

# **The echoes of the shattering glass:** the reverberations of *Kristallnacht* into the Australia of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

**An Occasional Address for the Council of Christians and Jews, Western Australia  
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**By Ron Hoenig**

I wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation. I wish to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.

Thank you to the Council of Christians and Jews of Western Australia for the honour of inviting me to give this presentation. You have made me feel extraordinarily welcome.

On November 9/10 1938 the sound of glass shattering all over Germany, annexed Austria, and in areas of the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia recently occupied by German troops presaged almost a decade of disaster for Jews in Eastern Europe (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2015). The streets resounded with the shattering of glass in Jewish shops, houses and synagogues. Sharp fragments of hatred littered the streets as a modern nation, wounded by its ignominious defeat in the first war and blinded with irrational fear for Jews and hatred fostered by the State took its revenge for the slights it had imagined it had experienced from my people.

I want tonight to touch briefly on that event and then to point out some little known history about the impact that the events on Kristallnacht had on a small group of Aboriginal people in Melbourne. I want then to move on to the period after the war when the Australian government was faced with an influx of Jewish refugees and finally to some reflections that connect these events and the Australian people's reaction to asylum seekers. Along the way I will reflect some more on some aspects of my own experiences.

The website of the Holocaust museum in Washington says the violence on that cold November night was instigated primarily by Nazi Party officials and members of the SA (*Sturmabteilungen*: literally Assault Detachments, but commonly known as Storm Troopers) and Hitler Youth (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2015). The orgy of violence was in response to the assassination in Paris of a German embassy official by Herschel Grynszpan, a 17-year-old Polish Jew living illegally in Paris (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2015).

A few days earlier, German authorities had expelled thousands of Jews of Polish citizenship living in Germany from the Reich and Grynszpan knew that his parents, who had lived in Germany since 1911, were among them. The Grynszpans were initially denied re-entry into their native Poland and were stranded in a refugee camp near the town of Zbaszyn in the border region between Poland and Germany. Grynszpan, now an illegal alien in Paris, apparently sought revenge for his family's precarious circumstances by appearing at the German embassy and shooting the diplomatic official assigned to assist him. The official, Ernst vom Rath died on November 9, the anniversary of the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch in Munich. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2015) and the day on which we remember Kristallnacht.

The German government blamed not a 17-year-old boy but "World Jewry" for the attack, but in an act of pure calculated evil, decided it would not take action itself. Rather the propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels announced that "the Führer has decided that ... demonstrations should not be prepared or organized by the Party, but insofar as they erupt spontaneously, they are not to be hampered" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2015).

Any demonstrations of the grieving German people against the Jews would be regarded as appropriate in the circumstances and no action would be taken against those who exacted a price of destruction and savagery against Jews and their homes, businesses and places of worship on that night (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2015).

Specific instructions were given by Reinhard Heydrich (later himself the victim of a successful assassination attempt)<sup>i</sup>: the "spontaneous" rioters were to take no measures endangering non-Jewish German life or property; they were not to subject foreigners (even Jewish foreigners) to violence; and they were to remove all synagogue archives prior to vandalizing synagogues and other properties of the Jewish communities, and to transfer that archival material to the Security Service (Sicherheitsdienst, or SD) (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2015).

The rioters destroyed 267 synagogues throughout Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland. Many synagogues burned as firefighters observed orders only to prevent flames from spreading to nearby buildings (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2015).

The shop windows of an estimated 7,500 Jewish-owned commercial establishments were shattered and looted. Jewish cemeteries were desecrated (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2015).

In Berlin and Vienna, home to the two largest Jewish communities in the German Reich, mobs of SA men roamed the streets, attacking Jews in their houses and forcing Jews they

encountered to perform acts of public humiliation. At least 91 Jews were killed (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2015). Police records of the period document a high number of rapes and of suicides in the aftermath of the violence. In fact up to 30,000 Jewish males were arrested, and transferred from local prisons to Dachau, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, and other concentration camps (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2015).

