

Reflections on the 100th Anniversary of the Signing of the Armistice of WWI - and on the 80th Anniversary of Kristallnacht

by Peter Allen, National Coordinator | Centenary of Anzac Jewish Program

Rabbi Nicole, ex-servicemen and women, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for the privilege of again speaking from the Bimah of the NSTE – although I think this is the first time for Remembrance Day, as compared with Anzac Day.

Before I begin my drasha in earnest, let me explain the significance of the two candles you see before you, for those who might not know:

Gloria and I transported the original four Anzac Centenary Yahrzeit candles of the Centenary of Anzac Jewish Program to every one of the 6 state capitals for lighting at their Commemorative Services from 2015, culminating with the Anzac Remembrance Service of the Australian Jewish Community at the ACT Jewish Centre on 12 August 2018, when the Australian Jewish War Memorial was unveiled by the Governor-General of Australia, in conjunction with the commemoration of the Centenary of Sir John Monash's knighthood.

The original candles are now held by the NSW Jewish War Memorial at the Sydney Jewish Museum for use by NAJEX. Six other replica sets of candles were also commissioned by the CoAJP, for use by every state and ACT, in perpetuity.

The candle-holders are hewn from Hawkesbury Sandstone, with their colours reminiscent of the ridges and gullies of Gallipoli, the mud and trenches of the Western Front, the hills and deserts of the Middle East, and the jungle tracks of New Guinea, the Pacific and SE Asia.

These two candles not only signify the special Anzac Centenary period 2014 to 2018, inscribed on one and the 3 Armed Services of the Australian Defence Forces on the other, but also represent the multiple generations of Australians that have carried on the Anzac tradition since WWI. They also demonstrate that Jewish servicemen and women came from all corners of our vast country.

The first candle is lit in memory of the 61,500 members of the Australian Forces who died in WWI, including some 200 Jewish Anzacs.

The second candle, is lit in memory of the 39,650 members of the Australian Forces who made the supreme sacrifice in WW2, including some 130 Jewish soldiers, sailors and airmen - and the 1,036 members of the Australian Defence

Forces, who have died on service since 1945, including 4 Jewish men: most recently, Pte Greg Sher, killed in Afghanistan in 2009.

As inscribed on the reverse of the first candle, on behalf of Gloria and myself I am honoured to donate these two replica candles for NSTE's use in perpetuity at annual Anzac Day and Remembrance Day services, with secure display in the foyer glass cabinet.

Also, obo the CoAJP, I am pleased to donate this children's book, *Digger's Code* – a delightful story about a Jewish boy who researches his great-grandfather's role in the Australian Light Horse Charge at Beersheba, of 1917.

When Rabbi Nicole asked me to speak today, I thought perhaps I would have run out of new things to say – and simply reflect on the past 4 – **nay six** – years of the Centenary of Anzac Jewish Program (– 'my war' went even longer than the original!)

– but since I spoke here last April, much has happened, and I have continued to learn more about the Great War, the Jewish experience and reconsider what our response to it should be – so here goes!

Those who have read my 'Op-Ed', published in yesterday's Australian Jewish News explaining my motivation and the rationale of the CoAJP, might recall its – perhaps predictable - conclusion:

As a key legacy of these Anzac Centenary years, we must educate current and future generations, so that when challenged “*Did Jews serve in the Australian military?!?*”, they can confidently uphold and be thankful for the role that Jewish men and women have had - and continue to have - in the defence of the freedoms and values that all Australians share.

I won't repeat the rest of the article here, save to note that the unveiling of the Australian Jewish War Memorial in Canberra was an emotional and outstanding culmination to the CoAJP - the hauntingly reflective 13 curved steel panels, inscribed with the names of 341 Australian Jews who made the ultimate sacrifice from 1900 till current, was previously described eloquently by the AJN's editor as “*a river of memory – Zachor*” ...

Now all finally together again, a tragic loss to our relatively small Jewish community and especially for the families of at least 13 pairs of brothers amongst them.

