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## “Light the Menorah Everywhere”:

## A Book Review of Dr. Jason Bell’s “Cracking the Nazi Code”

Journal of Applied Hermeneutics  
ISSN: 1927-4416  
December 11, 2023  
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DOI: 10.55016/ojs/jah.v2023i2023.78532

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### **Abstract**

This is a book review of Dr. Jason Bell’s book, *Cracking the Nazi Code*, published by Harper Collins Publishers (2023). This review has been shaped by my perceptions of and reflections on current global events. Dr. Bell meticulously compiled 15 years of archival research surrounding the role of Winthrop Pickard Bell, or A12, using historical archives in Canada, Germany, and the UK. His book is invaluable for deepening historical understanding of Canada’s place in the second world war, and to deepen current understanding of the global rise in antisemitism.

### **Keywords**

Hermeneutics; global events; war; antisemitism; nazism

When asked by Dr. Nancy Moules, Journal Editor, to review Dr. Jason Bell’s book, “Cracking the Nazi Code” (Bell, 2023) for the *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*, I accepted hesitantly, as my expertise in both the subject area and hermeneutics is limited. Bringing Dr. Bell’s book with me to a Montreal conference in November 2023, and walking on the paths around McGill University – I thought about recent world events, the rise of antisemitism (Borzykowski, 2023), and how increased knowledge about historical events have relevance today. As I read his book, I was

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reminded of my first Montreal trip in November 2009, with colleagues from the University of Lethbridge for an American Academy of Religion conference. Spending time with, and attending, Dr. Goldie Morgentaler's presentation about her mother's poetry, "The Prayerhouse of Chava Rosenfarb: Poetry and the Shadow of the Holocaust" from the book, "Exile at Last: Selected Poems" (Rosenfarb, 2013), was life-changing for me. Dr. Morgentaler described in heartbreaking detail her mother's longing for faith while acknowledging its impossibility due to the annihilation of faith by the Holocaust. Both Dr. Morgentaler's parents were Holocaust survivors; I had long admired Dr. Henry Morgentaler's contributions to women's reproductive health, but knew little about the contributions of Chava Rosenfarb. On that note, Jason's book could benefit from more details surrounding Dr. Winthrop Bell's wife, Hazel Lawrence [Deinstadt] Bell, who was a nursing sister for the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) of the Canadian Red Cross.

Dr. Jason Bell's book focused on the life of Winthrop Pickard Bell, or A12, who was a British subject, born in Halifax, Canada, completed a PhD with Edmund Husserl as his dissertation supervisor, and taught philosophy at Harvard. Early in the book, a vivid dream Winthrop (first name used to distinguish from Dr. Jason Bell) experienced in July 1914 is described, where a group of German serial killers eliminated anyone standing in their way, and although Winthrop wrote about the dream, its meaning was initially missed. The Germans Winthrop knew were intellectuals (and would later become anti-Nazis).

A recent article in the National Post is noteworthy:

Oct. 7 was a life-changing gut punch to liberals like me. It turned many of us into Zionists, including those once sympathetic to the Palestine Liberation Organization of Yasser Arafat, former president of the Palestinian Authority. The sadistic bloodletting of Jews in the land of their birth shoved the horrors of the Holocaust in our faces. Jews have a historic understanding of persecution and the inconstant nature of acceptance. It is therefore no surprise that they have played such an outsized role in the left's fight for social justice, participating in every major rights battle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ... that's what makes the betrayal by today's intersectional feminists, union leaders, and 'queer' movements disgusting. They're happy to erase Israel, the one Middle Eastern nation that defends gay rights, in favor of the theocratic despots who throw us from their rooftops. (Stratton, 2023)

Throughout Dr. Bell's book, concepts of antisemitism are found, beginning with a 1915 Anti-Semitic League plotting for a world war against Jews and Judaism. Not a grassroots movement, the Anti-Semitic league was a powerful group of Ludendorff collaborators, of which Hitler was an early subscriber; the term Nazi emerging around 1930. Details of Winthrop's life are provided, with insight about how Canada's greatest spy evolved. Not only did Winthrop's philosophical phenomenological training play a significant role, his place on a Cambridge University rowing crew, work as a surveyor across Canadian forests for the National Transcontinental Railway, and rock climbing in Germany contributed to skills and knowledge required in accessing early Nazi militia camps in 1919.