The German government made an immediate pronouncement that “the Jews” themselves were to blame for the pogrom and imposed a fine of one billion Reichsmark (some 400 million US dollars at 1938 rates) (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2015) on the German Jewish community. The Reich government confiscated all insurance payouts to Jews whose businesses and homes were looted or destroyed, leaving the Jewish owners personally responsible for the cost of all repairs.

It was not the beginning of persecution and legal discrimination but it was the beginning of an open season on Jews and the encouragement of public violence and destruction as part of a regime of cruelty which was aimed first to drive the Jews to emigrate and then metastasised into the initiation of a program of planned industrial slaughter aimed at destroying all of Europe’s Jews.

By the end of the war, my grandparents on both sides and four of my mother’s siblings, my young uncles and aunts had been murdered; my parents had had their lives shattered and half mended – and besides them who knows how many of more distant relatives ended up like shards of glass lost to the universe.

Kristallnacht took place in November, only months after July 1938 when 32 countries and 39 private organizations and some 24 voluntary organizations convened in the French resort town of Evian les Bains, at the behest of US president Roosevelt, to develop a plan to deal with the huge wave of Jewish refugees that was being disgorged from Germany (Wikipedia 2015). It was at this conference that the Australian trade minister Lieutenant-Colonel TW White declared that Australia was not going to take any Jewish refugees because “...It will no doubt be appreciated also that, as we have no real racial problems, we are not desirous of importing one...” (cited in Foley 1997).

White was in good company. All the countries except the Dominican Republic (Wikipedia 2015), including the United States gathered on the French Riviera behaved much like many of the European community today and wrung their collective hands about the awful fate of the Jews of Europe as their current counterparts are doing about the Syrian refugees (Martinez 2015) and then studiously denied any responsibility to take them. Rather Germany was delighted that it had thrown a hot potato into the grasp of the civilised world and, instead of grasping it, the civilised world had juggled it back, proving it had no interest in looking after the millions of Jews now being expelled. Hitler commented:

*“I can only hope and expect that the other world, which has such deep sympathy for these criminals [Jews], will at least be generous enough to convert this sympathy into practical aid. We, on our part, are ready to put all these criminals at the disposal of these countries, for all I care, even on luxury ships”*(Landau 2006 pp.137-140).

In December 1938, in Melbourne, only a few weeks after Kristallnacht, a very small group of Aboriginal activists, the Australian Aborigines League (Markus 1986), led by a proud erect elderly activist William Cooper, thought they saw connections between their situation and that of Europe’s Jews (Foley 1997). After all, they were members of a persecuted minority and their situation as a racially repressed minority was in some ways similar to the Jews. In fact, it could be argued that Aboriginals in Australia were in a worse situation than the Jews. While not directly threatened with expulsion or extermination, now, they were marginalised, their culture more or less denied them, their paler skinned children were being taken away from them in an attempt to breed out the evil stain of their Aboriginality (Markus 1986 p.65), and their property, their birthright, had already been usurped by the white invaders. They were denied citizenship in their own land and, in some ways they were denied the status of human beings (Foley 1997). In fact, Cooper made these claims explicit in one of his many letters, this time to Interior Minister John McEwen on 17 December 1938: “We feel that while we are all indignant over Hitler’s treatment of the Jews, we are getting the same treatment here and we would like this fact duly considered” (Markus 1986 p.65) .

So they decided to undertake a quixotic act in solidarity with a similarly beleaguered people (The *Argus*, December 3, 1938 p.7). They wrote a protest note and on December 6, 1938 delivered it to the German consulate in Collins Street (The *Argus*, December 7, 1938 p.3). The German Consul-General, Dr D.W. Drechsler, refused to admit them. Aboriginal historian Gary Foley (Foley 1997) describes the act as a spectacular failure. “their remarkable action achieved little in mobilising the conscience of mainstream Australia either in terms of the situation of Germany’s Jews or that of Aboriginal Australia.” (Foley 1997) The protest was unavailing. The consul didn’t even let them in. It didn’t in any appreciable way affect the treatment of Aboriginal people, but in hindsight, it was an act of singular bravery and Jews in Australia should know that the only private act of condemnation of Kristallnacht in Australia was this action by the Aboriginal activists. William Cooper has since been celebrated by the Jewish community in Melbourne (Kohn 2002) and commemorated with a grove of five trees planted at the Martyrs’ Forest near Jerusalem and another 65 trees in the Australia-Israel Friendship Forest (Goldberg 2009), Later a chair for the study of resistance, endowed by the Australia Israel Cultural Exchange, was established in tribute to Cooper at a ceremony at Yad Vashem in Israel (Goldberg 2010)<sup>ii</sup>.

