

## KRISTALLNACHT, NOVEMBER 9 – 10, 1938

# Kristallnacht's Aboriginal hero

In the wake of the horrific attack on Jews, Jewish businesses and Jewish institutions across Germany on November 9, 1938, Aboriginal elder William Cooper led the world's only public protest. Barbara Miller honours his legacy.

**“O**N the night of November 9, 1938, the sounds of breaking glass shattered the air in cities throughout Germany while fires across the country devoured synagogues and Jewish institutions. By the end of the rampage, gangs of Nazi stormtroopers had destroyed 7000 Jewish businesses, set fire to more than 900 synagogues, killed 91 Jews and deported some 30,000 Jewish men to concentration camps” (pbs.org).

This was Kristallnacht or the Night of the Broken Glass. It was also a night of terror, of death and of destruction. It was a night when racial hatred spewed forth and a night when the Jews were stripped of their dignity, their safety, their human rights and their livelihoods.

Not only was the glass of Jewish homes and shops shattered that night but also the lives and hopes and dreams of a peace-loving and innocent people. It was a night when not only were synagogues burnt, but sacred books, sacred furnishings and objects and the centres of community life and worship went up in flames. It was meant to rip the heart and soul out of the Jewish people.

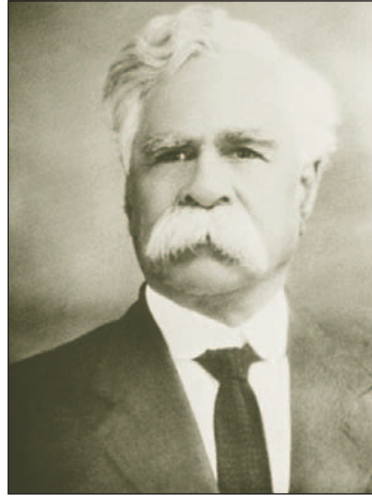


William Cooper's grandson Alf Turner (left) recreating his grandfather's march last December.

It is a tribute to the strength and resilience of the Jewish people that they survived not only this nightmare but the worse one that was to come.

On November 7, a 17-year-old Polish Jewish student named Hershel Grynszpan shot Ernst vom Rath, the Third Secretary of the German Embassy in Paris. Grynszpan, enraged by the deportation of his parents to Poland from Hanover, Germany, where they had lived since 1914, hoped that his dramatic action would alert the world to the plight of Europe's Jews. When the French police arrested Grynszpan, he sobbed: "Being a Jew is not a crime. I am not a dog. I have a right to live and the Jewish people have a right to exist on earth. Wherever I have been I have been chased like an animal."

Vom Rath died on November 9. The Nazis were just waiting for the excuse or opportunity to begin their



William Cooper

final solution of ridding Germany of the Jews.

A Yorta Yorta Aboriginal man called William Cooper who daily experienced oppression towards Aborigines was appalled at the treatment of the Jewish people in Europe. He was a constant writer to newspapers, Prime Minister Lyons and other MPs on the condition of his people. He had started the first national Aboriginal organisation in Melbourne, the Australian Aborigines League (AAL) and had organised a petition to the King of England. However the Australian government would not send it as Aborigines were not citizens in their own land.

William Cooper was isolated from the conflict in faraway Australia. He had no finances, being an old-age pensioner, few rights in his own land, no position of importance and little political clout. But he knew he had to

stand up and be counted. He knew he had to point out the injustice of the situation. He still managed to make his voice heard – and it reverberated around the world.

While western newspapers condemned the tragedy of Kristallnacht, little effective action was taken against the Nazi regime. William spoke passionately to the Australian Aborigines League about the situation and they passed a resolution condemning what had occurred. They decided to march from William Cooper's home in Footscray and hand deliver the resolution of protest to the German Consulate in Melbourne on 6 December 1938.

The *Argus* newspaper in Melbourne reported on December 7, 1938:

"A deputation from the Australian Aborigines League which visited the German Consulate yesterday, with the intention of conveying to the Consul (Dr R. W. Drechsler) a resolution condemning the persecution of Jews and Christians in Germany, was refused admittance."

A letter requesting Dr Drechsler to forward the resolution to his Government was left at the Consulate.

The resolution, voiced "on behalf of the Aborigines of Australia, a strong protest at the cruel persecution of the Jewish people by the Nazi Government of Germany, and asks that this persecution be brought to an end"

Little did William Cooper know that this was to be the only known protest worldwide against Kristallnacht. Buried in the archives for many years, the newspaper article

was unearthed and the Jewish community of Australia has held a number of events in recent years to honour William Cooper.

He has also been honoured at Yad Vashem in Israel with an Academic Chair of Resistance to the Holocaust named after him in December 2010. It was endowed by Albert Dadon of Melbourne. As well as the Cooper and Miller families, a bipartisan group of 17 MPs from Australia were present for the ceremony.

For the launching of my book on William Cooper, I organised, along with Abe Schwarz and others, a re-enactment on December 6, 2012, of the walk from Footscray to the site of the German Consulate in 1938. Aborigines, Jews and Christians walked. The Jewish Holocaust Centre bussed in some Holocaust survivors to walk the last block. Children of survivors were also present.

In a moving ceremony, William Cooper's grandson, Alf Turner (Uncle Boydie) presented a copy of the original protest letter of William Cooper and the AAL to the current German Honorary Consul-General of Melbourne, Michael Pearce, who received it and gave an apology for Germany's actions.