In January 1919, Winthrop sat in the cold, and read German history as a Christmas present to himself.

January 6, the Twelfth Day of Christmas, was ‘cold and very beautiful,’ [Winthrop’s] diary notes. He stayed up late in his frigid cubby, reading about the ancient Germans, a warrior people. Late in the evening, he walked back to his barracks under a beautiful waxing moon, over earth frozen fast and blanketed with snow. Finally, the horrible mud was gone. Reading German history was [Winthrop’s] Christmas present to himself. History helped him to better understand the present and anticipate the future. (Bell, 2023, p. 43)

Throughout his life, Winthrop was often focused on dangerous political undercurrents and strategizing ways to promote change, “phenomenological attitude is good for a lot of things, but it does not lend itself towards frivolous enjoyment” (Bell, 2023, p. 93). Jason identified “[Winthrop’s] pragmatism meant solving problems, not just describing them” (Bell, 2023, p. 223) and, with phenomenology centred in evidence, Winthrop was “constitutionally unable to do anything by half measures” (Bell, 2023, p. 121). Winthrop befriended interesting people wherever he found them, was a liberal (socialist), championing minority rights, “the ability of individuals to bear the rewards and consequences of their own actions, free from external pressure, whether public or private” (Bell, 2023, p. 61).

Just before spring 1919, Winthrop spent time in Berlin, strategizing with Albert Einstein and others about how to save Germany from disaster and, though the city was familiar over the years, it became unrecognizable:

...it felt off. The psychological sensation felt [Winthrop] wrote, like that of a cat in a strange new house. The whole city was mentally ill. It had the depressed feel of a *Ruhleben* prison camp, except without the order. Urgent rumours predicted a great battle for Berlin between right-wing and left-wing mercenaries. (Bell, 2023, p. 114)

Throughout the book, Winthrop’s historical and philosophical brilliance is evident, as well as his relentlessness in investigating and strategizing potential practical solutions. In December 1919, Winthrop wrote a report on Germany for Britain to stop the next world war, “one of the best political ideas of the twentieth century” (Bell, 2023, p. 75). If more attention had been paid to Winthrop’s 1919 report about the intent of the Nazi group, how might global outcomes have changed? Jason noted that “terrorists would never stop trying until they won or were utterly defeated” (Bell, 2023, p. 228). Winthrop’s predictions and reports were not believed until two decades after he first wrote about them; a small article in the *Saturday Night* was finally published, warning about the Nazi’s plan for genocide on a worldwide scale. Winthrop had offered himself to his work, mind and body – and it took a toll on his health.

Another recent article in the *National Post* is noteworthy:

The city of Moncton’s capitulation on the menorah display under the implied threat of violence somewhat mirrors the regrettable choice most major Canadian media outlets made almost two decades ago to not reprint the infamous *Jylands-Posten* (Denmark) cartoons lampooning Prophet Muhammad – again, under the implied threat of a violent backlash from Muslim Canadians. With Islamofacism once again on the rise in Canada, let’s not make the same mistake twice. Not only must Moncton reinstate its menorah display, and there is hope the decision will be reversed at a city council meeting Monday night; every

city hall in Canada needs to follow suit by putting up its own menorah this week. Such a show of solidarity would send a clear message to Islamist thugs, and anyone else who seeks to use violence to advance a political cause, that their actions are not welcome in Canada. (Mohamed, 2023)

Dr. Jason Bell's book brings forward personal and collective challenges and leaves us with questions. What were the conditions under which Nazism flourished; how can I augment my understanding regarding history's lessons; what are my personal perspectives and potentially ethical actions; how can I change my perspectives, beliefs, and actions to contribute to the greater good; and what can be done to become an ally? How can we light the menorah everywhere?

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