It’s an irony that last week when I was looking for the actual pages of the Melbourne *Argus* in which this event is recounted, it was located right next to the announcement that Australia

would indeed take 15,000 Jewish refugees over the next three years (The Argus, December 3, 1938 p.7)<sup>iii</sup>. It was a kind of clever accounting because the country already had a quota of 5000, so the 15,000 over three years was not, in fact, an increase and, in any case, Australia's generosity to this troublesome religious minority was not tested because soon the world was at war and only about 7,500 German Jewish refugees ever made it to safety here. In fact, immediately the war began in September 1939, immigration was frozen and the German Jewish refugees were classified as "illegal aliens" (Bartrop 1994 pp. 71-72, Kepple 2009 p. 28).

So you would think that after 1945 the world would be falling over themselves to make recompense for the cavalier way in which Jewish refugees were cast into the fires by the well-meaning world, or at least an Australia which continually assures itself and the world of its own generosity<sup>iv</sup> (Hoenig 2012)

Not so. If Australia held out the hand of friendship after the war, it was for those Displaced Persons (DPs) from Eastern Europe who could come here and work on the railroads or building the Snowy Mountains scheme (Neumann 2004). For the ghostlike survivors of the concentration camps, it was agreed after the first shipment of wraiths arrived from Europe, that Australia was not interested in accepting the survivors of the concentration camps. If they came, they would have to be sponsored by their community or families and not be a burden on the community.

The Australian government introduced a quota system and various measures to limit Jewish refugee and survivor migration. The aim was to ensure that Jews, who constituted only a tiny minority before 1933, would continue to remain as a very small percentage of the population. They were driven by public expressions of "anti-refo" and anti-Jewish feelings manifested in statements by members of parliament and in resolutions passed by pressure groups such as the Returned and Services League (RSL) and the Australian Natives Association (ANA). Jews were portrayed as incapable of assimilating. We were accused of setting up sweatshops, working long hours for low wages, thereby undermining Australian living standards. We were labelled as moneylenders who controlled the banks and media. We were depicted as a godless people bent on destroying Christian civilisation. We were greedy and obsessed with money. The well-known accusations of international control and world conspiracy theories had free rein. In cartoons on papers like *The Bulletin*, *Truth* and *Smith's Weekly* (Rutland 2003). We were fat, ugly, with hooked noses and foreign accents — . If we were given the chance, we would take over the country (Rutland 2003). There were graffiti and attacks on property, especially in areas with larger Jewish populations of Melbourne and Sydney.

The immigration minister Arthur Caldwell was desperate to populate Australia and import displaced persons to build up infrastructure and to employ in the factories of the future. But

even then, he didn't want Jews because, as he told the International Refugee Organisation (IRO): "Australia had some trouble with the Jewish people" (cited in Rutland 2001 p.56). Under the IRO agreement of July 1947, he agreed to admit workers on a two-year work contract from the Displaced Persons (DP) camps in Europe. Until 1950 170,000 DPs arrived under this agreement with a further 29,000 under personal sponsorship. Jews were virtually excluded from the program as only young, single Jews were permitted. They had to sign an extra clause agreeing only to work in 'remote areas of Australia'. The definition for being a Jew was based on racial not religious grounds. A Jewish member of the selection team commented at the time 'Hitler could not have done better' (Rutland 2003 p.78). Besides Jews were too skinny, weak and underfed to work in construction or to populate the country. We were unsuited to hard physical labour so the majority of those who came were the "Beautiful Balts", blonde haired, blue-eyed, tall Lithuanian, Estonian and Latvian refugees from Russian invasion of their countries. Nobody enquired too deeply into what they did during the war.