Please make a visit to that unique Jewish cenotaph, the next time you are in Canberra.

Yet the past 2 weeks – in the sunset of the Anzac Centenary - have been far more memorable than I anticipated ... for unexpected – mostly sad – reasons, which have also recalibrated my thoughts.

Approaching this Centenary of the Armistice - “*when the guns fell silent on the Western Front*” – at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, we were shocked to witness the tragic shooting of 11 fellow Jews in a Pittsburgh shule ...

Along with some 800 Sydney Jews - from all streams - and many non-Jews, I attended The Great Synagogue, to reflect and condemn this blatant display of anti-Semitism. It fell just 2 weeks before the **80th Anniversary of Kristallnacht. That was also marked at the Great Synagogue, when even more people showed their solidarity**, last Thursday.

At that service, several things struck me:

- I had not fully appreciated the breadth of attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions that occurred in Germany on 9-10 November 1938 – just 20 years after the ‘war to end all wars’:
 - Jewish homes, hospitals, and schools were ransacked, as the attackers demolished buildings with sledgehammers.
 - The rioters destroyed 267 synagogues throughout Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland,
 - and over 7,000 Jewish businesses were either destroyed or damaged
 - Early reports estimated that 91 Jews were murdered during the attacks. Modern analysis puts the number much higher. When deaths from post-arrest maltreatment and subsequent suicides are included, the death toll climbs into the hundreds.
- Additionally – and this was news to me - 30,000 Jewish men, mostly young, were arrested and incarcerated in concentration camps.
 - Thus, the Nazis made special effort to prevent likely reprisal or uprising by the very muscle of the Jewish population.
- And yet, at the conclusion of the service, 98 year-old Eddie Jaku, who witnessed Kristallnacht first hand and a survivor from Auschwitz, still smiled, has an incredibly positive attitude and, pleaded passionately to all humanity, “*Do not hate.*”
- President of the NSWJBoD, Leslie Berger, advocated succinctly:
 - Do not be perpetrator
 - Do not be a victim.
 - And most of all – do not be a bystander.

Given those principles, I now feel that 'Zachor' – remembrance – must go beyond simply recalling the tragic events of our history.

For them to grow into proud, contemporary Jews, we must teach our children and the generations that follow, **a history that they can relate to in 21st century Australia** – not just Biblical, Talmudic and mediaeval Jewish history – and not only about the European holocaust and Zionism.

They need to also **learn the positive stories** of the last 200 years:

- the success of Jewish culture, science, arts, sport and communities
- that Jews fought bravely in WW1
- and Jews fought back in WW2, whether in regular armies, in the Warsaw ghetto, at Sobibor, as partisans or on the home front
- and Jews have continued to do so since;
- **and they should learn of the outstanding lives that Australian Jews have led - providing tangible, contemporary role models;**

And, we must teach them to act purposefully, on account of that history.

Moreover, we need to show our children that, if we expect others to come to our aid, we have to also go to their aid: we cannot only support Jewish causes. As does the NSWBoJD and NSTE's own 'Jews for Social Action', we must call out all forms of injustice and racism, not just anti-Semitism. If we are to call ourselves the '*chosen people*' we are bound to set an example for the rest of humanity.

This was also exemplified last Sunday, at the NSW Jewish Community Remembrance Day Service, held at the NSW Jewish War Memorial/Sydney Jewish Museum, where former Chief of Army and retired General, Ken Gillespie, praised the outstanding efforts of the Jewish community. At that service, I was humbled to be honoured with a framed tribute from NAJEX, for raising awareness amongst Jews and non-Jews through the activities CoAJP.

Let us all seek the legacy of the Centenary of Anzac to be **more than** simply these stone yahrzeit candles, **but to strive for what they represent:**

Whilst we continue to pray for the day, "*when nations will beat swords into ploughshares, and spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more,*"

we must teach our children to remain vigilant - and when duty calls, with God's blessing, have the strength shown by our forebears to defend our values and beliefs:

ordinary Australian Jewish men and women can do extraordinary things.