

2007 Kristallnacht Memorial Service

by Rabbi Moshe Y Bernstein



In the past having organised, attended and participated in many events within the Perth Jewish community commemorating Yom Hashoah, I did not know quite what to expect attending my first Kristallnacht Commemoration organised by the Council of Christian and Jews WA (CCJWA), to the Executive of which I had been recently appointed.

The event was held at Perth Modern School on Thursday, 8 November 2007, which had graciously offered the use of their superb auditorium and premises. Special guest of honour was His Excellency Dr Ken Michael AC, Governor of Western Australia. Prior to the start of the commemoration, participating High School students, CCJWA Executive members and distinguished clerical guests were given the opportunity to mingle with the Governor and Mrs Michael in the Perth Modern staff room.

Filling in for the absence of CCJWA Chairperson Reverend Dr Rowan Strong was Ken Arkwright, who, apart from his poignant personal history in the tragic events of those time, masterfully articulated the various elements of the presentation. He first introduced two students from Presbyterian Ladies College, who provided a short synopsis of the background events that led to the horrors of Kristallnacht on the night of 9 November 1939. Thousands of Jewish businesses were destroyed and hundreds of synagogues burned and demolished; seventy-two Jews were murdered and 30,000 more interred at Buchenwald. This was the first incidence of an organised Nazi policy aimed at dehumanising Jews; the world's passive reaction only emboldened Hitler to pursue this policy to its demonic end.

Following these readings the Junior String Quartet of Perth Modern School performed *Concerto Grosso in D Minor* by Vivaldi. To me, it seemed as if the violins were weeping those tears that the rest of the world failed to shed those many years ago. His Excellency Dr Ken Michael then read the opening passages in English from The Book of Lamentations, linking in the Divine tragedy of the Temple's destruction.



A choral rendition of John Rutter's *The Beauty of the Earth* by students of Perth College again stirred the emotions of all who were present. A paradoxical counterpoint to the ghastly horrors that began on Kristallnacht, the song was a poignant reminder that hope can arise from the ashes of the past. This same theme reverberated in the moving arrangement of Psalm 36, (verses

7-9) אלהים מה יקר חסדך performed by Ken and Judith Arkwright, accompanied by Perth Modern School student, Christine Yeong on piano.

A dramatic excerpt from Elie Wiesel's *Night* describing a gruesome public hanging of a young Jewish boy in the concentration camp was delivered by a PLC student. The main address was eloquently conveyed by Rabbi Dovid Freilich. Rabbi Freilich offered an innovative interpretation of the name Kristallnacht, providing a deeper insight into the causes of the calamity. Although a crystal is valued for its polished sparkle, unlike real jewels, it easily shatters. He brought anecdotes and quotes to show how many German Jews viewed German culture as the paragon of civilisation and Germany a country that protected them with its laws and morals. What was lacking, however, was what he termed the "Divine Conscience", which is accompanied by attributes like justice, mercy, compassion and pity. Because of that fatal flaw, the sparkle and attraction of that culture was illusory, and, like the crystal, it shattered.

Rabbi Freilich also took issue with the renowned quote of the German nationalist Pastor, Martin Niemöller, who was interred in a concentration camp late in the war. ("First, they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Socialist. Then, they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist. Then, they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew... Finally, they came for me, and there was no one left to speak out."). One should not act because the end result might be the effect on oneself but rather out of that same Divine Conscience that impels us to defend the sanctity of life everywhere regardless of the personal repercussions.

Although this was certainly one of Rabbi Freilich's many outstanding oratory gems, even more impressive to me was watching the faces of the non-Jewish students seated on the dais, all of whom were rapt in his words.

Following the rabbi's address the program concluded with a contemporary and yet comforting arrangement of *The Lord is My Shepherd* performed by students of Aranmore College with piano and guitar accompaniment. Finally, students from PLC again recited the poem *The Butterfly*, written in Theresienstadt by 11 year old Pavel Friedman, and *The Chimneys*, by Nobel Prize Laureate Nelly Sachs. Ken Arkwright then led all the assembled in a moment of silence.

The CCJWA Kristallnacht Commemoration concluded with Carmel School students Gali Blacher, Jonny Eintracht, Jarod Rhine-Davis and Ernest Shultheis singing The Partisan Song in Yiddish and English accompanied on piano by Shirley Atlas.

Personally, I was profoundly moved by this event. The CCJWA, and in particular, through the efforts of its Secretary Dr Mary Marshall, put a great deal of time and dedication into a rich presentation that succeeded in evoking the necessary emotions to jostle us from our habitual slumber. Moreover, the mutual participation of the Jewish and Christian communities in such an occasion ensures a result that transcends the more insular concerns of Jewish life and is therefore educative in the truest sense of the word. I would highly recommend this event to the entire Jewish and Christian communities, but particularly to the younger generation, as a different, but very meaningful way, to remember and to learn from the catastrophe of Kristallnacht.