

75 years of peace and freedom in Apeldoorn and Düsseldorf A German-Dutch youth exchange project

At the beginning of 2018, the Gelre Association International found out about similarities between the liberation history of Apeldoorn and Düsseldorf. Thanks to the actions of courageous citizens, both cities, independently of one another, could be taken peacefully by the Allies. This has prevented serious loss of life and further damage to vital infrastructure.

The non-violent liberation of Apeldoorn on April 17, 1945 is due to the courageous efforts of two city resistance fighters, Gijs Numan and Albert van der Scheur. In the night of April 16-17, the two secretly embarked on the life-threatening route to the Canadian troops to inform them of the factual withdrawal of the German occupiers. This prevented the violent attack and destruction of the city planned for April 17, 1945, and enabled the Canadians to take Apeldoorn without a fight.

The liberation of Düsseldorf took place at the same time. On April 16, Karl August Wiedenhofen and Aloys Odenthal, at the risk of their life, managed to reach the American troops and provide information on the city's weak defenses. They offered Düsseldorf to the Americans without a fight. Eleven men were involved in this act of resistance under the name "Aktion Rheinland". However, the action was betrayed and five of the resistance fighters, Franz Jürgens, Hermann Weill, Theodor Andresen, Josef Knab and Karl Kleppe, were executed in Düsseldorf on the evening of April 16 and on the night of April 17. But their "Aktion Rheinland" was successful: on April 17, 1945, the Americans entered Düsseldorf without a fight.

In May 2018, the Gelre Association International contacted the Mahn- und Gedenkstätte in Düsseldorf (Düsseldorf Memorial and Education Centre) and pointed out these parallels in the liberation histories. On the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of both cities in 2020, it was important for the Gelre Association to heal the rifts of history and to bring Dutch and German young people into an exchange with one another. The Gelre Association offered a joint commemoration of 75 years of peace and freedom. The Mahn- und Gedenkstätte was aware of the importance of this proposal, after all Germans had occupied the Netherlands in 1940 and had cruelly exploited people and land until 1945 and subjected them to the National Socialist regime. This left deep scars. Even today, in 2020, it is anything but natural to celebrate 75 years of peace and freedom together.

The initiative of the Gelre Association led to the joint development of a German-Dutch youth exchange project. 29 very committed students from the Veluws College Mheenpark in Apeldoorn and the Friedrich-Rückert-Gymnasium in Düsseldorf were won over to the exchange project. Thankfully, the Euregio Rhein-Waal generously supported and accompanied the project.

From September 2019, the students invested a lot of time and energy in the exchange project. First, they dealt intensively with the historical events in their respective hometown, then prepared presentations and introduced their partner students to the history of their respective city in the first workshop days. In a second step, the 29 young people dealt with the importance of these historical resistance actions for their present day. They made their thoughts known to the general public with the help of the photo posters, whose QR code led you to this website.

The highlight of the project is the participation in the commemorative events in both cities: on April 16, 2020 in Düsseldorf and on April 17, 2020 in Apeldoorn. The students contribute their thoughts on the historical resistance actions, but also reflect on what it means for them to be part of this project and to take part in the commemorative events.

In any case, it can be said: For everyone involved, these were impressive months of exchange and encounter.

Retrospective on the project

The ACEC in Apeldoorn and the Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Düsseldorf show a small photo retrospective on the project. It can be seen in the ACEC from April 24 to May 25, 2020. In the Mahn- und Gedenkstätte it is open to interested visitors from April 28 to May 31, 2020.

Thank you

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