

# HOLOCAUST BEGAN AND THE LONE PROTEST WILLIAM COOPER

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## Walking in the footsteps of history

ON NOVEMBER 8, at the Australian Embassy in Berlin, Mr Cooper's grandson, Alfred Turner, known as Uncle Boydie, presented a copy of his grandfather's letter to Dr Felix Klein, German ambassador for Relations with Jewish Communities.

Also present at the handover were Lauren Bain, deputy Australian ambassador to Germany, Abe Schwarz, convener of the Legacy of William Cooper project and Dr Philip Bliss, chair of the Council of Christians and Jews Victoria.

Formally receiving the letter, Dr Klein expressed "my deep respect and sincere gratitude to Uncle Boydie as a representative of William Cooper and the Australian Aboriginal League in the fight against the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany".

The 1938 resolution "gives testimony to the condemnation of the persecution of Jews, by the Aboriginal people of Australia and their strong commitment to unity and solidarity among the people of the world," Dr Klein said.

"I wish to assure you in the name of the Federal German government and my fellow citizens, of the lasting remembrance of the victims of persecution and those who stood up against it."

Mr Schwarz was asked by Uncle Boydie to read out the protest letter.

On the next two nights, November 9–10, capacity audiences in Berlin listened to the story of Mr Cooper's stand.

And in a solemn ceremony outside Berlin's Jewish Community Centre, Uncle Boydie and his son Lance listened to an annual roll call of Berlin Jews who perished in the Shoah.

Executive Council of Australian Jewry executive director Peter Wertheim noted Mr Cooper's protest "was a remarkable affirmation of humanity and decency in the face of evil",



LONG JOURNEY: William Cooper's grandson Alfred 'Uncle Boydie' Turner hands the petition to Dr Felix Klein, the German ambassador for Relations with Jewish Communities.



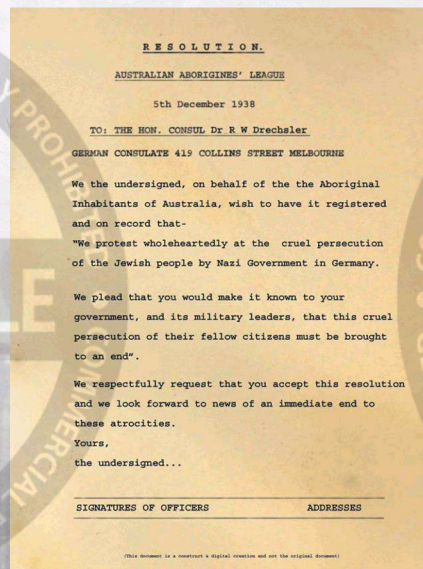
VIP RECEPTION: With deputy Australian ambassador to Germany Lauren Bain, Legacy of William Cooper project convener Abe Schwarz and Council of Christians and Jews Victoria chairman Dr Philip Bliss.

occurring at a time when "Aboriginal people themselves were denied citizenship and other basic human rights in Australia and were frequently subjected to appalling physical, social and economic privations".

Jewish Community Council of Victoria president Jennifer Huppert said "the JCCV is delighted this important historical letter has now been accepted by representatives of the German government".

"We welcome Uncle Boydie's action in completing the mitzvah started by his grandfather William Cooper so many decades ago," she said.

"This will forever create a strong bond between the Indigenous and Jewish communities, built on a bed of common humanity, respect for human rights and the desire to build a better world."



## WHO WAS WILLIAM COOPER?

WILLIAM Cooper, of Yorta Yorta descent, spent most of his life in the Cummeragunja community where he was a spokesman for the Yorta Yorta in their ongoing battles for land justice against the NSW government.

In 1933, at 72 years of age, he left his beloved home to go to Melbourne, as residence on the reserve made him ineligible for the old-age pension.

He made his home in Footscray, which became the centre for other Cummeragunja exiles such as his grand-nephew Doug Nicholls, Margaret Tucker, Shadrach James and others.

This group became the nucleus for the Australian Aborigines' League, which was formalised in 1934 to plan action on behalf of Aboriginal people.

Apart from ongoing letters to politicians and bureaucrats, William Cooper dedicated many years of his life to the gathering of signatures for a petition to King George V which asked, among other things, for Aboriginal representation in

the federal parliament.

Despite years of travelling, in which he gathered between 1800 and 2000 signatures, the petition strategy failed.

William Cooper contributed to a further strategy which challenged the colonial view of the settlement of Australia.

In 1938, celebrations were planned to mark the sesqui-centenary of the arrival of the British.

In response, William Cooper with Bill Ferguson of the Aborigines Progressive Association, planned a 'Day of Mourning' so Aboriginal people could draw attention to the destructive effects of the invasion.

This powerful symbolic gesture, along with the petition to the King and the formation of the Australian Aborigines' League, mark the beginning of political organisation for Aboriginal Australians and have inspired the following generations of activists working for justice for Indigenous Australians.

