

2008 Kristallnacht Commemoration

The commemoration of Kristallnacht on Sunday, 9 November was held in the Ballroom of Government House and was the best attended function ever held by the Council of Christians and Jews of Western Australia. Over four hundred guests attended, including His Excellency Dr Ken Michael AC, Governor of Western Australia; the Leader of the Opposition; and the Consul General of the United States of America. Apologies were tendered by Mrs Michael; the Premier; the Lord Mayor of Perth; and our Chairperson, the Reverend Dr Rowan Strong who was on compassionate leave.

The Reverend Dr Charles Waddell acted as Master of Ceremonies.

Prior to the commencement of the formal program there was a display of projections of scenes from Kristallnacht and its aftermath, accompanied by suitable music.

In an introductory address, the Reverend Ken Williams, Moderator of the Uniting Church in Western Australia, spoke of the strength of interfaith dialogue. He thought that seventy years after the dreadful events of 1938, another generation could keep the candle alight and move to a new understanding.

Choristers from Carmel School gave an emotive rendition of the song "Shema" by Bella (Rotenberg) Levitan and Abie Rotenberg; and students of All Saints' College provided an introduction to Muriel Rukeyse's "To be a Jew in the Twentieth Century" before reciting the poem. Against a background of appropriate music, students from Sacred Heart College presented readings from Lamentations and Isaiah, dramatised with graceful liturgical movement.

The principal address was given by Kenneth Arkwright OAM, Vice-Chairperson of the Council of Christians and Jews, Western Australia. Ken emphasised, that during the sorry history which started in 1914 and continued until 1945, there was a conspicuous opportunity presented to the "World Powers" to take firm action which could have obviated the horrors of World War II. This moment was Kristallnacht, 9 November 1938! It was on this night that the world became aware of the extremes to which the Nazi Regime could descend, to further its evil plans and appalling ideology.

Ken, who was then aged ten years, shared his personal memories of that dreadful time, as from the following morning, 10 November 1938. On the way to school he passed the chocolate shop where he had entered many times before, completely shattered. Chocolates, mixed with glass, were strewn on to the road. A policeman, who was standing nearby, invited Ken to help himself to these chocolates, but warned him to be careful of the glass! What a find for a 10 year-old boy to have an unlimited amount of chocolates to eat!

He arrived at school to find that it was closed and he was told to go home. A non-Jewish friend of the family suggested to Ken's parents that they go into the forest and stay there for a day. This they did, although at first Ken's father was not so keen to do so. On hindsight they were grateful to the friend for his wise counsel.

After spending time in a Labour Camp, Ken was marched some 400 kilometres in a temperature of minus 20 degrees, to the Concentration Camp of Gross-Rosen, where he spent a considerable amount of time. His food consisted of one meal a day, a bowl of insipid-looking liquid and a piece of bread about half the size of the palm of one's hand. What to do with this small piece of bread? Should it be eaten in one mouthful, or broken in half and saved for the evening? What a decision to make when one is starving for lack of food.

He escaped from Gross-Rosen and lived with a non-Jewish peasant family under a false identity, having to conceal that he was Jewish.

Churches and synagogues, he told us, are places where people all too often express their separation from others. A ballroom is a place where people mix, embrace, and face each other, discovering for themselves a fellow human being. Ken remembered that it was in the ballroom in his home town where Jews had to pray together after their synagogues had been destroyed, where they were assembled by the Nazis to be deported to Concentration Camps where their fate was determined, and as Jews they had to learn that any internal differences between them must be put aside. They must remember first and foremost that they had something in common — they were all Jews.

So it was serendipitous, that the 70th anniversary of Kristallnacht should be remembered in a ballroom. Ken thanked the Governor for his generosity in opening the ballroom-part of his home for this thought-provoking occasion.

The event gave an opportunity to all present to adopt the mind-set of youth, determined to look to the future and to leave behind, though not to forget, the nightmares of the past.

Following the address, two students of Wanneroo Senior High School recited extracts from the play "I Never Saw Another Butterfly" by Celeste Raspanti.

Prayers were then offered; a Jewish prayer read by Rabbi Moshe Bernstein followed by a Christian prayer read by Judith Schneider. Silence was then observed for two minutes, while images were projected of burning synagogues and destruction of properties, finishing with a crash of broken glass. A confession of remembrance was then spoken by all, after which a short address was given by His Excellency. The Reverend Marie Wilson then gave an expression of thanks.

All then stood and recited this poem, which was found on the wall of a Cologne cellar where Jews had been hiding from the Nazis:

I believe,
I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining.
I believe in love, even when feeling it not.
I believe in God, even when God is silent.

Finally we were invited to greet our neighbours with the words "Shalom, Peace", seeking out in particular those of the opposite faith.

Images now shown were expressive of hope, and included photographs of synagogues restored after their destruction during Kristallnacht, and of some which had remained unscathed in the pogrom. The initial music played was a recording of “Inscription of Hope”, a setting of the words from the Cologne cellar, composed by Z. Randall Stroope, and sung by the choir Exordium — St Stephen’s School.

His Excellency remained for some time talking with the principal speakers, and groups of people continued to talk about the Commemoration. All attendees, whatever their background, agreed that this was a profoundly moving occasion.

Ralph Hickling
Executive Committee Member CCJWA