

William Cooper's Aboriginal protest re-enacted

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Aubrey Schwartz (left), Kevin Russell and Uncle Boydie Turner (centre) with others outside William Cooper's house

On 6 December 2012 at 8:30am, a group of people from the Jewish Holocaust Centre (JHC), including President Pauline Rockman, Executive Director Warren Fineberg, Development Manager Reuben Zylberszpic, Board member Elly Brooks and myself, met up with other interested people outside 73 Southampton Street, Footscray. This is where Aboriginal activist, William Cooper, lived in 1938, and it is now significant as the place from which Cooper led a delegation of the Australian Aborigines League on that now-celebrated walk into the city on 6 December 1938. William Cooper then had the intention of delivering a letter of protest to the German Consul. The letter itself is lost to history, but its contents expressed condemnation of the cruel persecution of the Jewish people by the Nazi government in Germany. It was one of a number of protests at the time following the anti-Jewish riots in Germany known as *Kristallnacht* (night of broken glass).

The special significance of William Cooper's protest, however, is that the Aboriginal people, who at that time did not have citizenship in their own country, empathised deeply with the fate of the Jews on the other side of the globe who had been violently and harshly stripped of their citizenship rights. This protest was an expression of fraternity with other dispossessed people and was also an important statement about the Aboriginals' own unjust situation. Sadly, in 1938 the German consul refused to admit William Cooper and his delegation, and their protest went largely unnoticed, save for a few lines in the Melbourne newspapers at the time, and the memories of the few participants, passed down orally to

their friends and descendants.

More recently, however, the protest has been lauded, interest in William Cooper and his delegation has been revived, and Cooper has been honoured by Melbourne's Jewish Holocaust Centre, the Victorian Parliament and Yad Vashem, Israel's premier Holocaust memorial site.

The focus of the December walk was a re-enactment of William Cooper's walk by Alf (Uncle Boydie) Turner, Cooper's grandson, who walked in the footsteps of his grandfather to deliver a letter of protest to the German Consulate at its former site in Collins Street, Melbourne. Before the walk from William Cooper's house to the city, there was an early morning walk around Footscray, led by Kevin

Russell, William Cooper's great-grandson. He took us to sites of relevance to Cooper in the Footscray area and read from Cooper's writings at these stops. The walk also crossed the newly created 'William Cooper Footbridge' at Footscray station.

Uncle Boydie, Aubrey Schwartz – one of the event organisers – and I subsequently drove to the East Melbourne Synagogue, where we met another group of supporters, including a few survivors of *Kristallnacht*. After an impassioned speech by Aubrey Schwartz about William Cooper and some words from Uncle Boydie, this group embarked on a walk into the city, capably led by octogenarian Uncle Boydie, who had a determined look in his eye and a spring in his step. It was a challenge for some to keep up with him.

The march into the city took us down Lonsdale Street to the corner of William Street where we met up with the Footscray group and many more. We all squeezed into the recently opened William Cooper Justice Centre, a most appropriate venue that demonstrates the revival of interest in this proud and dignified activist. After a few poignant words from the Centre manager, the group – by now well over a hundred supporters – made its way down William Street to Collins Street, still trying to keep up with Uncle Boydie, whose energy had grown from the support of so many on his important journey.

As I walked alongside Uncle Boydie, I could see how determined he was to finish the job on which his grandfather had set out 74 years ago. The letter of

protest had not reached its intended audience on that day, but today it would! It made me reflect on why, when his people are still treated unfairly in this country and struggling for a better deal, this mattered so much to him and his family.

As we neared our destination, we paused for a few minutes to wait for the rest of the group to catch up. Uncle Boydie was serious and solemn, graciously accepting heartfelt thanks from survivors and their descendants, posing for photos with supporters from his clan and taking in the significance of what he was about to do.

When we crossed the street to the site of the former German Consulate, the current Honorary German Consul, Michael Pearce SC was there to accept the letter. In front of the assembled throng, including Holocaust survivors and their descendants, Pearce graciously accepted the letter of protest. He said:

Uncle Boydie, Ms Pauline Rockman, President of the Jewish Holocaust Centre, Holocaust survivors, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:



Photo: Lochlan Tangas, Australian Jewish News

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we stand, the Kulin nation, and pay my respects to their elders past and present. I also acknowledge the presence here today of members of the Yorta Yorta people.

I am very pleased on behalf of the Federal Republic of Germany to receive from Uncle Boydie this replica letter and the resolution of the Australian Aborigines League passed in December 1938.

I am pleased thereby to right the wrong committed by the German Consul on this spot exactly 74 years ago, when he refused to accept the original from Uncle Boydie's grandfather, William Cooper.

In the context of the horrific crimes that were then being committed against the Jews in Germany and were yet to be committed in Germany and in German-occupied Europe, the wrong committed here by the German Consul in 1938 may seem small and insignificant.

Yet the Consul's refusal to accept the letter and the resolution was undoubtedly wrong.

It was wrong because it denied the German Government's responsibility for the crimes being committed against the Jews.



Photo: Lochlan Tangas, Australian Jewish News

It was also wrong because it failed to acknowledge the courageous gesture of a people whose freedom and rights in their own land were heavily circumscribed and whose survival remained precarious.

Of course not every wrong can be righted. For some wrongs no amount of compensation can ever be enough. Some things too are beyond forgiveness and beyond reconciliation.

However, it is very important for the government and the people of Germany to take every opportunity to correct past wrongs. It is therefore with deep gratitude on their behalf that I receive this letter from Uncle Boydie.

I will pass it on to the German Foreign Office in Berlin and do my best to see that it receives a prompt and sufficient response. In that I will have the support of the German Embassy in Canberra.

While Pearce spoke I felt strong emotions, reflecting that in 1938 the Holocaust had not yet occurred and all those millions of Jews who subsequently died were still alive. I wondered whether people protesting really have the ability to change the course of history. William Cooper and his group had the historical insight of their own life experiences to understand where such blatant flaunting of people's civil and human rights could end. Sadly no one wanted to hear what they had to say in 1938.

In front of me stood a group of survivors – guides from the Jewish Holocaust Centre, including Willy Lerner, Abram Goldberg, Halina Zylberman and Rosa Krakowski. They were all wearing t-shirts with the JHC logo. Willy had managed to put his t-shirt on over the top of his suit. On the back was written 'REMEMBER the past, CHANGE the future'.



Photo: Lochlan Tangas, Australian Jewish News



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