Later only a few hundred Jews were permitted to migrate from Shanghai in July 1947, following a top secret report of the consul-general, Major General O.C.W. Fuhrman, which painted Jews as the criminal element of Shanghai. A 'gentleman's agreement' in January 1949 set the quota for Jewish immigrants to 3000 per annum, and then eased the 25 percent quota on ships and planes. The 'Iron Curtain Embargo' in December 1949 effectively excluded Jews who originated from countries under Soviet rule.

So it was the Jewish community that scraped together funds to support the Jewish refugees who came here. Each of them had to be sponsored by a family member or somebody in the community who was willing to take responsibility that we would not be a burden on the community. It was the organised Jewish community that scraped together fares to bring the remnants of the concentration camps to Australia in ships or aircraft that had to be only a quarter full of Jews and three quarters full of either pure bred British stock or, at least Northern Europeans (Rutland 2003 p.77).

Which was the reason why when my parents were smuggled into the newly minted Israel in 1948, they were waiting for sponsorship from either my mother's brother in New York or my father's brother in Melbourne. It was the sponsorship from Melbourne that came first so my parents left Israel, travelled to Rome, where they and their baby son who had been born in 1950, boarded an Italian ship called *Oceania*. Their son, whom they named Ron, so it would work in both English and Hebrew, turned two when they arrived in Fremantle on what I imagine was a blistering hot February 23, 1952. The ship then sailed to Melbourne, where they were soon greeted by my father's much older brother, who took my dad the next day to work in his trade, hosiery knitting, at a factory in, I think, Richmond. Soon, my mother

found work as a pieceworker sewing ladies garments in Chapel Street, Prahran, and I was sent to day care at the Prahran Municipal Day Nursery nearby.

Arthur Caldwell was made to rue the day he had allowed one shipment of 702 Jewish refugees on the Dutch ship, *Johan de Witt*. Indeed he defended his decision by saying that the ship was “not of a standard adequate for carrying British migrants from the UK.” and he limited the number of Jewish refugees in line with its White Australia policy. Charles Glassgold, the representative from the American Joint Distribution Committee in Shanghai in 1949, summed up the essence of these measures:

*From a most unimpeachable source there comes to me a statement made by the new Australian Consul in Shanghai that casts the pall of futility over the prospect of Australian migration. The Consul said to my informant substantially the following:*

*“We have never wanted these people in Australia and we still don’t want them. We will issue a few visas to those who have relations there as a gesture”*

I tell this history not just to give a recital of things Jews have suffered. I think we have a very excusable but irritating tendency to do this in a context and a country in which now, on the whole, we are extraordinarily privileged. The habit of persecution dies hard. I say this because much of this history has been repeated in Australia’s cruel and narcissistic response to asylum seekers, many of whom happen to be Muslim. The xenophobia that greeted Jews as a non-Christian minority has been repeated in the response both to people seeking asylum in general and in particular the Muslim minority living in Australia. As the Council of Christians and Jews, interfaith community which represents the culturally dominant majority and a religious minority which now has no difficulty in seeing itself as belonging, it is particularly important to recognise the situation of minority peoples of colour in this country. If Jews were accused of being unable to assimilate in the 1950s, senior members of the Coalition, Prime Minister John Howard (Megalogenis 2006) , Treasurer Peter Costello (Gordon and Topsfield 2006) and former Liberal Opposition leader Brendan Nelson did the same thing to Muslims (ABC 2005). In 2006, Howard said: “I do think there is this particular complication because there is a fragment which is utterly antagonistic to our kind of society, and that is a difficulty ... You can’t find any equivalent in Italian, or Greek, or Lebanese, or Chinese or Baltic immigration to Australia. There is no equivalent of raving on about jihad, but that is the major problem” (Megalogenis 2006 p.1).

