



## *The Confidence Men: How Two Prisoners of War Engineered the Most Remarkable Escape in History* by Margalit Fox.

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Elias Henry Jones (Wales) and Cedric Waters Hill (Queensland, Australia), unfamiliar names of minor British Imperial World War I officers in Iraq and Egypt, need some introduction. One a soldier and the other an airman, they were captured in battle and incarcerated in Anatolian Yozgad. There, in the mountains east of Ankara, they connived to escape unpleasant and undependable conditions in their could-have-been-worse POW camp. In *Confidence Men*, Margalit Fox, familiar as a *New York Times* obituarist, provides a lively account of their life-endangering flimflam. Both men wrote their own accounts, Jones in *The Road to En-Dor* (first published in 1919 and still in print), Hill in *The Spook and the Commandant* (1975).<sup>1</sup> The former is the principal source for Fox's book, both are filled with tales of "cunning, danger, and ... high farce" (xv). Fox posits that they explained how, but not why, their bizarre plan could succeed. The duo bamboozled not only enemy soldiers and the camp commandant, but their own fellow prisoners—even when the hoaxers admitted the sleight-of-hand nature of the successful plot.

The four chapters of Book I, "Dead Men Walking," extend from the pair's capture after the successful Ottoman siege of Kut in "Blunderland" through many miles walked and some traveled by cart and railroad cars to Yozgad, one of the Ottomans' main POW camps. Kut lay southeast of Baghdad and Ktesiphon on the Tigris River. Three British expeditionary armies had tried to relieve the siege without success. Rainy weather, sandy terrain, lack of water and other supplies, and the sufficiently effective Ottoman besieging army<sup>2</sup> eventually forced the starving, ill, insect-ridden imperial soldiers to surrender.

Kiazim Bey, the man ruling their POW camp, commanded Moïse Eskenazi, his translator and a Jewish soldier in the Ottoman army.<sup>3</sup> Feckless guards ransacked parcels sent to the prisoners, and the boredom led to "barbed-wire disease," aka, melancholy and monotonous boredom (48). Until—a postcard from an aunt suggested trying a ouija board to pass the long days! They had none, but Jones made one from skimpy materials. The imperial officers' prison buildings were converted houses. Their Armenian owners had recently been forcibly evacuated, victims of the Turkish round-up, forced marches, mass shooting, and genocidal paranoia. If the two Britons'

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1. Many readers will remember, as I did not, that a divining witch of Endor appears to Saul in 1 Samuel 28 of the Hebrew Bible. More to the point yet, as Fox notes, is Kipling's 1919 poem, "En-Dor," decrying spiritualists' preying on war-widows and bereaved mothers after World War I.

2. The British in Iraq, as elsewhere, underestimated their "sick man of Europe" enemies.

3. The British named this diminutive soldier "The Pimple," one of many ethnic slurs, some toned down for our century's edition of a story in which hardy Brits confuse, confute, and confound less mentally agile natives of Iraq, Turkey, and other "inferior" ethnicities. Orientalism and racism flavor this memoir (137).

crazy scheme had not succeeded with the connivance of their jailer, reprisal punishment of their fellow prisoners might have extended to “strafing,” compensatory executions for escapists (9).<sup>4</sup>

Book II’s title, “Ghosts,” refers to the sham spiritualism by which imposters got out of jail employing a ouija board and improvised planchette. It begins with an excursus (53–56) on this once popular tool for summoning the spirits, etymology uncertain. Jones summoned the Spook with the aid of automatism (excursus 58–62) and experience at law “drawing a red herring across my questioners’ train of thought” (62). Not only Mary Todd Lincoln but Europe and the Levant were drawn to the idea that modern communications had enabled conversations with the dead by séances (66). Aside from the debunkers of such delusions like Harry Houdini, hoodwinkers like Maggie Fox (no relationship claimed by author) exposed their paranormal techniques of telepathy. World War I and technological advances, paradoxically, reanimated cults and con games connecting to the world beyond.

