

Bachelor Thesis

Local perceptions, practices and meanings of World War II cemeteries in the Netherlands



A comparison of the *Netherlands American War Cemetery* in Margraten and the *German Military Cemetery Ysselsteyn*

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1. Introduction

Two massive white entrance gates surrounded by perfectly cut grass – the *Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial* in Margraten established by the American army in November 1944 presents itself as a neat and extraordinary site from the very first glance. Following a long allay, the visitor passes a huge square build purely out of white nature stoned floor and walls, as well as a colourful mosaic map. Without even allowing a glimpse on the 8.302 graves of American soldiers fallen in World War Two yet, this setting leaves a deep mark upon every spectator. The sight of the graveyard itself carries an even more impressive connotation, giving view to the marble stones, all of which are lined up precisely next to each other. Contrary to this striking experience in Margraten, the first encounter with the *German Military Cemetery Ysselsteyn* build in October 1946 on pressure of the American military is almost humble and modest. Finding the way across a big parking space the guest has to search for a little entrance gate hidden by bushes of rhododendron. Only a small signpost points the way across a narrow path towards two inconspicuous buildings. Then, unexpectedly, a sea of 31.598 crosses of dark black colour populates the tender hills on a space of about 30 acres. Diverging from the first impression, the visitor suddenly realizes that this must be one of the biggest German war cemeteries, hosting members of the German army fallen primarily during the Second World War.

These two confrontations with World War Two cemeteries in the Netherlands could not be more diverse. The first is accompanied by a majestic, impressive feeling as soon as one enters the bright and elegant space. The second is followed by insecurity and despair in the eye of the sheer unbelievable amount of dark crosses, as well as the outer appearance of the cemetery. However, next to these aesthetic qualities which indeed conjure up varying sensations within the visitor, as well as within the locals, are there more differences between the sites? Though both being situated in the Netherlands, to be more precise in the province of Limburg, as well as both hosting the dead bodies not of Dutch, but of foreign soldiers either from America or Germany, do they summon diverse emotions, memories and feelings?

This paper sets out to investigate how Dutch locals perceive and react to cemeteries of the Second World War. Looking on the one hand at the community Eijsden-Margraten, inhabiting 25.000 citizens, as well as at the town Ysselsteyn, part of the municipality of Venray and a town of together about 43.000 people the research aims to see in how far the

local perception of the *Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial* in Margraten differs from the *German Military Cemetery Ysselsteyn*. Special attention will be placed on the memories attached to the cemeteries, as well as the commemorative practices surrounding the places. Is there a difference in the way the Dutch locals perceive, attach meaning to and evolve practices around the American cemetery in contrast to the German one? Furthermore the analysis aspires to find out in how far the engagement with the two sites has changed since the end of the war by looking at the opinions of three different generations – first the eyewitnesses of the war, second the preceding generation and third their children's generations¹ - as well as the future plans for the cemetery. In how far have the perceptions, meanings and practices changed throughout the years?

In order to have a starting point for comparison, as well as to get a deeper understanding of the differences between the two sites of memory, a good theoretical framework is needed. Thus the paper will start by introducing the main concepts in the field of memory. Since this is a vast field, it will concentrate on specific aspects relevant here and take less notice of other, doubtlessly influential, theories. Concepts which will be taken a look at are the theories of *Communicative and Cultural Memory* by Jan Assmann, the theory of *Lieux de Mémoires* by Pierre Nora, as well as the concept of *Generations* by Ulrike Jureit. Furthermore, the methods used in this study will be explained and reflected upon in the Methodology, Sources and Limitations section. Having established a solid backbone, the third and central part of the paper will concentrate on the specific case studies – the *Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial* in Margraten and the *German Military Cemetery Ysselsteyn*. In four parts, ordered according to the three different generations, as well as the future ideas, the research will show how diverse generations from the war onwards relate to the site. Drawing back on qualitative interviews of about one to three hours length, the paper will analyse the memories of one particular local of each generation, placing it in a wider and more general context through the findings of archival research. Each of the four sections will first take a look at the cemetery of Margraten, then at the cemetery of Ysselsteyn and conclude with a short comparison of both.

But why is the paper at hand relevant and necessary? Looking at research about the war cemeteries in Margraten and Ysselsteyn it becomes obvious that till now, not many studies have been written. In 2009 Mieke Kirkels, Jo Purnot and Frans Roebroeks published a book titled *From farmland to soldiers cemetery – Eyewitness Accounts of the construction of*

¹ A more elaborate definition of the concept of *Generations* will be given in chapter 2.1

the American cemetery in Margraten. The study gives eyewitnesses of the first hour of the American War cemetery in Margraten a voice, presenting various biographies of citizens of Margraten. While the book is enlightening for an account of the experiences of first generation eyewitnesses, it does not provide any inside about later generations. Furthermore a children book called *Het geheim van opa* was published in 2009, still this can hardly be regarded as an academic work. A third study called *The Margraten boys* by Peter Schrijvers focuses on the adoption process in Margraten. However, this book will restrict itself to the practice of adoption, leaving other practices of commemoration out of site. Also, it will only be published in 2012. The cemetery in Ysselsteyn is hardly an object of any academic study at all. Except for one small article portraying the establishment and development of the place in a book called *Pioneers in de Peel* (Derix, J., Moorman, W., Tielen, T, eds., 1996), recounting the young history of the village of Ysselsteyn, nothing academic has been written till this point in time.

Seen in this context, the thesis at hand fills a present gap in the current research, analysing not only one, but both of the two cemeteries. Never before has a study compared the two cemeteries with each other. Furthermore, besides simply recounting the history of both cemeteries this paper follows a very unique approach by focussing on the local perception of the two sites. In a time where the eye witnesses of the Second World War will soon pass away, a study as such is of great importance to the current field of research.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter will explain the main concepts in use in the present study. The concept of generation by Ulrike Jureit, the concepts of memory by Jan Assmann and the definition of lieu de mémoire by Piere Nora.

2.1 Defining the Concept of Generation

Diachronic change – how perceptions, meanings, and practices are transformed over time – is a crucial component of our study. In order to discern differences or similarities between the memories attached to the tow sites, we have to establish a time frame and its units to facilitate comparison between the two sites as well as over time. The German historian Ulrike Jureit's concept of "generation" is particularly useful for comparing the memories of the three different generations associated with the *Netherlands American War Cemetery* on and the *German Military Cemetery Ysselsteyn* (Jureit, 2005 p. 247).

Following Ulrike Jureit the present case study will refer to those citizens who have experienced the war themselves and have witnessed the construction of the cemeteries as the first, or the "war generation" (Jureit, p. 256). They will furthermore constitute the starting point of the time frame set up in this paper. Members of the first generation focussed on are the 84-year-old Wim Claessens, (b. 1927) and the 86-year-old Felix Prevoo (b. 1925), both of whom were teenagers when they experienced the war first hand. The second generation is comprised of the children of the first generation, who were born after the war and thus have not direct recollections of it. For this generation we focus on Teun Berendsen born in 1954 and therefore 57 years old, as well as the 58-year-old Harry Seuren (b. 1953). Even more temporally distanced to the war, their children in turn, represent the third generation. The two representatives from this generation are the 23-year-old Thijs Hethuis (b.1988) and the 30-year-old Kim Kusters (b. 1981).

Yet, the generational units do not remain separate but interact with each other over time. This dynamic process between generations enables memories to be passed on from one to another and back again. This is what Gabriele Rosenthal calls "intergenerational transmission" (Jureit, p. 166). In the case of Ysselsteyn and Margraten, those who witnessed the war directly communicate their memories from one generation to the next, who then in

turn pass this knowledge on to the subsequent generation. As the chronological distance from the actualities of the Second World War increases, such memories lose their depths, detail and strength. This becomes more intense with each generation. This process becomes important for understanding the transmission of memories at Margraten and Ysselsteyn.

Having written so much about memories, it seems important to examine the concepts of memory. Therefore the following section will elaborate on the applied concepts of memory.

2.2 Jan Assman's Concepts of Memory

Looking at the wide field of memory studies, the theory on collective and cultural memory of the German Egyptologist, Jan Assman, provides a useful concept for the study at hand. The prevailing memories of the Second World War in the social context of the two villages, from the construction of the soldiers' cemeteries 66 years ago, until the present day, have been kept alive through everyday conversation and passed on through communication between three generations. Assman terms this form of memory, communicative memory. It is unstable and fluent and its existence averages about eighty years, which equals the time span of about three generations (Erll, p. 28, Assman, 1995, p. 127, Assman, 2008, p. 111). The village communities' collective war memories have reached with its three generations this time limit and if not fixed to external carriers of memory that endure time, it will disappear with the successive generation. However, when communicative memory receives a fixation it is incorporated into the situation-transcendent and stable cultural heritage of society, which Assman calls cultural memory (Assmann, 1995, p. 129).

This shift from communicative to cultural memory can be perceived at the present developments in the memory work of Margraten and Ysselsteyn. No longer merely communicated, the memories bound to the soldiers' cemeteries are given an institutionalized form and endurance for the future. The memories are written down and recorded and secured in memorial centres or exhibitions and educative programmes for schools. Being objectified and exteriorized those external carriers of memory will in the future functioning as triggers to activate them again. Then they can be used, for instance in educational matters, even if the living barrier of those memories have died (Assman & Czaplicka, 1995, p. 131).

However, with our research we are to a certain extent as well counteracting the disappearance of World War Two memories. Through the conduction of oral history interviews, communicated memories of the locals of Margraten and Ysselsteyn are fixed and made available for future generations, further removed of the origins of the memories. But what exactly are such sites where memory is fixed? One theory very helpful in this respect is the concept of *Lieux de Mémoire*.

2.3. Pierre Nora's *Lieux de Mémoire*

Since this paper will look at the memories and meanings attached by various locals to two different sites, the following section will take a look at the concept of *lieu de mémoire* coined in the 1980s by the French historian Pierre Nora. In his essay *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire* Nora describes specific places where, according to him, “memory crystallizes itself” (Nora, 1989, p.7). These sites of memory retain images of the past. When walking across, or standing in front of them, they conjure up memories of times long gone within the visitor. According to Nora, they function as placeholders for the collective memory, facilitate and manifesting them. In a way the sites can be seen as a sort of deliberately created archive of collective memory (Nora, 1989, p.12). These *lieux de mémoire* can be actual geographical places – such as the *German Military Cemetery Ysselsteyn* or the *Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial* in Margraten, but they can also describe monuments or practices as for example the *Memorial Day* in Margraten (Erll, [year] p.23).