The Jews were only the first to be accused of being queue jumpers in the 1940s<sup>v</sup> We were accused of being too wealthy to be real refugees when we sought asylum in the 1930s (Neumann 2015), just as those seeking asylum in the years following 9/11 and this decade have been accused of queue jumping if they have saved enough money to pay people to smuggle them. When Jews fleeing Manchuria on the *Hwa Lien* in 1947 came to Australia, the

same thing was said about them. Regional NSW newspaper accounts headlined “Moneyed Jews on Hwa Lien” and the *Tweed Daily* documented the “fabulous wealth in gold bars, diamonds, bank notes and goods carried on the *Hwa Lien*, which arrived yesterday from Shanghai with 305 Jews on board. She is believed to be the wealthiest ship of her size to enter port for many a day” (1947 p.1)

The real issue is not the truth or falsehood of any particular accusation. The real issue is why those who have the power to offer sanctuary to refugees or asylum seekers use a variety of language strategies to reinforce their moral superiority at the same time as they tout their generosity when it is clear that we are neither morally superior nor, often, very generous. It’s my view that the value of interfaith activity is the practice it gives us in seeing the religious other not as someone to convince but as someone to learn from and to share with. I think for most of us living comfortable lives in the relative affluence of contemporary Australia, the opportunity to see ourselves through the questioning eyes of the Other is salutary. It teaches us to recognise the privilege of our status as hosts. The history of the past 70 years should alert us to the dangers of demonising a minority Other and alert us to the historical dangers that an arrogant and unquestioning quasi-racial sense of superiority can lead to.

The shattering of glass is a powerful metaphor for the destruction of so much of Europe’s Jewish civilisation. But at the same time it echoes a different metaphor of shattering and gathering as regeneration. The Talmud (Schwartz 2011) says that at the beginning of time, God’s presence filled the universe. When God decided to bring this world into being, to make room for creation, God first drew in breath, contracting Godself. From that contraction darkness was created. And when God said, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3), the light that came into being filled the darkness, and ten holy vessels came forth, each filled with primordial light.

In this way God sent forth those ten vessels, like a fleet of ships, each carrying its cargo of light. Had they all arrived intact, the world would have been perfect. But the vessels were too fragile to contain such a powerful, divine light. They broke open, split asunder, and all the holy sparks were scattered like sand, like seeds, like stars. Those shards fell everywhere, but, the Talmud says, more fell on the Holy Land than anywhere else.

That is why we were created — to gather the sparks, no matter where they are hidden — in Jew or Christian or Muslim or Hindu or those with no faith. God created the world so that the descendants of Jacob, and indeed, all people, could raise up the holy sparks. That is why there have been so many exiles — to release the holy sparks from the servitude of captivity.

The shattered glass of Kristallnacht should remind us of both the history of the tortured refugee or asylum seeker and the temptation of unthinking cruelty that fear and xenophobia can lead to. That small band of Aboriginal activists in Melbourne heard that sound and

recognized its resonance for themselves. We who have the opportunity to act as hosts and are now seeking to un-hear the call of those on Nauru and Manus Island and, now, from Syria, calm our consciences with the lie that the cruelty practiced in our name will save lives, we rehear the sound of shattering glass tonight and remember that the casual cruelty of the oppressor can lead to far greater violence.

It is a temptation that, on this night of all nights, we should resist.

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<sup>i</sup> Reinhard Heydrich was assassinated in Prague on May 27, 1942 by British-trained team of Czech and Slovak soldiers sent by the Czechoslovakian government in exile to kill him. He died from his injuries a week later (June 4, 1942). German Intelligence falsely linked the

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assassins to the villages of Lidice and Ležáky. Lidice was razed to the ground; all men and boys over the age of 16 were shot, and all but a handful of its women and children were deported and killed in Nazi concentration camps. The plot informs the meta-historical novel *HHhH* (2013) by the French author Laurent Binet.