Plans are underway for Pearce to give a response to Uncle Boydie's letter on this year's anniversary of Kristallnacht in Melbourne and we have a team raising money for Uncle Boydie to go to Germany to receive an official response from the German government. His story lives on.

Barbara Miller is the author of *William Cooper: Gentle Warrior*.

## Kristallnacht witness: 'Be on our guard'

PETER KOHN

HENRI Korn's experiences 75 years ago on Kristallnacht, when Nazi-instigated riots smashed synagogues and set the torch to Jewish businesses in his German home town, instilled in him a lifelong vigilance about the abuse of power, of language and of shared memory.

It prompted the octogenarian to write a letter to *The AJN* last month despairing of new shadow foreign affairs minister Tanya Plibersek's infamous labelling in 2002 of then Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon as a "war criminal responsible for the massacres of civilians in refugee camps outside its borders".

Korn, who had spent his youth on the run from actual war criminals, wrote that it was "a description she has never applied to anybody else" and expressed distrust in her admission last month that she had "spoken injudiciously".

Korn, 84, was still exasperated at Plibersek's epithet when *The AJN* con-

tacted him last week: "Sharon's job was to protect Israel from its many enemies [and] she called him a war criminal."

Asked how he felt when he heard about the October 25 attack on Jews in Bondi returning home after a Friday night dinner, Korn hoped "it was an isolated case ... they saw a group wearing yarmulkas and decided to pick on them".

Korn said the attack, and the well-publicised 2006 assault of Melbourne man Menachem Vorchheimer who was walking with his two young children on a Shabbat afternoon were "so extreme that we shouldn't panic, but we should be on our guard".

Korn was nine years old when he witnessed the looting of his family's synagogue at Wuppertal-Elberfeld in northwestern Germany on November 9, 1938. Joining a crowd of onlookers, he saw scraps of parchment from a desecrated Sefer Torah floating on the breeze.

After one of the mob pointed him out and exclaimed: "Here's another Jew", he was lucky to escape by dropping to his

knees and squeezing through the feet of spectators.

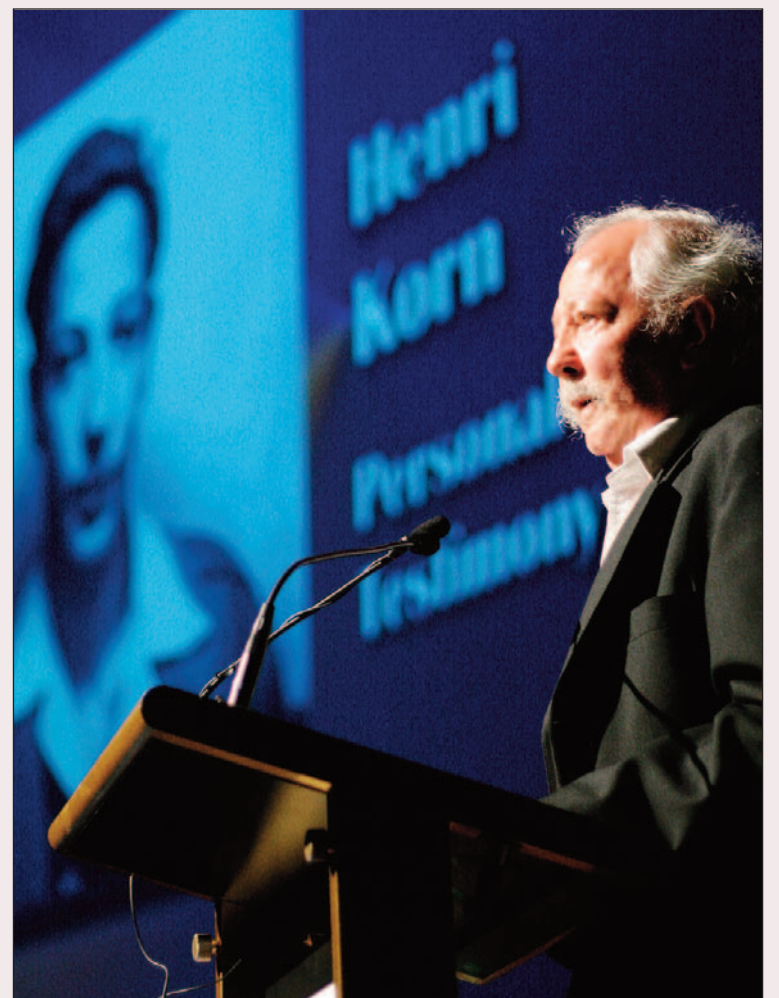
He later discovered that family friends had been hurled to their deaths from high windows and that a schoolmate had been murdered.

Until Kristallnacht, Korn's mother and father had been assimilated Germans who rarely spoke about the troubling times. But a few months later, his mother was arrested.

Korn and his sister were spirited away to Belgium and later reunited with their mother. During this time he lived as a church altar boy.

In 1950, he emigrated to Australia. Last year, Korn's second of two Holocaust memoirs, *My Past Is My Future*, was launched at the Jewish Holocaust Centre. In 2004, he wrote *Saviours: The Story of a Jewish Altar Boy*.

Korn will relate his memories of Kristallnacht at a commemoration held by Mizrahi Synagogue, Melbourne, this Saturday evening.



Henri Korn speaking at a Yom HaShoah commemoration. Photo: Peter Haskin