The concept is of course much more complex than it is explained here. However, for the purpose of this research, it suffices to stick to a simplified definition, referring to the two cemeteries as sites of memory which contain images and memories of the Second World War and the Dutch liberation through its physical presence, as well as its “symbolic aura” (Nora, p.18). Both places fulfil the fundamental purpose of a *lieu de mémoire*, namely to “block the work of forgetting [...] to provide [...] a frame of reference for memory” (Nora, p.19). However, it is important to notice that spaces of memory are not static. They are themselves subject of change. This will become obvious while looking at the meanings and memories ascribed to the two sites by various generations.

3. Methodology, Sources and Limitations

Before finally taking a look at the memories, perceptions and practices attached to the cemetery by the locals of Margraten and Ysselsteyn it provides useful to explain and reflect upon the methods and sources underlining this research. How did the choices of the particular sites come about? Which sources informed the research and which limitations were met?

Looking for places suitable for the comparison of two *lieu de memoire* in Limburg the choice soon fell on the *Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial* in Margraten and the *German Military Cemetery Ysselsteyn* - both being spaces where the memory of the Second World War crystallizes itself. The two sites are situated in the province of Limburg. Both lie close to small Dutch communities. Furthermore neither one of them shelters soldiers of Dutch nationality. Resulting both cemeteries provide sufficient common ground to be compared with each other.

In order to do so and to answer the research question, qualitative interviews formed the main methodology. In each town five to six locals were interviewed for about one to three hours. Each of the participants was deliberately selected according to certain criteria. First, they had to live in the particular community near the cemetery. Furthermore it proved advantageous if the interviewee could speak English fluently since both researchers have a limited knowledge of Dutch. Last but not least, the interviewees were chosen in accordance with Ulrike Jureit's theory of generations elaborated upon in the previous chapter of the thesis. The number of people interviewed was kept relatively small. Rather than providing a limitation, this enables the focus on few, but very detailed accounts and opinions by locals of each town. Instead of simply formulating generalizations, the paper pays respect to particularities.

The interviews were loosely structured by a questionnaire (see Appendix C) developed with Assman's concept of Cultural and Communicative Memory, as well as Pierre Nora's *Lieux de Memoire* at the back of the mind. The questions posed, therefore aimed to find out three different aspects. On the one hand they should see which memories and opinions are communicated within the villages. When did the locals first hear about the cemetery? Is it a point of discussion within their community? The second point of focus during the interviews lay on the commemorative practices surrounding the site which help to fix and manifest memories and perceptions about the sites. Can the interviewees remember when they first participated in a certain practice? What was it like and why had they attended in the first

place? In short, which role do the cemeteries take on within the village's community and in how far do they retain images of World War Two?

While conducting the interviews certain things had to be kept in mind. On the one hand the positioning of the interviewers as Germans, and thus as the occupiers of the Netherlands during World War Two meant that some interview partners would be very careful in sharing their true feelings and opinions in order not to come across rude. Still, as long as this fact is taken into consideration during the analysis of the interviews this is no major limitation. It simply results in a growing attention to the fine undertones which, though hidden behind careful formulations, exhibit the true opinion. Furthermore language barriers were encountered during the interviews. Since both researchers are of German origin, with rather limited Dutch language skills, all meetings were conducted in either English or German, except for one held which was held with the help of an interpreter. To prevent this from reducing the outcome of the interviews particular attention was paid to the choice of interview partners - one criterion being that he or she had to speak English fluently.

To analyse the interviews three frameworks marked the structure. For the interpretation of the locals from Margraten the book *Oorlogslessen* by Dienke Hondhous (Hondhuis, 2010), summarizing various educational and commemorative movements in the Netherlands from 1945 onwards, was helpful. For Ysselsteyn a book called *Zestig Jaar Herrie Om Twee twee minute stilte* by Maud van de Reijt (Reijt, 2010) was of importance. Various chapters elaborate on Germany's role in Dutch commemorative culture. The text *suffering as a warning* by Johannes Blom (Blom 1995) provided useful in both cases. The study explains the general commemorative atmosphere within the Netherlands beginning directly after the war and stopping in the present.

In order to underline the findings gained during the interviews short articles were published in local newspapers (see Appendix D). These clippings asked the locals for their responses, calling them to share their opinion on the cemeteries, their function and importance to the local community. However, while analyzing these answers, one has to keep in mind that only certain kind of people will react to an article, namely those really interested in the site, while the other ones will keep silent. Therefore, to validate and question the preliminary insights gained here, primary sources such as newspaper articles were taken into account in order to add and validate facts told during the interviews. These sources found in official archives, as well as in the records of private collectors provided the research with a more detailed picture. However, again, the language barrier provided some problems. Another

difficulty limiting the use of these sources was the fact that sometimes in the private archives certain editions, whole pages or references such as page numbers were missing. Nevertheless, as additional information, these sources provided very helpful for answering the research. Taken together, the findings of the qualitative interviews, as well as the primary and secondary sources create an interesting and sometimes surprising picture of the local perception, meanings and practices surrounding the two cemeteries.

4. Case Studies

In order to understand the memories, meanings and practices surrounding the two cemeteries in Margraten and Ysselsteyn it is helpful to have some background knowledge about both sites' history. The *Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial* in Margraten is the only American military cemetery in the Netherlands, located close to the city centre of Margraten in the South of Limburg and occupying 65 ½ acres of farmland. It was established in November 1944 by the American Army and turned over to the *American Battle Monuments Commission* in 1949, thereby becoming American soil (Roebroeks, 2009, p.14).

The German Military Cemetery Ysselsteyn was established in 1946 according to the Geneva Convention, regulating that soldiers fallen in a in a fight in foreign country have the right to be buried there (Derix et al., 1996). Thus, the Dutch government had to find a last resting place - in the municipality of Venray called “de Paardenkop”, in the neighbourhood of a young village – Ysselsteyn. Without informing the village's citizens but letting them in the assumption that the soldiers' mortal remains will be brought back to Germany the course of the following years, the Dutch army finished constructing the cemetery in 1950. In 1976 the German War Graves Commission, the *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, took over the charge of the site.

4.1 The First Generation

“Memories of wartime suffering were still fresh [...]. In the atmosphere of the time there was a great demand for narratives about the war.”

(Johannes Blom)

“Why not on the other side of the border?”

(De Volkskrant)

4.1.1 Margraten's First Generation – War? Never again!

Thinking about the Second World War means thinking about the *Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial* in Margraten – at least for Felix Prevoo, a 86 year old citizen of Margraten (Prevoo, personal interview, 2011, 21 May). Born 7th April 1925 he was one of

many children growing up during the war. When the South of Limburg was liberated in September 1944 he was only 19, living at his parents who owned a small café situated close to the highway between Maastricht and Aachen. Back then, although not the centre of any actual combat, the village finds itself in the middle of an immense military event - the establishment of the American Cemetery. Therefore in Margraten, memories about the war are intrinsically tied to the history of the cemetery.

“My memories of the war...well...in 1944, a cemetery was build here in Margraten. Loads of trucks would come into town. And because my parents had a little café, the trucks would often stop in front of our house. There were so many dead bodies lying on the streets then [silence]. It was horrible, just horrible. There was blood everywhere...that was terrible. You could smell it...yes, you could smell it” (Prevoo, personal interview, 2011, 21 May).

As Prevoo recalls about the time directly after the war, the cemetery takes on a significant role within the village's everyday reality from the very beginning. The sight of hundreds of trucks laden with corpses becomes an omnipresent image. American soldiers responsible for the establishment of the cemetery populate the town, stay at local families' homes. How, do the locals perceive this presence in 1945? Do they reject or rather welcome the soldiers and the cemetery with open arms? Felix Prevoo remembers that within a few weeks a bond of comradeship between the Dutch and Americans develops, proving advantageous for the cemeteries acceptance. Most locals are glad that the Americans remain nearby, for they are the ones who liberated the South of Limburg from the horrible German occupation (Prevoo, personal interview, 2011, 21 May). The dominant image of the brave American soldier securing the Netherlands' freedom promoted in numerous newspaper articles of these years underlines the approval of the site. “They gave their lives as a return for our freedom. Pay respect to these heroes”² (U.S.A. Militaire Begraafplaats te Margraten, 1945, 30 May, p.1) propagates the *Limburgse Dagblad* for example in March 1945. Soon, the *Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial* in Margraten is accepted as the burial place of the honoured liberators and as such integrated within everyday life practices.

² Original quote: “die hun leven als losprijs voor onze vrijheid betaalden. Eerbied voor deze helden!” (U.S.A. Militaire Begraafplaats te Margraten, 1945, 30 May).

But it is not only the gratitude towards the Americans that creates a positive perception of the cemetery. When in 1945 the Americans see themselves unable to cope with the high amount of war casualties and call the civilians of Margraten upon help, Dutch locals volunteer to dig out graves (Roebroeks, 2009, p.13). One of these men is Felix Prevoo. Together with American soldiers, as well as some Dutch locals the young man works at the cemetery for about four to five days.

“We had to dig graves with our shovels. I had to go there every day...there were so many dead bodies that they needed every hand they could get and of course we helped them” (Prevoo, personal interview, 2011, 21 May)

the old man explains. Being engaged with the establishment of the cemetery themselves and working side by side with their liberators, the citizens soon develop an intimate relationship to the site. Hosting the dead bodies of so many soldiers fallen for the freedom of the Dutch it turns into a symbol of the liberation and a place of gratitude towards the dead.

Therefore it is not surprising that for many citizens it is an urgent need to take part in the first official celebration at the cemetery in 1945 – the American *Memorial Day* at the end of September, commemorating all fallen soldiers of the war. Though actually being an



American practice on American soil, thousands of Dutchmen move towards the site on that special day (Herdenken Gesneuvelden, 1945, 28 May, p.1). Felix Prevoo has very vivid memories of his visits on *Memorial Day*. From 1945 onwards he attends each and every ceremony. As he recalls, the site is a sea of flowers then (fig 3). Everyone from Margraten is present, the whole town on its feet. Coming from Margraten, but also from the rest of the Netherlands the survivors of the war lay down flowers and listen to the speeches of Dutch and American politicians and ambassadors. Till today, the 30th May is *the day* in Margraten, at

(Fig. 3: An American grave during Memorial Day) least according to Felix Prevoo (Prevoo, personal interview, 2011, 21 May).