<sup>ii</sup> There is a collection of documents by Melbourne historian Andrew Markus taken from his edited book *Blood from a Stone: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines League* (1986), Monash Publications in History, Department of History, Clayton, 1986. Introduction to Documents pp.19-20. Documents, pp. 21-101 which introduces Cooper's pioneering work for Aboriginal liberation. It can be found online at <https://waynera.files.wordpress.com/2010/09/cooper.pdf>.

The online PDF version includes on page 3 a clipping of an article by Peter Kohn "Holocaust Museum plaque to honour Aboriginal Nazi Protest," the Australian Jewish News of 13 December 2002, p.4 chronicling the first recognition of William Cooper by Australia's Jewish community.

<sup>iii</sup> Minister of the Interior, John McEwen announced in the House of Representatives, on December 1, 1938, that over the next three years 15,000 refugees would be allowed to enter the country. But McEwen carefully stipulated that "[i]n all cases, permits for the admission of these refugees...will be granted strictly in accordance with the Government's general white alien immigration policy." In effect, "every refugee must be desirable as an individual, and of good character...[and] he must have the approved amount of landing money." That is there was no specific refugee intake and the quota could include non-Jewish Europeans as well. Moreover, he hastened to assure the public that "the quota which I have stated means that there will be some increase, but a not very great increase, of the rate at which permits have been issued to people of the refugee classes." Kepple, L. (2009). "Jewish Immigrants in Australia Before, During, and After WWI." *The Monitor – Journal of International Studies*. Retrieved 15 November, 2015, from <http://web.wm.edu/so/monitor/issues/15-1/2-kepple.pdf>.

<sup>iv</sup> Singer and Gregg (2004, p. 73) point out that figures about the generosity of the nation's refugee policy are based on the fact that Australia is one of only 10 countries who are members of a formal UN resettlement program. Do (in Maley *et al.* 2002, pp. 41-48) shows that Australia, compared to countries accepting refugees outside any formal program, is actually 39<sup>th</sup> on a per capita basis, hosting three refugees per 1000 population. In fact, in this respect, Australia is not unlike most affluent, Western countries. The UNHCR reports that the vast majority of asylum seekers are currently located in non-or-barely-industrial countries adjacent to their home states from whose regimes they have sought asylum. Many of the world's poorest countries host huge refugee populations, both in absolute terms and in relation to the size of their economies. In 2010, Pakistan, Iran and Syria had the largest refugee populations at 1.9 million, 1.1 million and 1 million respectively (UNHCR 2010 online). Pakistan provides refuge for 710 refugees for each US dollar of its per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The percentage contribution of industrialised countries to alleviate this suffering is, by comparison, minor. The largest recipient of refugees in the industrialised First World is Germany, with a refugee population of 594,000, equating to 17 refugees for each dollar of per capita GDP. There has been a decline in the percentage of claims from 60 per cent in 2006 to 45 per cent in 2010 in what the UNHCR calls

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the '44 industrialised countries' (UNHCR 2011b online). I discuss this rhetoric of generosity further in my thesis (Hoenig, 2012)

<sup>v</sup> According to Smit (2011), the first use of the term “queue jumper” was in the Fraser cabinet in regard to Vietnamese asylum seekers in 1979. Neumann (2015) refers to the concept being alive and well in the 1940s, although the term “queue jumpers” was not specifically used, but the term was used by British Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin about Jews in Cyprus in 1948, though the full context makes it somewhat more benign. Former Foreign Minister Douglas Hurd quotes Bevin thus: “I am very anxious that Jews in Europe shall not over-exercise their racial position... [I]f the Jews, with all their sufferings, want to get too much at the head of the queue, you have the danger of an anti-Semitic reaction to it all.” (Cited in Hurd, 2013) Nevertheless, as a precursor of descriptions of Australia detention centres in the early 2000s, the *Illustrated London News* in 1947 ran a headline of “Seaside Camp for Jewish Queue Jumpers” with photographs captioned “Jewish illegal immigrants dancing a national dance in the Cyprus sunshine” Liebreich (2014, p.146) Liebreich, F. (2014). Britain’s Naval and Political Reaction to the Illegal Immigration of Jews to Palestine, 1945-1949. London, Routledge.