

## **The spoken word counts!**

**Speech of the mayor of Wesel, Mrs Ulrike Westkamp,  
for the commemorative days "War nevermore"**

**Date: Saturday, 15<sup>th</sup> February 2020, 11.00 a.m.**

**Place: Town Hall auditorium**

Ladies and Gentlemen,  
dear citizens of Wesel,

the day on which the 700-year-old Hanseatic town of Wesel was almost completely flattened was, according to contemporary witnesses, a sunny winter's day.

Rolf Oppenberg, born in 1936, who lived and still lives in the Gabainstrasse, recollects:

"I got a pair of roller skates for Christmas 1944. As the weather was nice in February I was practising with them in the Schillerstrasse: as I was in the afternoon of 16<sup>th</sup> February. "Come home immediately the alarm sounds", my mother had always impressed upon me.

There was a pre-alert and shortly after that maximum alert. As quickly as I could I ran home. I turned round at the entrance to the cellar and saw one airplane after the other in the west. Bombs were falling like strings of pearls. My mother grabbed me down and pressed a pillow in front of my face. The others were waiting for me. My grandfather had to wait upstairs once more. The bombs fell incessantly and exploded with a terrible bang".

Marie-Luise Reibstein, born in 1934, a resident of Wesel in the Berliner-Tor-Platz since birth, describes the hours in the air-raid shelter like this:



“The impact of the bombs and the explosions hit the town right up to us with an unimaginable force. We were trembling and shaking as well, frightened for our lives. Huddled close together praying, not lying in our beds, we gave ourselves courage and hope. The smell of dust got through to us through the slits in the windows and doors. We suddenly felt a terrific tremor and thought, that’s it. But we lived on and had to wait what seemed like an eternity until a deathly silence set in.”

On 16<sup>th</sup> February 1945 - 75 years ago tomorrow – the town on the Lower Rhine was reduced to dust. On the evening of this day Wesel - as a British war reporter recounted - “was according to human judgement uninhabitable”.

Nonetheless many of those who had fled in panic came back, to look for their loved ones, to rescue the injured or free those trapped or to salvage some of their belongings. Given the almost total devastation they did not expect further attacks. They were mistaken.

On 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> February the airplanes returned and more than 600 people died in the hail of bombs. Whoever survived was injured, distraught, traumatised.

After such devastating bombardment nothing was the same as it had been. Wesel counted as one of the most badly destroyed towns in Germany.

The aerial photo of the bombed town of Wesel

- with the bomb craters
- with the empty spaces where once the heart of the town had beaten



- with the ruined Willibrodichurch, whose tower stretches towards heaven in silent defiance
- this picture was published throughout the world.

We commemorate and mourn the dead. And are still stunned how this could have happened, in February, 75 years ago, here in Wesel on the Lower Rhine.

There are only a few contemporary witnesses and I am extremely grateful to Mr Winfried Evertz, born in 1935, and to the witnesses

- Marie-Luise Reibstein
- Rolf Oppenberg
- Marlies Blumenberg
- Helmut Coenen
- Christa Terwelp
- Heinz Böhmer
- Elisabeth Baumeister
- Heinz Reuyß
- Marget Kötter.

Extremely grateful that they have written down their memoirs of these events. The book with the title: February 1945 – Wesel's last days? – has just been published. The author Winfried Evertz is here today.

On behalf of the town and personally may I say "Thank you" for your commendable work.

And please allow me to quote one last time from your book.



In the foreword it says: "We, the fellow citizens and signees of this foreword, who in the meantime are all well over 80 years old, but who belong to those lucky ones surviving that time and who are of sound mind, would like to pass on a legacy with our words to those born afterwards and to remind them for all eternity that it is the noblest duty of upright men to avoid future war by correct behaviour and peaceful cooperation.

Intolerance towards the different-minded, incomprehension of the unknown, derogatory, insulting or violent acts either in word or deed, refusal of equality and ignorance of civil etiquette are all sources of conflict and violence.

We appeal to the following generations to be vigilant and check thoroughly who is leading you into a peaceful future or into harm. Best of all rouse yourselves and commend yourselves to your town, state and country by helping the community through active deeds and by securing peace."