On the one hand the ceremony provides a frame to show the personal gratefulness of the Dutch for their liberation. At the same time, it also offers a space to remember, share and discuss memories. As Dienne Honduis elaborates in her book *Oorlogslessen*, days such as Memorial Day are a time and place “to speak about the war, to share questions and emotions....[They are] a space [war survivors often] can’t find at home, at school or with friends”³ (Honduis, 2010, p.100). Here, and sometimes only here, can the citizens reflect upon their experiences. Indeed, Prevoo states that to visit the cemetery means to bring back memories – memories of what has happened back then during the war and the liberation. When the choir sings and the masses walk around the site, images spring into his head. He remembers how young men – one of them his brother - were sent to Germany in order to work during the German occupation. But it is not only the memory which moves him while attending the ceremony. Rather, seeing so many citizens who care to remember just like him makes him very emotional (Prevoo, personal interview, 2011, 21 May).

This last statement reveals another essential function of commemorative practices such as *Memorial Day* for members of the first generation – solidarity. For some hours the whole community of Margraten, as well as their American liberators stand together as one united people at the graves. Side by side they all follow one aim – to show their respect to those soldiers who died for their liberty and freedom. Shortly after the war this act creates a feeling of belonging and companionship (Honduis, 2010, p.87). Shaken by the horror and insecurity of the war, it offers a safe port to return to each year anew. Newspaper articles of that time show, how important these aspects are, stressing over and over again the incredible amount of visitors: “The journey to Margraten on Memorial Day was a true pilgrimage [...]. The amount of visitors on the cemetery could be estimated as about 4.000”⁴ (Memorial Day 1948, 1948, 31 May, p.1).

While the practices on *Memorial Day* provide a suitable ground for a collective commemoration of the past they still confront the citizens with certain limitations. Though being a ceremony not only for the Americans, but just as well for the Dutch, it is still highly influenced by the American commemoration culture and political agenda. As Robin Rob

³ Original quote: “een plek waar een andere ruimte ontstond voor het spreken over de oorlog, een voor het delen van vragen en emoties...ruimte die zij op dat moment thuis, op school en onder vrienden en studenten neit vonden” (Honduis, 2010, p.100).

⁴ Original quote: „De reis naar Margraten was ditmaal op ‘Memorial Day’ een ware pelgrimstocht [...] Toch kon het aantal belangstelienden veilig op vierduizend geschat worden.” (Memorial Day 1948, 1948, 31 May, p.1).

writes in his article *A Foothold in Europe: The Aesthetics and Politics of American War Cemeteries in Western Europe* the cemetery and the corresponding practices are

“designed primarily as representations of the American spirit abroad [with a] desire to control and guide symbolic representations. [...] The monuments and tombstones were there to ‘represent the United States’ and not necessarily to commemorate the fallen” (Robin, 1995, p.55, p.59).

Speeches, words and gestures at the end of May are all perfectly planned out and monitored in order to convey a controlled image of America in Europe. While this becomes much more prominent in recent years, already in 1946 some incidents stir the resentment of the citizens in Margraten. In his article *The American Cemetery in Margraten*⁵ Kees Ribbens describes one incident in 1946 when the American authorities announce that the citizens of Margraten are only allowed to place flowers after the end of all official ceremonies, thereby allowing the politicians and ambassadors to arrive without ruffle or excitement but leaving the locals with hardly any time for their personal practices (Ribbens, 2010, p.44). For Prevoo it is therefore not enough to only go to the cemetery. According to him the Americans came to the Netherlands to fight for the freedom of the Dutch. They gave their lives for them. If they hadn’t come, Prevoo says, who knew how Margraten would look like today (Prevoo, personal interview, 2011, 21 May). Combined with the limitations on *Memorial Day* imposed by the Americans, the locals thus feel that a new way to show their appreciation is needed.

Thus already in 1945 additional commemorative practices evolve, taking a more Dutch approach. In February 1945 the *Citizen Committee of Margraten* initializes the adoption of single graves. As the *Limburgse Dagbald* states in 1945, adopting a grave means “1. A visit of the grave, 2. The laying down of flowers, 3. Correspondence with the family in America”⁶ (U.S.A Militaire Begraafplaats, 1945, 30 March, p.1). It also means, according to Prevoo, to take on responsibility for the fallen soldier. Contrary to the official ceremony at *Memorial Day* the adoption is a much more personal practice commemorating the war and the liberation. Prevoo tells

“I lay down flowers on the grave, just like the soldier was part of my own family. From 1948 onwards I furthermore worked for the adoption committee.

⁵ Original title: *De Amerikaanse begraafplaats in Margraten* (Ribbens, 2010, p.44).

⁶ Original quote: „Zoals bekend, bestaat de adoptie in: 1.bezoek aan het graf; 2.het leggen van snijbloemen; 3. Correspondentie met de familie in Amerika” (U.S.A Militaire Begraafplaats, 1945, 30 March, p.1).

I spoke a bit of English, so that was good. With my work, I wanted to show my appreciation and help those who also wanted to show that they still care. If there was no adoption and laying down flowers...I am sure there would be no remembrance of the cemetery. It would be out of our minds or at least out of the younger ones...that is what I feel” (Prevoo, personal interview, 2011, 21 May).

Adopting a grave therefore has a second meaning. Not only is it a way to show ones personal appreciation, but it is also – for Felix Prevoo – a means to secure the memories about the past for upcoming generations, to pass them on. The positive lesson to be learned by each and everyone was “this should never happen again” (de Keizer, 2010, p.12; p.14). But what about the citizens of Ysselsteyn? Do they feel the same?

4.1.2 Ysselsteyn’s First Generation – No entrance allowed!

When Claessens has a look over the see of thousands crosses at the German Military Cemetery Ysselsteyn (*Deutscher Soldatenfriedhof Ysselsteyn*), inevitably and with immense intensity a gruesome picture of the two German soldiers lying dead on the street comes to his mind. Shaken by this image, he always leaves the burial ground with the same uneasy feeling (Claessens, 2011, 03 May). In Claessens’ small native village images like this did not vanish with the end of the German National Socialist occupation in 1945. Ysselsteyn stayed also in the years following the liberation the stetting of such terrible scenes, as a newspaper-article from 1948 of the national newspaper *De Volkskrant* reports. Remains of dead bodies and thousands of coffins arrive daily by the truckload in the village from all over the country to the cemetery (De Volkskrant, 18 November). Those experiences endow the villagers with a permanent impression of the war, which always recurs when they step onto the cemetery ground. In discomfort Claessens confirms

“I cannot forget all the terrible things happening in those days everyday in Ysselsteyn. The dead people... you found them when ploughing the

field.... and – No! These horrible images have already been chasing me my whole life.”⁷ (Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 03 May)

Wim Claessens, who was born and has always lived on a farm close to the *German Military Cemetery Ysselsteyn*, witnessed first hand not only on the cemetery’s construction, but also the formation of the village – “I know Ysselsteyn inside out”⁸ (Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 03 May). The young village, founded in 1921, shares the longest part of its existence in union with the German war cemetery, which was established merely twenty-five years later in 1946 (Derix, 1996, p. 22). It seems obvious to presume the cemetery as an integral part of the village’s community.

Today, after the burial site has existed for more than 65 years, W. Claessens considers it indeed as part of the village. However, this has not always been the case. Although the residents are never “anti” or against the cemetery people living there after the war, feel “antipathy” towards its presence, states Claessens (Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 03 May; Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 11 June). This is only a natural feeling since the site with its almost 32,000 buried Germans soldiers is deeply connected to World War II and the Nazi regime that left the Netherlands devastated and its population with horrible experiences and memories. With the end of the German National Socialist occupation, the residents become aware of the scale of devastation and number of lives lost. In such a situation the construction of a cemetery for the country’s former occupants is not favourable (Blom, 1995, p. 66). As the 84-year-old elucidates, it takes a few years, if not longer, until in a slow process the residents of Ysselsteyn agree to the presence of their former occupants’ war cemetery (Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 11 June). However, in addition to the antipathy felt towards Germans, two additional factors impede initially an early integration of the cemetery into the community’s identity.

First, the constructor of the site, the Dutch government, is not forthright with the local population in the undertaking of constructing the biggest war cemetery in the Netherlands at the ‘Paardenkop’⁹, the fallow piece of land in Ysselsteyn. “*Verboden toegang.*” No entrance - says a sign at the entry - only for men of the *Dienst Identificatien en Berging*, who are bound

⁷ Original quote: “Ik kan alle vreselijke dingen die deze dagen dagelijks gebeurden in Ysselsteyn niet vergeten. De dode mensen... je vond ze tijdens het ploegen van het veld.. en - Nee! Deze verschrikkelijke beelden hebben mij al mijn hele leven achtervolgd, (W. Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 03 May).

⁸ Original quote: „I ken Ysselsteyn helemaal!“ (W. Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 11 June).

⁹ Original quote: “Paardenkop” is the local term for the 30 hectare piece of land on which the cemetery is located today (Derix, 1996, p. 109).

to secrecy. The mysteriousness of the work, taking place behind the hedges and barbed wire, leaves the locals puzzled with questions as *Gazet Limburg* in 1949 reports: “What are they doing at the ‘Paardenkop’ in Ysselsteyn?”. Only in 1952 does the government finally allow the local population admittance to the cemetery, which Claessens out of curiosity instantly does (W. Claessens, 2011, 11 June; Derix, p. 109; “Kruisen rijen”, 1949).

Second, the locals live with the false assumption of the soldiers’ cemetery’s disappearance from Ysselsteyn’s map as soon as the remains of the fallen are brought back to Germany over the close border. On the whole, this initial unclear situation provides the villagers with an overall insecurity in how to deal with the place in general (“Kruisen rijen”, 1949).

Next to the negative preconditions and the sensitivity regarding Germans immediately after the war, other circumstances lead nevertheless finally to a collective agreement to the cemetery’s presence. In the first place, strong antipathy against Germans lasts a lot longer in other provinces of the Netherlands than in northern Limburg. Ysselsteyn’s proximity to the German border provides close commercial partnerships and personal contacts to Germans, hence a strong emphasis of the war would have been disadvantageous (Blom, 1995, p. 69). In contrast, Dutch from costal areas and cities, such as Rotterdam, know Germans mainly as

tourists and thus retain their sensitivity much longer (K-H. Voigt, K-H., personal interview, 2011, 06 June).

Everyone deserves a place to rest no matter from which nation he comes, thus resentment stops after entering the cemetery hedges, an attitude voiced by Claessens and local newspapers of the 1950’s (Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 03 May; “De Dodenherdenking”, 1959). The Netherlands has always been a tolerant country, guided by Christian values and emanating a “high moral calibre” (Blom, 1995, p.65). Thus, a loud protest against a burial place is not a possibility for the Dutch locals.



