had earlier agreed at the February 1945 Yalta Conference to partition Germany into various "occupation zones." Suhl was well within the Russian zone, and specially organized "Trophy Battalions" immediately began removing manufacturing equipment and industrial resources from factories in its occupation zone to the Russian homeland as "war reparations." Between mid-1945 and the end of 1946 some 33 percent of the non-war damaged industrial plant in the Russian zone was disassembled and shipped to the Russian homeland.

Merkel Over and Under DeLuxe Rifle

The Russians focused on major industrial equipments such as the Daimler-Benz aircraft engine plant that had been constructed underground by *Organization Todt*, not the 1920–1930s' era machinery used to manufacture Merkel firearms.

When Merkel ceased operations following Germany's unconditional surrender, approximately 350 people were employed in manufacturing operations. Early on however, the Russians had plans for Merkel—the manufacture of sporting arms to be shipped to Russia as "war reparations"—sporting arms that Russia could sell for hard currencies—or present as gifts to visiting heads of state. When production of firearms was restarted toward the end of 1945 some 150 people were employed. During the following decades high-grade Merkel double guns and drillings manufactured in Suhl were presented by the rulers of the Kremlin to notables such as Chinese Chairman Mao Tse Tung, Marshal Josip Broz Tito, first president of Yugoslavia, Gamal Abdel Nasser, second president of Egypt, or Dwight D. Eisenhower, 34th president of the United States.

However, as Winston Churchill so ably noted in his

"Sinews of Peace" speech delivered on 5 March 1946 at Westminster College in the small town of Fulton, Missouri: "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest, and Sofia. All

these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and, in many cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow." Replacing the Nazi regime and its notoriously brutal internal security police—the Gestapo, the soulless, mind-numbing cloak of communism and its cohort, the Stasi—perhaps the most effective and repressive intelligence and secret police agency of the 20th century descended upon the scene so lately lighted by the Allied victory.

In October 1949 the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik*—DDR (German Democratic Republic—GDR), or as it was more commonly known, "East Germany" as it would be known for the next 41 years, was formed as a satellite state of the USSR. East German industries were organized into *Volkseigener Betrieb*—VEB (Publically Owned Operations)—actually work collectives, under a mass nationalization program and these VEBs employed 80% of the East German workforce. Merkel and other firearm manufacturers in the Suhl area, such as Simson, were assigned to the VEB Ernst Thälmann-Werke, named in honor of a deceased German communist. The VEBs produced whatever the centralized East German government directed them to produce, and since very few private citizens in East Germany could afford to purchase motor scooters, much less automobiles, VEB Ernst Thälmann-Werke produced a lot of bicycles.

While the East German government engaged in the façade that its *Ostmark* traded at parity to the West German *Deutsche Mark*, the *Ostmark* was worthless outside East Germany. Desperate to earn hard currencies the East German government directed Merkel to do what Merkel had always done best—build high quality double guns. Existing factory records document that between 1945 and 1987 Merkel manufactured more than 150,000 double guns—that is almost 4,000 double guns per year—during a period when East German products could not be marketed in the West. Nevertheless, a large number of Merkel double guns clandestinely and not so clandestinely found their way to Western markets.

"The Merkel Story" will continue with Part 2 in the Spring 2015 issue.

DeLuxe in Weimer design. Below: The Merkel 303 with V-Spring equipped, exquisitely finished sidelocks.

To read Part 2 of The Merkel Story, return to section 5 and click the link.