

Kristallnacht

And the Story of William Cooper

As Jewish communities and others mark the anniversary of *Kristallnacht* ('Night of Broken Glass'), they recall the night of 9 November 1938 when a Nazi rampage caused massive destruction of Jewish communities in Germany and Austria. In the absence of international protest, *Kristallnacht* marked a critical step in Nazi policy towards the 'Final Solution.'

Particularly sobering is that the anniversary of *Kristallnacht* recalls a specific moment in history *when there was still time* for people to speak up; a moment which passed all too silently. Evil triumphed because good people did nothing. When I imagine the morning after *Kristallnacht*, I picture (from eye-witness accounts) people walking through streets of shattered glass, while others stare in horror at razed synagogues and incinerated Torah scrolls, or mourn relatives killed in the violent events.

But I also know that for most people in the world the day after *Kristallnacht* was 'business as usual.' A day with enough of one's own problems to be taking notice of the plight of the Jews 'over there.'

And I admit that, in a certain sense, I can understand this reaction. After all, the daily tasks of life are difficult, busy, all-consuming. And who am I to think that I can make a difference in complex political events on the other side of the world? Surely they need to be dealt with by somebody more knowledgeable, smarter, wealthier, more powerful.

Enter William Cooper: an Indigenous Australian, in his late seventies, living in Melbourne in 1938. In the context of the times, he was hardly the image of power, his Aboriginal identity excluding him from Australian citizenship. But when William Cooper woke to the news of *Kristallnacht* in November 1938 he responded by organising a protest march. With

supporters he walked to the German Consulate and attempted to deliver a petition (which was rejected), decrying the persecution of Jews. His initiative was formally acknowledged at Israel's [Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial](#) in December 2010 with the establishment of the Chair for the Study of Resistance during the Holocaust, in tribute to William Cooper.

[The William Cooper story](#) has a number of fascinating angles to it, including the sheer nerve of Cooper himself. If an elderly, disenfranchised, indigenous Australian living in Melbourne in 1938 can take a stand against one of the most murderous regimes in history, then what excuse do I have to be a bystander to antisemitic events? This is not to suggest that what William Cooper did was unusual for him or out of character. He led a life of activism, campaigning for the rights of Aboriginal Australians as well as other oppressed groups. But this only underscores the point: here was a man who *lived the life* of a commitment to justice, never seeing the reforms for which he strived. Cooper died in 1941.

Each year on 9 November, the anniversary of *Kristallnacht* calls for attention to our ongoing relationship with the Jewish people. It is a moment when people of every culture and creed can join together to say 'never again' to antisemitism and to every form of destruction of human dignity. It is a call to personal responsibility for the human family. For Australians in particular, William Cooper has made it the anniversary to declare: 'no excuses.'

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