Fig. 4: The memorial stone ‘Bonbruck’

However, particularly decisive for the improvement and relaxation of the tense Dutch-German relationship and for the establishment of the first contacts between the locals and the cemetery site, is one very important person – Sief Janssen

(Reijt, 2010; Voigt, personal interview, 2011, 06 June). Pastor Janssen, whom Claessens knew very well, arranges since 1963 in association with the German referent Kohl – both knew each other from their confinement in the concentration camp Dachau – the German-Dutch reconciliation programme ‘Verzoening over de graven heen’¹⁰. During a two-week vacation, German boys – later girls could join as well – from the Bavarian town Bonbruck, conduct maintenance work at the cemetery. Contact to local youth is for instance ensured through joint dance nights, evenings at bonfires or the accommodation in Dutch guest families (Wangener Jugend, 1967). Here the foundation of a tradition in form of an annual exchange is a sign of friendship, mutual understanding and peace, to which a memorial stone (fig. 4) in the village’ centre pays tribute (Derix, pp. 112-113, Dagblad voor Nord Limburg, 1964, 21 November). Recalling proudly, the 84-year old Claessens meets only recently once again at the end of May 2011, a group of teenagers from Bonbruck. It fills him with pride and delights him till the present day: “I like it *very much* that the German youths still come here after all those years. This is *very nice*”¹¹ (personal interview, Claessens, 2011, 11 June).

When today’s youths come to the cemetery, from time to time Wim Claessens tells his personal war experiences in the context of the educational programme of the *Youth Meeting Centre* (hereafter *JOC*). Claessens, rather exceptional for the war generation, has been involved in this practice for a while already. His most important message to the youth is: “No more, no more war! Never again”¹² This belief has always determined Claessens perception, as well as his engagement with the war cemetery.

Too long have the war generation, her parents’ generation, kept silent about first hand experiences, states 47-years old Mia Rongen-Roelenzia. However, realizing now before valuable memories get lost, the first generation sees its responsibility to educate and broadening the awareness of young people for the preciousness of peace (Rongen-Roelenzia, personal interview, 2011, 04 May). Hence, Claessens assesses that if you do not speak about the war, it does not help but creates rather new conflicts (W. Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 03 May).

But speaking about war is not enough. In the eyes of Claessens one needs to be at the grounds of the war cemetery, see and feel its presence physically. “Because it is yet always an

¹⁰ Original title: „Reconciliation over the graves”

¹¹ Original quote: „Maar ik vind het heel fijn dat de Duitse jongeren nog altijd komen na al die jaren. Dit is heel mooi” (Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 11 June).

¹² Original quote: “Nooit, nooit meer oorlog! Nooit meer!” (Claessens, personal interview 2011, 11 June).

immense experience to stand on the cemetery itself”¹³. Thus, all his fourteen grandchildren are regularly taken to the cemetery by him. It is not only of personal importance for Claessens being confronted with the past but also for future generations such as his grandchildren. (W. Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 03 May).

4.1.3 Margraten and Ysselsteyn - A Comparison

By now this paper has analyzed the memories, perceptions and practices of the first generation in Margraten and Ysselsteyn. But how do they differ from each other and in how far are they similar? The first generations of the two small villages in Limburg – Margraten and Ysselsteyn – experience a testing post-war period. Horrible circumstances create dreadful memories which are often closely connected to the two different cemeteries. These memories recur, for Felix Prevoo and Wim Claessens alike, vividly with every visit of the two sites. However, from here on the perceptions and the roles ascribed to the two sites by the first generations deviate. This is mainly due to two factors. First, Margraten hosts the dead bodies of the liberators whereas Ysselsteyn that of the occupiers of the Netherlands. A second factor influencing the perception of both cemeteries is the locals’ different involvements in the erection of the cemeteries. Participating in person in the construction process of the *American War Cemetery and Memorial*, as well as the strong appreciation felt towards the American liberators bound Prevoo’s memories very tight onto the site. An early attendance at the *American Memorial Day* provides the locals with a platform to pay tribute to their heroes and to express their thankfulness. This is furthermore enhanced through taking personal care of an adopted grave.

These developed practices, the very positive perception and the early identification with the war cemetery could not instantly occur for Ysselsteyn’s residents due to various circumstances, such as the prevailing antipathy and aversion felt towards the Germans for a long time, as well as the exclusion of the locals in the construction process of the *German Military Cemetery Ysselsteyn*. These negative feelings and memories about the war time and the establishment of the cemetery also attach themselves to the cemetery itself. Thus, the war generation in Ysselsteyn, differently than in Margraten, is rather reluctant in visiting and relating to the site, instead of collectively asking for personal involvement with the soldiers’

¹³ Original quote: “Omdat het toch altijd een immense ervaring is om op de begraafplaats zelf te staan.” (Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 11 June).

cemetery. However, time and committed individuals slowly lead to a new perception of and reconciliation with the Germans, resulting in a gradual acceptance of the cemetery's presence.

Still, no matter how different the obtained sets of memories, perceptions and the difference in involvement with the cemetery site are in both villages, the very first memories of the war are crucial and shaping for the relationship towards the site. Both interviewees conclude in unison: "No more war!". Do the proceeding generations agree?

4.2 The Second Generation

“Margraten, that is the cemetery, and the cemetery belongs to Margraten”

(Teun Berendsen)

“We don’t know Ysselsteyn without the cemetery. It’s just like that”

(Mia Rongen-Roelenzia)

4.2.1 Margraten’s Second Generation – Bringing memories back to live!

Already in the 1940s and 50s the *Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial* in Margraten formed an omnipotent, ever present membrane in the lives of the first generation, providing a space to engage with the vivid memories of the war, as well as to pay respect to the fallen heroes. Within the following decades this role consolidates itself. Teun Berendsen, a 58 year old citizen of Margraten, explains that for him the cemetery has become an integral part of the local identity. Already in the 1990s, when Berendsen moves to the village, he feels the immense presence of the site.

“We [here he refers to himself and his wife] both knew about the cemetery. A lot of people know it. When you think about Margraten then you know that there is an American Cemetery. It clearly is a part of the region, a part of the village. It is part of the life here” (Berendsen, personal interview, 2011, 13 April).

Indeed, many reactions of the second generation received via mail, as well as during interviews show that almost everyone has a very positive opinion about the cemetery. Harro Hautmans for example states that each time he receives visitors from outside of Margraten he takes them to the cemetery since this is the most important site in the South of Limburg (Hautmans, personal communication, 2011, 03 April). Berendsen furthermore recalls that from the very first year he and his family participate in the ceremonies of *Memorial Day* because everyone would do so in Margraten (Berendsen, personal interview, 2011, 13 April). Visiting the cemetery, he quickly learns, is what one does in order to be an accepted member of the community of Margraten. Even though not being personally liberated by the Americans, the members of the second generation feel deeply connected to this part of their

villages past. Hence everyone in town agrees – the liberation through the Americans is still very important.

However, while the site has taken on a very central role within the village's community, it is not so much integrated in everyday life anymore as it was with the preceding generation. Instead, the interest focuses on special occasions. As Johannes Blom explains in his essay *Suffering as a Warning: The Netherlands and the Legacy of War* "the war [is] no longer a direct source of inspiration for daily life; it [recedes] somewhat into the background." (Blom, 1995, p. 66). Indeed, the frequency of visits to the site during the week reduces. While Prevoot could be seen several times a month on the cemetery, Berendsen says that he visits only four or five times a year (Berendsen, personal interview, 2011, 13 April). But how did this change come about? As Berendsen explains, being born in 1954 he himself did not experience the war himself. His knowledge stirs from history books, as well as stories told by his parents. Therefore, standing in front of a grave it is hard for him to imagine the horrors of



the past. Moreover the thought of thousands of real persons buried underneath the tombstones (fig. 5) appears incredible. For Felix Prevoo, digging graves himself, the sight conjures up images of the past – of the dead bodies on the streets, of himself with a shovel in his hands. Teun Berendsen however, has no such memories. He sees a tombstone with a name on it. But

Fig. 5: The Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial

to realize that underneath this sea of crosses more than 8.000 real human beings are buried proofs fairly difficult (Berendsen, personal interview, 2011, 13 April). "When you stand in front of the grave for the first time, it doesn't do much with you" confesses also Adry Weijenberg in an article of the *Dagblad de Limburger*. "You see a name and that is all."¹⁴ (Walken over het graf, 2005, 06 May). It is exactly because of this issue to truly realize and understand the past that the importance of the cemetery has changed for everyday life throughout the years.

¹⁴ Original quote: "Als je voor het eerst voor zo'n kruis staat, doet dat je niet zoveel. Je ziet een naam en dat is alles" (Walken over het graf, 2005, 06 May).

This does not mean however, that the “interest in the war as such [dies] out, but the [...] public interest in the war [tends] to be aroused on special occasions” (Blom, 1995, p. 66) such as *Memorial Day*, as Blom writes. During these times of the year the cemetery is still bursting with people, coming from Margraten, but also from all over the Netherlands (Margraten Memorial Day, 1965, 31 May; Oorlogslachtoffers VS in Margraten herdacht, 1997, 26 May). Next to *Memorial Day* the adoption of graves is regarded with growing interest. Adopting a grave to search for information about the young soldier's life and to keep contact with the family members in the United States enables locals to learn about the individual fate of one single soldier, writes the *Dagblad de Limburger* in 2005 (Adoption of graves, 2005, 06 May). It establishes a new individual relationship with a particular grave, connecting the site with highly specific memories about the fate of a certain fallen soldier. These experiences are exactly those of Teun Berendsen and his family, who have adopted one grave, as well as co-adopted another one. In 1993 the local accepts a job in America. Being there for some time he makes the acquaintance of Tony – an American colleague of his from Minnesota. Soon they discover a similarity – the cemetery in Margraten. Tony's uncle is buried there. The two men develop a close friendship so that, back in the Netherlands, Berendsen attempts to adopt the fallen soldier's grave. Unfortunately it is already taken by somebody else. Nevertheless the citizen of Margraten brings flowers on every *Memorial Day* – having somehow co-adopted it (Berendsen, personal interview, 2011, 13 April). Sometime later the whole family actually adopts a second grave. Each *Memorial Day* they place a photo of the soldier in front of the grave. Knowing Tony, a relative, this is very important.

“Once you know somebody, the whole relationship towards the site changes, the grave becomes alive. What I mean with this is that I suddenly realized: behind each and every gravestone there is a person. Behind each tombstone there is a life story. Each of the soldiers was a young boy with own dreams and aspirations in life.” (Berendsen, personal interview, 2011, 13 April).