Humbuggering that began as a diversion evolved into a plan for salvation. The two con men and others wrote in code to their families at home for essential supplies (including gold coins!) that often escaped the authorities’ examination for contraband and their pilfering. The junior officers’ elaborate plan was stymied by lack of an opportunity to meet the commandant after a year and a half of imprisonment (85). Eskenazi heard rumors of the Briton’s skill in “spiritism” and came knocking. One of Jones’ intuitive advantages was an inclination to undersell himself (and Hill’s magic tricks), an inclination that led their victims to demand supernormal performances.

Burying gold Sovereigns inside and outside the fence (on permitted strolls) lured Moise the translator and Kiazim the commander into belief in the dependable nature of spookery—the (planted) treasure tests.<sup>5</sup> The Spook became angry, fell silent, or threatened death. The Spook commanded the commander. Moise had to apologize for his impatience. On 30 Jan. 1918, Jones approached Hill with a plan to photograph Kiazim in complicit digging for treasure that would secure their safety. The Spook in touch with Hill would provide necessary clues. A desperate Armenian allegedly buried the gold hoard before becoming one of the millions murdered in the Turkish genocide. Jones became a mind-reader, another mass entertainment of the waning nineteenth century (Mark Twain was an exponent, 109). The two men developed a code to dominate and bewitch their audiences. They practiced for three months (111) memorizing codes for nearly 500 objects, gainfully employing the time on their hands. The goal was to be sentenced to solitary confinement (not in camp with other Brits) for transmitting war news by telepathy (115). The pseudo-psychic’s masterstroke was the invention of OOO, the obstructive Armenian source for the Spook’s information about treasure, a ruse that magicians call an “out” for situations where the plot has gotten sticky (129–31). The long-concocted goal was to walk three hundred miles—under guard—south to the coast nearest British Cyprus and pirate a boat. They had the assistance of the “telechronistic ray” (chap. 11). But ... a misguided fellow POW, trying to protect them, thwarted that plot.

Book III’s title, “Demons,” refers to their second long con. They feigned madness, as Odysseus had done to escape Trojan War service. But their con lasted months and was so successful that Constantinopolitan psychiatrists, including the renowned Mashar Ozman Bey, signed papers for their lunatics’ exchange with mad Turkish POWs. The vetting process was severe, but these two

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4. Hill in a previous stage of confinement had to give his “parole” to his fellow prisoners, a promise in contemporary parlance (102) not to try to escape because that would endanger all British prisoners of the Ottomans.

5. Jones claimed he learned witchcraft among the “Head-Hunting Waas” of Burma (142). This charlatan recited ritual incantations—Welsh love-songs and pseudo-Choctaw. The duo would grunt and groan in chorus.

men, one professing a desire to blow up and “abolish” Britain (195), and the other, a melancholic immersed in his Bible at all hours, managed to convince their captors. This part of the book is less entertaining, although the story of their scheme to hang themselves, eleven feet from the floor, is gripping. Their unceasing fakery on the dusty road and in the capital’s mental hospital took a toll on them (196). Hill and soon after Jones were repatriated, just before war’s end. The book’s describes their subsequent lives, Hill as an aviator and officer, Jones as a university registrar.

Margalit Fox puts the spiritualism craze of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century into perspective. She is conversant with the relevant literature on “coercive persuasion,” which encompasses fields of applied psychology useful to “the adman, the con man, the cult leader, the demagogue” (223-9). “Weapons of influence” include afflicting the “mark,” by force, manipulation, and stealth. These techniques enable con men to install false beliefs. Fox thoroughly attributes references and quotes and includes helpful maps and photos from Jones’s publication.

Fox's reprise will interest students of soft weaponry, the war for men's minds in one early twentieth-century twist. She assures us that individual delusion and mass manipulation can be exposed but often not suppressed. The accuracy of her narrative depends on that of the British hero, her chief source. The Turks have no voice. The adventure presents a "charming" footnote to a terrible conflict that devastated much of humanity then living.