



Five years ago, on the 75th anniversary of William Cooper's march, Cooper's grandson Alfred "Uncle Boydie" Turner spoke at the Jewish Holocaust Centre. From left: Pauline Rockman, Turner and Abe Schwarz. Photo: Peter Haskin



Kay (Shari Sebbens), Cynthia (Miranda Tapsell), Julie (Jessica Mauboy) and Gail (Deborah Mailman) in the film *The Sapphires*.

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The spiritual that inspired Cooper's march?

A Yorta Yorta translation of a classic Gospel song may have inspired a 77-year-old Aboriginal Elder to protest to save Jewish lives 80 years ago today, writes **Abe Schwarz**.

At the end of every Pesach seder, my family, like so many others in both Melbourne and around the world, has a tradition to sing the all-join-in melodies found at the back of the seder's order of service, the Haggadah.

One our family always enjoys is *Who Knows One?* – and we often sing it Gospel-style. During the seder itself, at the point where Moses tries persuading Pharaoh to “Let my people go”, we have also taken to singing – in a similar genre – the catchy tune *I said: Go Down, Moses!*, which was brought home by me or my sister from Habonim camp, or was it a Counterpoint seminar, hosted by my alma mater, Mount Scopus College?

Over the last 12 years, I have personally become rather absorbed with the stories of Aboriginal Elder and activist, Uncle William Cooper. But I am still constantly bugged by the question of what could possibly have possessed him to not only lead a national political movement demanding justice for Aboriginal people, lead the first “Australia Day protest” in Sydney on the sesquicentenary of colonisation, the first circulation of a petition to the King about Aboriginal rights, but then also to remarkably lead the Australian Aborigines League (AAL) in protest against oppressive treatment of German and Austrian Jews – after read-

ing about Kristallnacht in *The Argus* on November 11, 1938?

No other racial minority group did anything like that. According to the world-famous Holocaust centre in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, “no other public protest by a private organisation is recorded from anywhere in the world ... definitely not elsewhere from Indigenous or non-Indigenous communities in Australia”! Could the explanation be in an Aboriginal-language song called *Ngarra Burra Ferra*?

Research done by Matthew Busby Andrews, a good friend of Cooper's grandson, Uncle Boydie Turner, has further demonstrated that *Burra Ferra* (as it is known by many) is a Gospel song the Yorta Yorta people of the Murray River have been singing since the winter of 1885, and it is still sung today. Recently, it was featured in the film *The Sapphires*, documenting four young Aboriginal women who formed a singing ensemble that performed to the troops in Vietnam.

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According to Dr Heather Bowe, a distinguished linguist from Monash University who has analysed the lyrics, the entire song is based on a African American spiritual, with the title “Burra Ferra” literally meaning “Boss (Mister) Pharaoh”. Dr Bowe discovered also that yoomina means people – so in this context, Pharaoh's “people” is his army.

Andrews compared the song to *Brother Moses*, further noting it “as a real slave song about your enemy being crushed while you escape from slavery... and you make your way to the Land of Milk and Honey”.

There are choirs in America who keep this song alive and it was very popular in the heyday of Gospel.

Now this narrative gets even more amazing. I am good friends with Aunty Zeta Thomson, who accompanied me to Limmud-Oz a few years ago – where we expressed our appreciation of the song's Jewish origin by teaching *Burra Ferra* that Shabbat, prior to intertwining a smoking ceremony with Havdalah.

Zeta and one of her 12 siblings, Lois (who happens to be an “original” Sapphire)

learnt it from their dear mum, the late Aunty Geraldine Briggs (1910-2005), and traditional grandmother, Nanny Yarmak Theresa Middleton Clements – who survived until Zeta was 14 years old.

It was her Nanny Yarmak who was originally taught *Burra Ferra* on the banks of the Murray River, translating it into Yorta Yorta, which was then written down by local Mauritian Indian scholar Thomas Shadrach James.

Brother Moses was performed around Australia in 1885 by a visiting troupe of African-Americans, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, some of whom were emancipated slaves from the American Civil War era. This ensemble did three world tours to raise funds for America's first Black university, which is still going in Nashville, Tennessee.

Back in July 1874, the Maloga Mission near Echuca had been founded and supervised by missionary Daniel Matthews, and his diary records note that he had met the Fisk Jubilee Singers while leading an evan-



William Cooper depicted in a mural in Shepparton.

gedness, spirit and natural prosperity of the Barmah Forest and the Murray Flats – their own “land flowing with milk and honey”.

With this great story of liberation firing his imagination, is it any wonder that Uncle William Cooper, even now in his late 70s, was a man with a special sensitivity to the experience, spirit and destiny of the Jews?

There is no firm evidence that he ever knew a single Jewish person, though some suggest he or his peers picked or packed peaches and pears for the Jewish fruit growers who arrived in Shepparton from 1913.

When Cooper and his AAL marched on the German Reich's consulate in Collins Street on that Tuesday in December 1938, he clearly empathised with the Jewish story of liberation from slavery. The Haggadah's narration of the Exodus – of standing up to Pharaoh – along with some cute songs that challenge dictators – teach us to believe, to create hope – even when all hope seems gone. Aunty Zeta says “we were spiritual people, with our Creator ... way before Christianity!”

Thus a translated song, *Burra Ferra*, may in fact have been the very source of inspiration – way back in 1885 to a young William Cooper, helping him realise that he needed to become the “Moses” – and lead his people to their “Promised Land”. No wonder his leadership some 53 years later also led to a protest at Melbourne's German Consulate in 1938. Invoking my best Gospel tone, I say: “Go Down, William”!

gelistic mission in Brighton, on Port Phillip Bay in Melbourne. Matthews heard these singers and invited them “to go up river and sing”. From that point on, the Mission began passionately singing *Burra Ferra* or *Brother Moses* – for an enslaved Indigenous people – themselves!

Thus the Yorta Yorta mob have been singing it for almost 130 years – and one of the people who I believe learnt it that night was a smart, educated and impressive 25-year-old man called William Cooper.

But the song Cooper learnt was not just a 19th century slave song. In fact, it is one of the oldest, continually sung, “living” songs in the world – sung by both Jewish communities and Christian churches, as it can be compared to the Song of the Sea, from the book of Exodus.

I can see perfectly why this song would have meant so much to the Yorta Yorta mob. Like the Children of Israel, they prayed for their land, had been forced to labour hard without wages and endured cruel overseers. Their situation looked hopeless – authorities had absolute power over them. The Yorta Yorta longed to again enjoy the connect-

Ngarra Burra Ferra lyrics

Womraka Moses yenyen wala
Wala yepun yeiputj
Ngarra burra ferra yoomina yala

When Brother Moses stretched his hand
out on the Red Sea
Waters rolled back together
And Mister Pharaoh's armies drowned
in the sea. Hallelujah!

Abe Schwarz is coordinator of the William Cooper Legacy Project. A community march commemorating Cooper's protest 80 years ago this week will begin at the Separation Memorial in Flagstaff Gardens at 6.30pm tonight (Thursday). For more information, visit walkingtogether.org.au