Searching information and getting into contact with the soldier's family is a means to connect with the cemetery explains Berendsen. Thus while for the first generation being primarily a means to show their personal gratitude, the adoption has now also turned into a necessary way to build a relationship with the site in order to understand, at the example of one soldier, what has happened in the past. This is not only important for adults, Berendsen thinks, but as

well for younger children. They need to know what happened as well and visualizing always helps to understand things better (Berendsen, personal interview, 2011, 13 April).

Therefore, in order to awake the interest of the smaller citizens of Margraten new practices surrounding *Memorial Day* have developed. These newer ideas take the example of the individual approach of the adoption as a model. Each year, one or two days before the actual *Memorial Day* school children of the eighth grade visit the cemetery together with their teacher. However, they do not simply walk around the site, but have to become active themselves. Berendsen still remembers the day when his daughters participated in that event. For him that was very special. The teacher would tell the children about the war and the reason for the cemeteries existence. Then, each child picks flowers on a field nearby and lays them in front of the graves. As the *Liburgse Dagblad* describes, in 1996 example more than 2.500 graves were covered with flowers placed by children (Jean Graus, 1998, 25 May 25, p.7). However, it does not end here. Witnesses of the establishment of the cemetery as for example Felix Prevoot as well as relatives of one of the fallen soldiers furthermore share their memories with the children. In 2003 Tony visits Berendsen. Together the two visit the local school, where the American tells the children about his family and dead.

“By the time the children could place their flowers they all would know who his uncle was. For them this one grave started to come alive, because Tony talked about him. I think it was very powerful when there was a nephew of a soldier who is buried there” (Berendsen, personal interview, 2011, 13 April).

Visualizing, making the graves come alive in order to relate to the cemetery – that is close to the heart of Teun Berendsen and the rest of his generation. This tendency does not only reveal itself during the official ceremonies surrounding the site but also in the very private ones. Berendsen has recorded almost every visit of the cemetery on camera. He films his family while walking across the sea of graves, as well as portrays the moment when one of his daughters lays down flowers in front of the adopted grave. Not only videos, but also dozens of newspaper articles, programs of various practices on the cemetery find themselves in a neat folder, filled till the top. Every gesture is documented for the future. Why is it so important for him to film these events and to archive them? This becomes obvious the very moment the adoptee watches himself and his family crossing the huge meadow. He suddenly becomes very calm and quiet – for the first time during the whole interview. Capturing the moments on

camera provides the opportunity to re-experience the memories created during the visits. It gives his memories a visual shape. These videos represent his personal point of view, showing those aspects of the visit that care for him – the grave, being together with his family during that occasion. Just as the adoption of a grave, they videos mark a personalized means to engage with the cemetery and to share the memory of the war and the liberation with the rest of the village. They “keep alive what otherwise would soon be lost. It is for me so that I know that I have been there, as well as for other people to see” (Berendsen, personal interview, 2011, 13 April). Having analyzed Berendsen’s point of view, this paper will now take a closer look at the second generation in Ysselsteyn. How do they feel about the German soldiers buried at the cemetery? And how vivid are their memories about the war?

4.2.2 Ysselsteyn’s Second Generation – Acceptance? Yes – Identification? No.

“Wow!” The impressive mass of crosses (fig. 6) strikes Harry Seuren each time he stands on the grounds of the *German Military Cemetery Ysselsteyn* once a year or when the opportunity is given.



Fig. 6: the German Military Cemetery Ysselsteyn
May).

He gets very calm, silent and fall into a devote mood when bringing to his mind that many Germans buried here were merely young soldiers of seventeen or eighteen years. Despite having not experienced the war, those thoughts about World War II come nevertheless immediately to his mind being here at the place that inevitably bears witness to it

(Seuren, personal interview, 2011, 02

The war cemetery is charged with diverse memories for the second-generation residents of Ysselsteyn. These have been produced through positive and negative events, shaped by people involved with the cemetery, and influenced by the alleviation of a former sensitive relationship with Germany. The following sections will, in examining the diverse memoires connected to the cemetery – positive, negative, new and old – visualize why an

unstable perception and not often clearly defined practices, or rather often lacking, of the second generation exists.

All second generation's representatives in this investigation grew up in, or in a village close by, Ysselsteyn. The supermarket owner expresses, however with a slight hesitation, the overall perception of the second generation

“ The cemetery? Well, you know, we don't know it differently that a German cemetery is there. That is very easy to understand, isn't it? It is like with the village square and the church – they are as well, just there and have always been there. We think that this is normal. And to take it away? No! No! It belongs to Ysselsteyn and it belongs to the area and, er, well bad Germans lie there, but also good Germans. Most of them – I think so...”¹⁵ (Seuren, personal interview, 2011, 02 May)

Yet being asked, on the other side, whether Seuren sees the *German Military Cemetery* not only as a part of, but positive for the village, he commits that he do not know the answer. Then, however, he slowly expresses a slight discomfort with its existence: “It would have been better to construct such a cemetery on the other side of the border. Yes! Here that – well, that is a bit risky”¹⁶ (Seuren, personal interview, 2011, 02 May). The fact that in the post war period the Dutch government chose the area of unused moorland without informing the locals beforehand, was for him a slightly audacious undertaking. The manager of the centrally located diner *Kwalitaria Forst*, Mart Bos, has on the other side, no doubts and maintains that particularly due to the presence of the military cemetery it had first pinned down Ysselsteyn onto the map (Bos, personal interview, 2011, 03 May). The first generation, knowing the village without the military cemetery, the second generation could never dispute its existence since it was being already constructed when they were born. Thus, the second generation begins over the years to accept the German soldiers cemetery but used it never as a means of

¹⁵ Original quote: “Der Friedhof. Ja gut, wir wissen es ja nicht anders als dass da ein Deutscher Friedhof ist. Das ist doch ganz einfach, oder? Das ist doch wie mit dem Dorfplatz und der Kirche – die sind ja auch da und waren schon immer da. Für uns ist das normal. Und ihn wegnehmen? Nein! Nein! Der gehört doch irgendwie zu Ysselsteyn und zu der Umgebung und... ja, schlechte Deutsche liegen da, aber auch gute. Die meisten von denen – denk ich mal...” (Seuren, personal interview, 2011, 02 May).

¹⁶ Original quote: “Es wäre bessser gewesen, wenn er auf der anderen Seite der Grenze gelegen wäre. Ja. Das ist doch ein bisschen heikel hier.” (Seuren, personal interview, 2011, 02 May).

identification: “Accepted? Yes, we in Ysselsteyn accept it – but I myself never *identified* with it...no”¹⁷ (Bos, personal interview, 2011, 03 May).

Undesirable circumstances prevented an early integration into the community’s positive collective identification of the burial place. Yet, various encouraging incidences were supportive to finally bring about the above-mentioned acceptance. Thus, second-generation interviewees’ memories range from positive till even negative. The following section will examine first, the negative and proceed to the positive memories, which nevertheless dominate this generation’s present perception of the burial place.

Charged with memories of World War II and the Nazi regime and next to being by area the biggest German World War II cemetery – where simple soldiers of the German armed Forces lie next to SS-officers – it provides a natural attraction to Neo-Nazis. The local newspaper *Peel en Maas* had been reporting time and again of gatherings of the latter, as early as in November 1952 and ending with the last major case in 2003 (Derix, p. 111). Neo-Nazis, mainly of Dutch origin, such as the “black widow” Florentine Rost van Tonningen¹⁸, use suitable occasions, such as “their Heldengedenktage” – the German *Remembrance Day* in November – to openly demonstrate their antifascist mind-sets (Voigt, K-H. Personal interview, 2011, 03 May; Voigt, T. Personal interview, 2011, 03 May; Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 03 May; Seuren, personal interview, 2011, 03 May; Rongen-Roelanzia, personal interview, 2011, 04 May; Peel en Maas, November 20). A few incidents in the 1980’s, receiving even national attention in the media, left the most permanent “shock”-impressions to the villagers (Peel en Maas, 1952, 15 November; Peel en Maas, 2011, 25 October; Peel en Maas, 1991, 28 November; Voigt, K-H. personal interview, 2011, 01 May). Seuren recalls several incidences and states that those Neo-Nazi occurrences had left quite overwhelming impressions to the members of the second generation of Ysselsteyn, since in a small village as Ysselsteyn “we are not used to something like that. We don’t know this here. That was terrible!”¹⁹. However, this aroused “anti-promotion”, as Seuren calls it, never cast a bad light at the village in general (Seuren, personal interview, 2011, 02 May)

¹⁷ Original quote: “Akzeptiert? Ja, das haben wir hier in Ysselsteyn – aber ich selber habe mich nie damit identifiziert...nein” (Rongen-Roelanzia, personal interview, 2011, 04 May).

¹⁸ Florentine Rost van Tonningen, continuing devotedly the socialist Nazi mind-set of her husband Meinhoud, who was member of leader of the Dutch National Socialist Movement (*NSB*), and provided Ysselsteyn time and again in this aspect much broad attention.

¹⁹ Original quote: “Wir sind das nicht gewohnt, wir kennen das nicht hier. Das war schrecklich!” (Seuren, personal interview, 2011, 02 May).

“No! We have not started to wish that the cemetery wasn’t here because the Nazis came. It has nothing to do with it. No, we know the position of the Neo-Nazis. We condemn them, not the cemetery!”²⁰ (Seuren, personal interview, 2011, 02 May)

Though the confrontations with the Neo-Nazis were not seen negatively for the village’s image, it was not constructive in bringing the cemetery village’ community a common identity neither. Thus, the site stays still in the late 80’s and 90’s in close connection with the Second World War. According to Maud van de Reijt, an expert in German studies, efforts to get the German war cemetery in Ysselsteyn out of this above-mentioned “taboo” zone, was even as late as in 2008 still the objective of mayor Jos Waals of Venray (Reijt, 2010, p. 174).

Other memories, for instance those concerning villagers collaborating with the Germans during the occupation, still stay – perhaps not as expressively but yet very much, active in the community collective memory. In the 1960’s and 1970’s the Dutch had for the first time properly given attention to those who betrayed their fellow countrymen. Yet, even today there are still people in Ysselsteyn that recall the families’ names of the village’s collaborators (Blom, 1995, p. 67; Seuren, personal interview, 2011, 02 May).

However, these cases are only a few exceptions, as Harry Seuren maintains, who recalls a more distinctive sensitivity of the Dutch residents towards Germans shopping in his



Fig. 7: The supermarket Coop Seuren in Ysselsteyn.

supermarket thirty years ago (fig. 7) (Seuren, personal interview, 2011, May 02). Today these strong sensitive feelings against Germans, determinative rather for the first generation’s perception, has gone: “You [the Germans] belong to us. We are together!”²¹ (Seuren, personal interview, 2011, May 02). Considering the German war Fig 6.: cemetery, the residents even

²⁰ Original quote: “Nein, wir wünschen uns nicht, dass die Friedhof nicht hier wäre wegen der Nazis. Nein, wir wissen wie die, wo die Naonzis stehen, das hat nichts dazu zu machen. Wir verurteilen die, nicht die Friedhof! (Seuren, personal interview. 2011, 02 May).

