

Aboriginal plea to help Kristallnacht Jews finally heard after 79 years

Marea Donnelly, The Daily Telegraph
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IT took almost 79 years and a trip halfway across the globe for the world's only public protest, from a private organisation, against Nazi Germany's Kristallnacht pogroms to reach the German government.

The protest, penned by the Australian Aboriginal League, was delivered to Berlin this month by Victorian Yorta Yorta Aboriginal elder Alfred Turner, after the German consul-general in Melbourne refused to accept the letter on Tuesday, December 6, 1938.

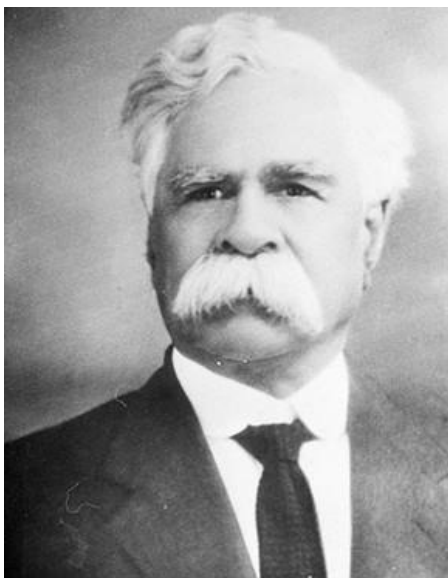
Turner's grandfather William Cooper had led some 60 league members and supporters on a 10km march from his Footscray home to the consular office in Collins St, for an 11.30am meeting with German consul Walther Drechsler.

“We are a poor people, and few in numbers, but in extending our sympathy to the Jewish race we ... pledge ourselves to help them by all means in our power.”

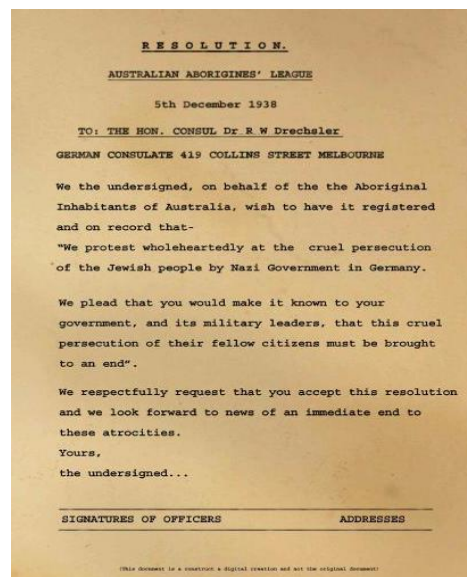
Drechsler refused to meet them and security guards locked the office doors. The letter, organised by Cooper as head of the Australian Aboriginal League, is recognised by Israel's Yad Vashem World Holocaust Remembrance Centre as the only public protest by a private person or organisation against the Kristallnacht destruction over November 9 and 10, 1938.

A replica of the petition is exhibited at the Sydney Jewish Museum.

In NSW, the Dubbo branch of the Aborigines Progressive Association sent telegrams to support the league's protest against “the treatment of the Jews by the Nazi government”.



Aboriginal activist William Cooper who presented a petition protesting Kristallnacht in 1938.



A facsimile of the petition. Pic: Courtesy the Sydney Jewish Museum.

The Legacy of William Cooper project — initiated almost 15 years ago when youth worker Abe Schwarz, then based at Echuca, was told of Cooper’s advocacy efforts — arranged for Turner to visit Berlin to present a replica of the petition.

Turner, who had marched with his grandfather in 1938, presented the replica letter to Felix Klein, German ambassador for Relations with Jewish Communities, at the Australian Embassy in Berlin on November 8.

Cooper was born on December 18, 1860, at Moama on the Murray River. As an Aboriginal rights advocate, in 1933 he visited Aboriginal settlements around Australia to collect 1814 signatures for a petition requesting better conditions for Aborigines to prevent extinction, and the right to parliamentary representation. Cooper wrote to then prime minister Joe Lyons in 1937, asking that the petition be forwarded to King George V.

That petition did not reach London, but in 2014 Turner, known as Uncle Boydie, presented a copy to Prince William. Last week the Labor Party proposed changing the name of the Victorian federal seat of Gellibrand to Cooper.



Alfred Turner hands his grandfather William Cooper’s Kristallnacht protest petition to Dr Felix Klein of the German government in Berlin. Pic: Emmanuel Santos.

The Australian Aborigines’ League resolution protest against “the cruel persecution of the Jewish people by the Nazi government of Germany”, also asked that “the persecution be brought to an end”. It was adopted in the first week of December 1938, when a meeting also supported plans for a deputation of Aborigines to present the resolution to the German consul-general.

As he prepared for his consular visit, Cooper contacted journalists at two Melbourne newspapers, who reported a “deputation from the Australian Aborigines League which visited the German Consulate yesterday with the intention of conveying to the consul a resolution condemning the persecution of Jews and Christians in Germany was refused admittance”.

The resolution, expressed “on behalf of the Aborigines of Australia”, added that: “Like the Jews, our people have suffered cruelty and exploitation as a national minority, but we are glad to say that we are now experiencing more kindness, sympathy and co-operation from the white population of Australia.

“We are a poor people, and few in numbers, but in extending our sympathy to the Jewish race we ... pledge ourselves to help them by all means in our power.”

Turner says his grandfather kept up with world affairs through daily newspaper reports, and was deeply disappointed at the response to Nazi persecution of Jews by world governments when he submitted the protest letter.