



From left: Professor Ghil'ad Zuckerman, Uncle Boydie, AJAC's Jeremy Jones and Abe Schwarz.

Photo: Peter Haskin

The legacy of William Cooper

ADAM BLAU

HERE is a passage in Pirkei Avot that reads: "If not me, than who? And if not now, then when?"

This sentiment provided the thematic undercurrent throughout this emotional and provocative hour led by Abe Schwarz, local educator and an active worker within the Aboriginal community.

Schwarz took a captivated audience through the inspirational story of William Cooper, an Aboriginal man who embodied the above quotation.

Cooper is famously known as the first person – not only in Australia, but the world – to publicly condemn the Nazis after Kristallnacht.

The audience was fortunate enough to hear of Cooper's life story not only from Schwarz, but also from Cooper's 85-year-old grandson, Alf Turner (Uncle Boydie), who has spent the last decade highlighting Cooper's incredible courage and compassion in the aftermath of Kristallnacht.

From the mouth of his grandson, Cooper's story is as follows: he received a semblance of an education at an Aboriginal camp, after which he became involved in Indigenous issues and became secretary for the Aboriginal Australian League (AAL), where he continued as an activist for various social issues.

When Cooper saw the front page of Melbourne's daily newspaper *The Argus* on November 11, 1938 screaming of razed synagogues in Europe, fatal beatings of Jews in Berlin streets, Jewish businesses looted in Vienna, he – unlike most of the world – was prompted to action.

Schwarz was quick to remind the audience that in 1938, by law Cooper and his Indigenous people had no rights; it was still 29 years before the 1967 referendum granting recognition to this country's original inhabitants.

Still, Cooper swiftly organized a petition against the Nazis' brutal actions and marched with the AAL on Melbourne's German consulate to deliver his protest.

Uncle Boydie told how the consulate refused to greet him or accept his letter and Cooper was escorted away by security.

The audience was then treated to a touching video from 2012, in which Uncle Boydie, with the cooperation of German consul Michael Pierce (who was also present at the lecture), re-enacted Cooper's march and delivered a letter to Pierce, completing Cooper's unfinished work from 74 years earlier.

Scenes of Holocaust survivors' descendants embracing Uncle Boydie as he stood proudly in front of the Collins Street building, brandishing the letter, brought tears and appreciation from the fixated room for Cooper's almost unbelievable act and his grandson's dedication to fulfilling it.

Schwarz also speculated about the possible motives behind Cooper's strong identification with Jews, tracking back to Jewish settlement in Shepparton during the 1880s where early Jewish fruit-picking businesses would hire Indigenous people and pay them equal wages, unlike their non-Jewish counterparts.

It was a moving, thought-provoking session that demonstrated the kinship between victims, no matter the lengths that separate them.