²¹ Original quote: „Ihr gehört zu uns. Wir gehören zusammen!“ (Bos, personal interview, 2011, 03 May).

thousand crosses are. The reason why Seuren, for instance, pays a visit to war cemeteries in general, are not because the latter host soldiers of particular nations but because they are cemeteries of *war* (my emphasis) (Seuren, personal interview, 2011, 02 May).

According to Maud van de Reijt, the second generations' new approach to their country's former enemy is a nation-wide perceptual change. However, this will be elaborated more in depth in chapter 4.4.2 (Reijt, 2010, p. 12, p. 13). Concerning Ysselsteijn in particular, this change was enhanced through the reconciliation campaign 'Verzoening over de graven heen'. It was initiated with the awareness that reconciliation between Germany and the Netherlands needs particular attention and external support by creating a friendly basis. The campaign endowed the second-generation's residents of Ysselsteijn with positive memories evolving around the *German Military Cemetery*, dating back to the 1960's, when they were themselves children. German youth performed, during their vacations maintenance work on the cemetery site and came always into a friendly exchange with the young villagers. Whereas in the war generation pastor Janssen, who brought the first youth groups to Ysselsteijn, was recollected (see chapter 4.1.2), in the second generation another name occurs – Peter Müller. The "rasechte idealist"²² from Plochingen, Germany, accompanied since 1968 German youth, and displaces Janssen hereby (Peel en Maas, 1983, 03 June). Müller's mission for peace and reconciliation, still vividly recalled in the second generation today, became a successful tradition and is still an integral part of the educational programme of the *JOC*, wishing to reconcile different nations of the whole world (Youth Meeting Centre, June, 22, 2011).

When the second generation needs to describe the importance the cemetery plays for them in the context of the campaign, Harry Seuren for instance, who was friends with Müller and took part in the reconciliation process himself, maintains that the youth work and the exchange with the German teenagers was "... not really about the cemetery. It was about being together with Germans and Dutch. This was actually relevant!"²³ (Seuren, personal interview, 2011, 02 May).

Although "Verzoening over de graven heen" was being staged at the cemetery ground, the latter seems not having taken in an important position. It was again "just there" in the eyes of the second-generation citizens. The graves represented merely a means over which reconciliation of the former enemies could be performed. It originated not out of a collective

²² Original quote: "authentic idealist" (Peel en Maas, 1983, 03 June).

²³ Original quote: "Es ging nicht um den Friedhof! Es ging um Zusammensein mit Deutschen und Holländern. Das war eigentlich relevant!" (Seuren, personal interview, 2011, 02 May).

will but out of the wishes of individuals, such as Müller, who recognized the importance. However, the original purpose of visiting the cemetery—to remember the fallen soldiers—appears to have been lost among those in the second generation. Out of a pedagogical duty, parents might, for example, take their children to the war cemetery to have a look. However, this is always in combination with an appealing event. Harry Seuren likes to come to exhibitions and theatre plays the *JOC* organizes at the site. In here he sees the opportunity given to leave the *JOC* buildings and to enter the *German War Cemetery Ysselsteyn* to have a look at the masses of graves and experience a striking moment. However, the major event staged at the cemetery, the ‘Volkstrauertag’, the German *Remembrance Day* in November, occasionally attract some locals of Ysselsteyn, yet the broader Dutch public claims having no reason to attend the ceremony. “This ceremony is only for the Germans and the German government. The Dutch don’t go there”²⁴ (Seuren, personal interview, 2011, 02 May). Perhaps this indicates that the second generation’s sensitivity towards Germans is under the surface still more pervasive than being committed.

4.2.3 Margraten and Ysselsteyn – A Comparison

Comparing the memories connected to the cemeteries in Margraten and Ysselsteyn by the members of the second generation, one sees that the cemeteries are not considered as extraordinary anymore as they were for the first generation. Existing for a relatively long time already, their presence within the villages has become somehow commonplace. The locals don’t remember their community any other than close to a cemetery. Also, stories about the war time, as well as about the establishment of the cemeteries are still communicated very often. In this respect, Margraten and Ysselsteyn are quite alike. In both towns, the sites of memory have grown to be part of the villages’ identity in one way or the other. Still, the meanings of the cemeteries within the local communities, as well as the practices which are connected to that, differ.

In Margraten, the site carries very positive connotations from the very beginning onwards. This enables the locals to build their identity as a community around the site, embedding it in the local traditions and habits. To visit the cemetery is a part of the local custom. In order to be an accepted member of the town one has to participate in ceremonies

²⁴ Original quote: “Die Zeremonie ist nur für die Deutschen und die deutsche Regierung. Aber die Holländer gehen da nicht so hin” (Seuren, personal interview, 2011, 02 May).

taking place. Thus, on certain days of the year almost every citizen moves towards the site with great enthusiasm. For the locals in Ysselsteyn, on the other hand, accepting the site proves not as easy. Negative memories about Neo-Nazi gatherings and collaborations still hinder the identification, even though the war itself has reached into the distance and is not as present anymore as for the first generation. Though not condemning or rejecting the cemetery, the locals still can't identify with the cemetery but rather endure its presence. Therefore, the official practices are often only attended by local politicians and officials. In order for the rest of the citizens to attend, a special invitation or reason is needed. In this respect one can see a big difference between the two sites. In Margraten the locals identify with 'their' cemetery, in Ysselsteyn it is rather accepted.

However, while the general perception of the two sites diverges, the function of them is coming more and more a line with each other. The *Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial* proves to be a space to bond with the soldiers fighting during the war. Locals visit the site in order to show their gratitude. The *German Military Cemetery Ysselsteyn* also provides the locals with the possibility to deal with their feelings about the Germans. Though not a place to show their gratitude, it offers a platform for the slow reconciliation between the Dutch locals and the German perpetrators, offering campaigns such as '*Verzoening over de graven heen*', as well as activities by the *JOC*.

Will these movements grow more important in the coming years? Which role does the cemetery play for the third generation after the war?

4.3 The Third Generation

“I don’t exactly remember the first time I visited the cemetery. It must have been with my school in eighth grade. No, wait, maybe it was with my parents? I don’t know anymore.”

(Thijs Heithuis)

“The people living in Ysselsteyn do not have a lot to do with the cemetery. They don’t think about it very often”

(Jos Arts)

4.3.1 Margraten’s Third Generation – Do they still care?

Till now we have seen how the first and second generation engages with the *Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial* in Margraten. But what about their children - the members of the third generation? Interviews, as well as newspaper articles very quickly exhibit that, contrary to the two preceding generations, it is not that easy to determine the meaning and perception of the cemetery for the younger locals. Instead two opposing developments surface. On the one hand the cemetery and its practices, existing for more than 66 years, have clearly taken on an integral part within the local’s community. Repeating what his parents and grandparents generation have already claimed time and again, the 23-year old student Thijs Heithuis for example sais

“The cemetery, Memorial Day and the adoption are very important for Margraten. It is necessary that people remember what has happened here and that it should never happen again. They [the Americans] liberated us, you know... I think we need to pay attention to the fallen soldiers, just as they did with us when they were here.” (Heithuis, personal interview, 2011, 12 April).

Each and every resident of Margraten knows about the cemeteries history, the program on *Memorial Day*, as well as the habits connected to the adoption of a grave. The ceremonies, practiced for so many decades, have turned into an almost natural habit. To undermine this, new practices specifically centring on the local history of Margraten have developed since

2004. In a requiem, called *Alle Namen*, “special attention [was paid] to the fact that sixty years ago Belgium and the South of Limburg were liberated from Nazi occupation” (Alle Namen, 2004). For a few days the voices of adoptees and eyewitnesses could be heard across the cemetery. They cite, mourn or sing the names of individual American soldiers. Also each year in September the *Limburgs Symphonie Orkest* performs next to the graves. These events still attract thousands of visitors. Within a few hours the streets are filled with cars and the cemetery is crowded with people, as the *Dagblad de Limburger* states in 2006. Even those coming by foot can’t find a place to sit anymore” (Seuntjens, 2006, 13 September).

However, it is not so much the younger generation who is participating in the concerts, but mainly the members of the second and third generation. Heithuis, for example, does not feel attracted at all since this, as he states, would not be his type of music at all (Heithuis, personal interview, 2011, 11 May). A similar answer is given when asked about his first visit to the cemetery in eighth grade, which was so important for Teun Berendsen who even filmed the day when his daughters participated. Heithuis on the other hand is not able to recall this day. Even though he knows that he must have taken part because every school child in Margraten does, he cannot remember any details. For him this day was not as impressive as for the members of the first and second generation. What about *Memorial Day* then? What does he think about that day? Does he visit the cemetery then? First of all, the young man does acknowledge the fact that many citizens of Margraten are present during that day. For him this is very impressive and shows how important the cemetery still is. It is indeed necessary to pay respect to the fallen soldiers. However, he himself has

“already seen the ceremony a couple of times together with my family. Since it is the same ceremony every year it is nothing new anymore. I wasn’t at the cemetery during *Memorial Day* last year and I am not sure that I will go there now. I have heard the stories too often” (Heithuis, personal interview, 2011, 11 May)

he confesses with an uneasy expression in his face. Indeed, since the very first *Memorial Day* in 1945 not much has changed in the sequence of the day. The program, published in 1945, is almost exactly identical with the one of 2011 (Herdenking Genseuvelden, 1945, 28 May, p.1; *Memorial Day Ceremony*, 2011, 29 May. Thus, while on the one hand acknowledging the general importance of the cemetery and the practices taking place there for conveying the horrible happenings of the Second World War, the personal interest of the third generation in the site is decreasing.

This becomes obvious when looking at specific statements Thijs Heithuis utters throughout the interview. Asked about the name of the soldier he and his family have adopted, he is rather unsure. What he knows for sure is the soldier's surname – Hopper – but he has to guess the first name which according to him might be Dennis (Heithuis, personal interview, 2011, 12 April). As a matter of fact Dennis Hopper is not the name of the American soldier, but belongs to a famous Hollywood actor - the actual name is Albert. Furthermore, next to being general and sometimes incomplete, the sentences the student pronounces seem very familiar. Formulations such as “this should never happen again” or “they liberated us and we have to be thankful” (Heithuis, personal interview, 2011, 12 April, 11 May) spring, sometimes with the exact same wording, pausing and emphasis, from newspaper articles, as well as from stories about the cemetery communicated by Felix Prevoo and Teun Berendsen, members of the first and second generation. When asked what exactly he means with these sentences, Heithuis laughs embarrassed and answers “well, I don’t know. It simply should never happen again, that is all” (Heithuis, personal interview, 2011, 12 April, 11 May). Though without a doubt pronounced and meant with firm conviction these phrases and answers are repetitions which have lost their former intensity, in depth knowledge and sincerity.