When we reminisce on the destruction of our hometown, remember the dead and the loss of our cultural heritage then in the midst of our mourning we must not forget that Wesel was no singular incident of military destruction. There were many towns bombed in air strikes.

Probably the most famous testimonial and memorial is not a photography but a painting. It is by the Spanish painter Pablo Picasso and is called "Guernica".

On 26<sup>th</sup> April 1937 German fighter jets from the Condor division bombarded the Basque small town of Guernica.



There was civil war in Spain and Nazi-Germany supported General Franco, later the long-standing dictator.

On 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939 the Second World War began with the German Armed Forces invading Poland. On this day, early in the morning, German Air Force dive bombers destroyed the Polish small town of Wielun. It was almost completely destroyed, approximately 1,200 people lost their lives. Historians assess this attack as the first war crime of the Armed Forces in the Second World War. The towns of Frampol and Warsaw were to follow.

On 14<sup>th</sup> May 1940 a large part of the old town of Rotterdam in the Netherlands was demolished in an air raid.

On 14<sup>th</sup> November 1940 the German Air Force blitzed the English city of Coventry after having struck London and other towns in southern England.

I could add to this list with further names of towns in the whole of Europe – and of course with the names of German cities such as Lübeck, Cologne, Dresden and Berlin.

All of these are and remain unfathomable and inconceivable:

- the limitlessness of human deeds
- the death of millions of people
- the destruction of our cultural heritage

How could this happen in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, just 80, 75 years ago?



Beside the question of WHY and after the reconstruction of the places destroyed, further questions had to be put: What lessons could and are to be learnt? How do we prevent a new war and renewed bombing of towns?

In 1949 in the "old" Federal Republic constitutional democracy was established as a secure stronghold. Respect for the dignity of every individual was laid down as the highest dictate of all public acts.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> May 1950, so five years after the end of the war, the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman gave the answer for Europe, by suggesting The 'Montanunion' as the first act of a supernational cooperation. From this there arose The European Coal and Steel Community. Its aim was to secure peace among its member state. Out of that arose the European Union, which after the fall of The Wall incorporated most east-European states.

70 years of peace, freedom and prosperity – who would have thought it possible in February 1945 in Wesel, in Germany, in Europe?

I am grateful and very pleased that the Bishop Pawel Hause are here with us today. On behalf of the town of Wesel and also personally may I welcome you all. Germany and Poland have a long and often painful mutual history so that our twinning offers a small but significant contribution to international understanding. I was deeply touched when your town presented me with the golden key in 2012. And your former mayor Mr Hecman is an honorary citizen of Wesel.

The mayor of Felixstowe, our English twin town, Mr Nick Barber is with us today with his delegation. Our twinning has existed since 1974 and many personal friendships



have formed since that time. I like to visit Felixstowe every year, to the Mayor's Ball and on other occasions. We'll be coming this year too, even when the date is after the 31<sup>st</sup> January. Brexit was a sovereign decision of the British people. We must accept it but please allow me to say that the majority of Germans particularly regret you leaving the European Union.

But our friendship will stay forever.

Guests from our Dutch neighbours and friends have also come to visit. Living together in the border region has become "routine".

By the way, 247 Dutch nationals live in Wesel.

And even when the national football teams play against each other there is not so much ado.

Hartelijk Welkom.

And the mayoress of our twin town Salzwedel Mrs Sabine Blümel is with us today. Welcome to you. We can enjoy over 30 years of reunification. 30 years ago European and German separation, resulting from World War II, came to an end.

Therefore the commemoration day of the destruction of Wesel in February 1945 is, 75 years on, a day of gratitude. Gratitude for freedom and peace in Europe and the cohabitation of peoples.

But we must be careful and not take everything for granted. Who would have thought a few years back that demagogues, nationalists and historical misrepresentation would start to whip up resentment and egotism?

Do we really want to go back and endanger the peaceful cohabitation in Europe? And that in a world, which daily seems to be more and more unsafe, in North Africa, in the Middle East, in Central America and in Asia.

The spirit and the courage of the post-war generations in Europe must inspire us and the following generations. On this day let us remember the victims and the destruction of Wesel and the other towns destroyed and make our contribution so that

- such devastation
- so much suffering and demise and
- the loss of our cultural heritage

never happen again.

**NEVER!**