

Rede von Frau Swaab. Vorsitzende des Komitees 4. und 5. Mai. (Dieses Komitee organisiert die Gedächtnisfeiern zur Befreiung Hollands von Hitler-Deutschland)

(Ms Swaab - the chair of the 4th and 5th May committee)

Opening “Lawyers without Rights” in NIOD, Amsterdam on May 13, 2008

Mr. General Dean, dear Willem,
thank you for your honourable invitation to open the exhibition “Lawyers without Rights” here in Amsterdam.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Dean’s invitation was directed to me in my capacity as Chair of the Dutch National Committee 4th and 5th of May.

This Committee has 2 major tasks.

First of all, to organise and give meaning to the annual national memorial on the 4th of May and the celebration of our freedom on the 5th of May.

The second major task of the Committee is to enlarge the commitment of the Dutch population in both the commemoration and the celebration and to connect the hundreds of local activities on the 4th and 5th of May by creating collective context.

The members of the Committee are appointed by Her Majesty the Queen and we are assisted by a team of around 15 professionals. Especially the content side of our work keeps the team busy during the whole year. Mostly with educational and exploratory activities. Besides, the Committee acts more and more as a centre of know how on commemoration and celebration.

The national memorial ceremony takes place on Dam Square here in Amsterdam and is centred around the 2 minutes of silence at 8 p.m. A memorial ceremony is held within the large Nieuwe Kerk in the presence of about a thousand persons, amongst whom survivors of Sjoa, resistance and military activities, the Queen and members of government and parliament. After this ceremony – which holds music and a lecture by one of our well known writers (every year someone else) – we all go to Dam Square for the public ceremony with about 25,000 others. The whole ceremony is broadcasted directly.

This is not the time nor the place to enter in further detail on the ceremony; if you have questions, I myself and another here present member of the Committee, Daniel de Swaan, are very much willing to answer them later on.

I permit myself however one more remark on this subject: up until the year 2000 on the 4th of May the memorial ceremony was limited to those Dutch people who died in WW-II. Since 2001 the memorial ceremony is held for all those, civilians and soldiers ,who died ever since the start of WW-II up until the present moment, during the war and during peace missions. Unfortunately, the number of people to commemorate grows with our missions a.o. in Afghanistan.

I said that the National Committee becomes more and more a know how centre on commemoration and celebration. To help us in our task we commission a yearly survey amongst 1000 persons – divided over all ages and origin – in order to follow how freedom, war, fear, solidarity, terrorism and the like live among the Dutch.

This year we put one new question in the survey, that runs as follows.

“Are your feelings as to the Germans and the Japanese somehow still influenced by WW-II?”

The outcome was that 47% (Germans) and 66% (Japanese) had never at all felt such an influence. Of course, especially the young ones. 44% (Germans) and 28% (Japanese) say that their feelings used to be influenced, but that that no longer is the case. Conclusion: Only a small minority in the Netherlands is still influenced by WW-II as to their respect to the German and Japanese population. Good news and, of course, about time!

Before opening the exhibition “Lawyers without Rights”, I would like to give some attention to, in my personal opinion, one of the most admirable Jewish Dutch lawyers who survived the holocaust, Abel Herzberg.

Abel was born in 1893, son of Russian-Jewish parents. In 1918 he becomes Dutch citizen. He studies law in Amsterdam and starts a law practice. Next to being a very talented lawyer he was also a very talented writer. For the first time in 1930 he wrote about the oncoming persecution of the Jews in Germany. From that time on he becomes more and more a Zionist and as from 1934 he sits on the board (later as the Chair) of the Dutch Zionist League. In 1939 he visits Israel for the first time. In 1943 he is picked up by the Nazi’s. First stop is Westerbork, later on he arrives in Bergen-Belsen. Both he and his wife survive and come back to Amsterdam. He takes up his work as a lawyer and a writer. From 1945 he publishes books. First about life in Bergen-Belsen, later on about Zionism, Israel, the Eichmann proceedings and his life as a lawyer.

When in 1948 the State of Israel is proclaimed, his finest dream is fulfilled. Though he would have loved to go and live in Israel, he realises that Dutch law will not bring him far there and that he can be of better help to Israel through the Dutch Zionist League. And so he did. He won several prizes as a writer and was one of the founders of one of the largest and most prestigious law firms in the Netherlands, Stibbe.

He died in 1989, 94 years old.

I would like to end with a quote from a recent interview with Abel’s daughter Judith, also a highly talented writer who lives half in Israel and half in the Netherlands. I quote:

“It is both idiotic and a waste that it are always the young people who are being sent to war. An army should consist of old ladies. They hit less hard and they have to die anyway.”

Thus Judith Herzberg.

This old lady thanks you for your attention and now declares the exhibition “Lawyers without Rights” open.