With the war reaching further and further in the past, its vivid impact is losing itself. While the images of the war, the occupation and the liberation were very prominent in the first generations' minds and also still somehow tangible for the second, it is hard to imagine what it was like for the new one. According to the University professors David Uzzel and Roy Ballantyne this is only natural. In their essay *Heritage that hurts* they state that “meaning and resonance of events from the past changes as time separates us from those events” (Uzzell & Ballantyne, 2008, p. 504). The further an event is removed in time, the less people are concerned and emotionally involved with it. For generations with no direct connection to the war, the event loses more and more significance. Thus, one can explain why members of the third generation visit the place less often than their parents. Not only the interviews show that, but also a look at newspaper articles. While those of the years after the war, until the mid 1970s are of big length, taking in at least one page and being on the front page very often, the more recent ones mostly inform in four to five sentences about *Memorial Day* (Memorial Day, 1995, 27 May, p.1). As Blom explains “the main difference lies in a reduction, not of the frequency, but of the intensity with which the war is discussed, just as the intensity of the general public debate has diminished.” (Blom, 1995, p.68).

Next to the decrease in personal interest, the political side also makes the cemetery more and more a place of discussion within the media. *Memorial Day* is often used, from sides of the Americans, to follow their own political agenda. This, however, collides with the perception of the Dutch locals. The most prominent occasion of such an opposition is marked by the visit of President Bush in 2005. In his speech on the cemetery Bush states

“there is no soldier so strong as a soldier who fights for freedom. As the 21st century unfolds before us, Americans and Europeans are continuing to work together and are bringing freedom and hope to places where it has long been denied: in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Lebanon [...]. Freedom is a permanent hope of mankind; and when that hope is made real for all people, it will be because of the sacrifices of a new generation of men and women as selfless and dedicated to liberty as those we honour today”
(Text of President Bush’s speech, 2005, 10 May).

In his speech Bush alludes to the wars fought by the American army in the recent past, as well



(Fig. 8: American and Dutch military during Memorial Day)

as at the present moment. But he does not simply mention them. Far more he uses those soldiers fallen during the Second World War as a means to justify his actions and to mobilize the Dutch locals for his cause. This way of employing the cemetery stands in great opposition to the meaning the locals ascribe to the site – a memorial and reminder for peace. Thus, not every local perceives the president’s

visit as positive. Many newspaper articles report on demonstrations against Bush. The *Dagblad de Limburger* for example titles “occupied by our liberators”²⁵ (Vos, 2005, 09 May, p.10).

Summarizing, one sees that the relationship towards the cemetery is becoming more controversial than in the years before. Understanding what has truly happened during the

²⁵ Original quote: „Bezet door onze bevrijders“ (Vos, 2005, 09 May, p.10).

fights of the Second World War and the liberation in 1944 is causing a bigger problem to the third generation than ever before, leading to a decrease in the general interest. Also the American agenda to use the site as a means to convey its own political ideas is seen with growing criticism. The cemetery as a *lieu de memoire* seems to lose its impact. With the recent development in commemoration practices at hand, the fear of forgetting is becoming more prominent. Seen in this context it is not surprising that the academic attention placed in the cemetery is growing. In recent years the number of researches exploring the complex history of the cemetery is becoming comparatively high. In 2009 the book *From Farmland to soldiers cemetery* was published (Kirkels, M, Purnot, J, Roebroeks, F (Edts.). 2009). The book portrays the memories about the establishment of the cemetery by 41 eyewitnesses. Also, a documentary was made out of these tales. Furthermore the historian Peter Schrijvers is currently writing a book about the unique process of adoption in Margraten (Schrijvers, forthcoming 2012). All these researches follow one goal to ensure “that the stories will be preserved and passed on”²⁶ (Cobben, 2009, 03 January) as Frans Roebroeks, one of the authors of the book *From Farmland to Soldiers Cemetery*, tells the *Limburgse Dagblad* in January 2009. They manifest the importance of the cemetery as a site of memory for the recent and the following generations.

But in how far is that the same in Ysselsteyn? How important is the cemetery for the third generation in this village?

4.3.2 Ysselsteyn’s Third Generation – The “reconciled Generation”

When Kim Kusters realized that a huge military cemetery was located at the end of the street on which her childhood home was situated, the Timmermannsweg, she was merely a young child of about eight years. On the German *Remembrance Day*, when the street was fenced off for all the official participants and visitors, she sat on the window and observed the event. Yet, when Kusters actually attended the commemoration services herself, she had already begun to work for the *Youth Meeting Centre* (JOC) as pedagogical and educative employee six years ago. Yet, in contrast to other young residents of Ysselsteyn, such as Rony Claessens or Jos Arts, the thirty-year old employee of the *JOC* has at least witnessed and personally

²⁶ Original Quote: „Dat is waar we het voor doen. Dat de verhalen van toen bewaard blijven en worden doorverteld” (Cobben, 2009, 03 January).

attended the *Remembrance Day*. However, on occasions when her schedule admitted it; when no sport activities are planned (Kusters, personal interview, 2011, 03 May)

After having engaged with the small village and its residents for a few days in the context of this investigation, the direct experience and overall impression show that the third generation of Ysselsteyn is in a way not really aware of the German soldiers cemetery in their village, what the site means, carries with it, and how it even looks like – “It is just there, down the street²⁷”. Patrik Backer, completing his twelve-months compulsory community service at the *Youth Meeting Centre*, assures this perception. He had been approaching same-aged youth from Ysselsteyn time and again and was surprised of the unawareness and lack of interest in the site and values hence the *JOC*’s pedagogical work and efforts to integrate local youth (Backer, personal interview 2011, 03 May; Kusters, personal interview 2011, 03 May).

However, as soon the third generation visitors finally stand between the sea of crosses themselves, they always receive an unexpected, but very profound, impression. “When I was there with my class, I found it very impressive. *So many graves! You cannot imagine!*”²⁸ And Kusters states: “I always get goose bumps. Especially when I visualize that this is only a small amount of people fallen in the Second World War. And when I walk here through the crosses then I always think: Wow – Gosh! That so many people have died?!”²⁹ (Kusters, personal interview, 2011, 03 May).

This impression Kusters narrates ,carries a crucial educative function. It makes the implication and meaning of war for the third generation tangible. However, this educative element occurs only when being at the site oneself. Karl-Heinz Voigt provides an example: When a schoolboy, for instance, stands in front of one of the thousands crosses, but needs to engaged merely with one gravestone and with the destiny and past of its buried soldier– Who was he? Was he as old as me? – he is inevitably confronted and exposed to the implications of war (Voigt, K-H. 2011, 11 April).

The third generation’s first encounter with the cemetery and thus the first memories connected to it, date back to school days – for some representatives even not very far –when, for instance in the context of history lesson, a visit to the *German Military Cemetery* was paid

²⁷ Original quote: “Es ist halt einfach da am Ende der Straße.” (Arts, personal interview, 2011, 02 May).

²⁸ Original quote: „Ich fand es sehr beeindruckend, als ich mit der Schulklasse auf dem Friedhof war. *So viele Gräber! Das kann man sich nicht vorstellen!*“ (Arts, personal interview, 2011, 02 May).

²⁹ Original quote: „Ich bekomme immer Gänsehaut, besonders wenn ich denke, dass das nur ein kleiner Teil von den Menschen ist, die im Zweiten Weltkrieg gestorben sind. Und wenn ich hier laufe zwischen die Gräber, dann denke ich immer: Wow, krass, dass da so viele Leute gestorben sind?!” (Kusters, personal interview, 2011, 03 May).

(Arts, personal interview, 2011, 02 May). The latter is made possible by the manager of the *Youth Meeting Centre*, Tarcicia Voigt, who received for her committed work with the youth the *The Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany* in June 2010 (Bundesverdienstkreuz). She seeks to arrange that every child of the basic and primary schools in Ysselsteyn and Venray has been, at least in the context of a school trip, to the *German Military Cemetery*. Consequently, most representatives of the third generation saw the site themselves – at least once in their life (Voigt, T., personal interview, 2011, May; Bundes Verdienstkreuz, June 1, 2011).

The first generation, having first-hand war experiences and direct memories, which are of course more intense and expressive and carry personal meanings – perhaps they have even seen or known a man buried in Ysselsteyn themselves – come therefore more likely out of own accords to the site as maintained by Voigt (Voigt, K-H., Personal interview, 2011, 06 June). In contrast to the third generation, further removed from the event and temporally and emotionally detached from war memories, which carry no personal value or significance. Already the second generation needs to be attract to the site, which seems to have increased in the third. Today's youths of Ysselsteyn come merely in cases when their attention is aroused by an appealing attraction or something exiting. The *JOC*, for instance, provides such attractions on the burial ground in its educative programme and events, like German Christmas markets, theatre plays or interactive exhibitions (Zondag 19 december kerstmarkt, December 19, 1999).

The 21-year-old Jos Arts had come, not very long ago, to pay the burial place his first and only visit so far. According to Arts, draws neither the *German Military Cemetery Ysselsteyn*, nor the issue of the Second World War, his interest. "When the school wouldn't have organized a trip to the cemetery, I think, I would not have come here. It just doesn't interest me. No, no interest."³⁰ Like Arts expresses, most young adults of today visit the cemetery merely when an external person, such as a schoolteacher, arranges a visit.

Is then the bold question allowed that simply disinterest prevents Ysselsteyn's third generation to engage with the cemetery? The importance of World War II has in general in the Netherlands faded into the background and has attenuated for being determining the

³⁰ Original quote: "Wenn die Schule nicht den Ausflug hierher nicht organisiert hätte, wäre ich wahrscheinlich nicht hierher gekommen. Es interessiert mich halt nicht. Ne, kein Interesse!" (Arts, personal interview, 2011, 02 May).

picture of the Germans (Reijt, 2010, p. 13). The image of the “Moffen”³¹, which has been the prevailing image of the Germans in the first and second generation, does not exist in such a form anymore (Claessens, personal interview, 2011, May 03). The third generation – “my generation” according to the 34-year-old Rony Claessens – is aware of being much more temporal removed from the crucial event. This creates for this generation a different picture of Germans and likewise of the cemetery – as their parents or grandparents still might have had (Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 03 May).

When their grandparents and parents have not been to the site, then mostly due to the prevailing sensitivity to Germans and the Second World War. However, the war is a long time gone and the eyewitnesses are dying out – merely three million Dutch eyewitnesses are left in the Netherlands. The third generation is emotionally further removed from memories touching this sensitivity, that decreased in its severity (Houd, 2010, p. 9). Rony Claessens, who, as a schoolboy, used to come frequently a few years ago to play football with the German youth on the cemetery, states

“I am too young. There are people in Ysselsteyn – there are many older people – for whom it might be different and for whom the war is still significant. But for us? No. It is not so important. And I think it is the same for the German youth. We young people loose the connection to the war... Well, and it is actually a sad that this is happening - that the people who have seen the war and can talk about die now. Right now. Because it should not happen again. There should be no more war.”³² (Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 03 May).

In his reference to the importance of the horrors of war, a contradiction becomes outstanding, which is representative for the third generation’s relation, personally and temporally, to the Second World War. On the one hand confesses Claessens his lack of interest in the site due to his detachedness from direct war memories, but stresses on the other side the importance of commemorating the war. It sounds almost as if, whenever he addresses the war, he cannot but needs to hint to its significance. However, it has a casual colouring and appears like a

³¹ Original quote: A negative labelling of the Germans by the Dutch (Voigt, T., personal interview, 2011, 03 May).

³² Original quote: “Ich bin zu jung dafür. Es gibt Menschen in Ysselsteyn, da sind viele ältere Menschen, und vielleicht ist es für die anders und der Krieg ist immer noch wichtig. Aber für uns? Nein. Es ist nicht so wichtig. Und ich denke, das ist auch nicht anders für die deutsche Jugend.” (Claessens, personal interview, 2011, May).

commonplace phrase, that the third generation heard of grandparents, parents or history teachers.

The campaign ‘Verzoening over de graven heen’ played a crucial and important role in the memories of the second generation. The exchange programme and its organizers Sief Janssen and Müller were recalled in the interviews in long and in vivid passages: “Peter Müller! Yes, that was a great man – a splendid man! It was very noble and wonderful what he did in bringing the German youth to Ysselsteyn.”³³ However, for the present youth of Ysselsteyn the reconciliation programme has not longer really been playing a central role in the engagement with the cemetery. Today’s annual visits of the residents from Bonbruck, though resulting from the reconciliation programme, are rather cherishing the gained friendships to Dutch families of the past exchanges (Derix, 1996, p. 113). Kusters already perceives the reconciliation programme from a different angle

“ I knew that there existed such a partnership between Bonbruck and Ysselsteyn. But I had not really anything to do with it and I have not participated in the exchange. Besides, there used to be much more organized in former times. Now not anymore”³⁴ (Kusters, personal interview, 2011, 03 May).

Today the *Youth Meeting Centre* has, so to say, taken over to care about the youth. However, the approach is different. It involves the local youth on the one side, but simultaneously directs on a more international level towards a general education about peace and war, not longer exclusively focused on the friendly exchange between German and Dutch youths. This is because the relationship between Dutch and German youth is being no longer determined by a sensitivity towards the former occupiers. In other words, the reconciliation programme has been successful and, thus, the present generation might be called: the “reconciled-generation” or the “generation verzoening”.

³³ Original quote: “Peter Müller! Ja das war ein toller Mann – ein ganz wundervoller Mann! Es war nobel und großartig von ihm die Deutsche Jugend nach Ysselsteyn zu bringen” (Rongen-Roelenzia, personal interview, 2011, April).

³⁴ Original quote: “Ich wusste, dass es eine Partnerschaft zwischen Bonbruck und Ysselsteyn gab. Aber ich habe nicht wirklich was damit zu tun gehabt und Ich habe persönlich nicht am Austausch teilgenommen. Außerdem wurde früher da auch mehr viel organisiert. Jetzt nicht mehr.” (Kusters, personal interview, 2011, 03 May).

4.3.3 Margraten and Ysselsteyn – A Comparison

While there were quite some differences in the way the locals of Margraten and Ysselsteyn perceive and attach meaning to the two cemeteries for the last generations, the members of the third exhibit quite similar opinions. As Uzzel and Ballantyne describe, both locals are emotionally, as well as time wise removed from the reality of the war. They do neither share direct memories of the battles and the aftermath of the war, nor of the establishment of the cemetery. While their parent's generation still heard many stories told by their family and therefore could somehow paint a picture of the past, the third generation has difficulties to truly understand the consequences. As a result, their interest in the site decreases drastically.

In Ysselsteyn the third generation hardly participates in any ceremonies as for example *Remembrance Day*. They take a look at the site with their schools, but other than that the visits confine themselves to special events such as theatre plays. Even then, it is not self-evident to see them there. Similar movements can be seen in Margraten. While acknowledging the general importance to remember the past and to attend practices regularly, the personal engagement is reducing significantly. Phrases uttered about the cemeteries sound more and more like empty shells, heard so many times that they have lost their meaning.

However, while on the one hand the general interest of the third generation in the site is reducing, there still are attempts to fix and manifest the memories about the past. As Assman wrote, memory changes automatically. Throughout the years, the flux and ever changing communicative memory is in danger of fading away, unless it is fixed through texts or certain spaces such as museums. This development, the fear of losing memories and to therefore look for a way to manifest them in one way or the other, can be seen at the example of the *Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial*. With view to the growing disinterest in the tales of the war and the ceremonies surrounding the cemetery, more and more research about the history of the site, as well as the memories of war survivors about that time is conducted. And this movement is not becoming less, but is growing every day. Future plans, such as a Memorial Center are being developed at this second. But what are the future plans of both sites? Let's take a look.

4.4 The Future

“In order to prevent that in the near future there will be less people sitting in the audience we must ensure that the people in this region will continue to remember. That means to involve the youth, to teach them about the deaths of the soldiers and their deeds for our freedom”

(Jean Graus)

“The participants learn that: PEACE doesn’t need to mean a war free environment”

(Youth Meeting Center)

4.4.1 Margraten’s Future – A Monument for peace!

Is it still necessary to remember the Second World War? Is a cemetery such as the *Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial* in Margraten still an influential site of memory in this respect? And if the answer to both questions is yes, what are the reasons for that? These issues dominate the contemporary discussions in newspapers, as well as amongst Dutch locals today. Especially with view to the developments of recent years – namely the decreasing interest and engagement of the third generation with the World War and the cemetery, they seem very relevant. Amongst the interviewees of all three generations the topic about the future role of the site was very prominent as well. All three recognizes that there is a change going on, that the role of the site will transform in the future –in one way or the other. But how do they see the future and what are their personal wishes?

“While we [the older generation] have experienced how the German occupation was like, the younger ones didn’t. They can’t imagine how bad it was during the war. For younger people the war does not mean as much as it does for me. I was there at that moment and they weren’t. Still, people shouldn’t forget! We need to educate the young ones; they need to know their past” (Prevoo, personal interview, 2011, 21 May)

Felix Prevoo explains. The same way of thinking also surfaces during the interview with Teun Berendsen who thinks that the story must be told. For how long, that is unknown, but at least

today and in the next twenty years it remains important to talk about it (Berendsen, personal interview, 2011, 13 April). Thus, while seeing that the interest in the site is getting less, all interviewees still acknowledge its importance. To remember the liberation, to know about one's own past, is close to all of their hearts. In order to walk into the future, one has to know the past is what Berendsen believes and what Thijs Heithuis and Felix Prevoo think as well. The memory of the war and more important of the liberation should not cease into oblivion.

But how is it possible to revitalize the cemeteries role within the community again, to bring it back into the focus also of the younger generations? According to Uzzel and Ballantyne there is a way to achieve this – the *Hot Interpretation*. As already explained in the previous chapter, Uzzel and Ballantyne hold the opinion that the bigger the gap between an event and the present is growing, the less intense the engagement with this time gets (Uzzel & Ballantyne, 2008, p.504). In order to strengthen the relationship again, more emphasis needs to be placed on the emotional side of the event. Therefore, instead of presenting plain facts or mere relicts of the past, a place that makes use of the *Hot Interpretation* tries to include people's feelings and emotions. This is stirred in particular through first person interpretations and demonstrations (Uzzel & Ballantyne, p.504).

Indeed, plans by the *Stichting Margraten Memorial Center*, a foundation occupied with the future of the cemetery, seem to build on these ideas, placing a growing attention to school education, as well as a more personal and emotional viewpoint on the cemetery. For some years already the foundation is planning a Memorial Center next to the site. The future plan consists of two steps. First, a virtual monument in form of a webpage will be launched. The website will exhibit the life stories of hand picked soldiers on the cemetery based on the information adoptees have gathered. As Giel Dijk, member of the *Stichting Margraten Memorial Center* states, the aim of the webpage is to tell the history of the cemetery through the individual stories of certain persons. Where were they born, where did they go to school? What were their plans for the time after the war? Through answering questions like these the dead receives a face as soon as one knows whether he was married or had children (Dijk, personal interview, 2011, 24 May). Just as Uzzel proposes this will enable younger generations to identify with the dreams and aspirations of the soldiers and therefore create a bridge to the rather abstract topic of war. In a second step a physical Memorial Center will be build. This museum should, according to Dijk, present images, dates and a wider background about the cemetery and its history. Again, special attention will lay on the human stories behind the cemetery.

It is not only the idea to hand down the story of the cemetery and the liberators to future generations which makes the Memorial Center so important, but furthermore its role in using the site as a space to educate future generations. The webpage of the *Stichting Margraten Memorial Center* states in this respect

“freedom of expression and democratic values are still not granted to everyone. We must be alert and vigilant. Particularly for those who either do not know about the horrors of war or know too little about them. We must make them fully aware that a war must never be waged again by anyone“ (Stichting Margraten Memorial Center, n.d.).

Especially in times as these today – with raging wars not only in Iraq and Afghanistan – there is a great need for such an education again. It is exactly this, what the Memorial Center aims to do – to educate, to show that freedom is not a natural phenomenon but something very fragile. Doing so, the cemetery turns into a monument of freedom, a place to show the consequences of war. But what do the locals think about such plans?

As Honduis writes in her book, education is close to the hearts of many war survivors and the preceding generations (Honduis, 2010, p.14). Therefore the idea of a museum or educational center is greeted with enthusiasm by the wider population. Thijs Heithuis for example thinks that such plans could have been made much earlier. To confront the visitor with more than simply the grounds of the cemetery, to show them how the war actually was is, according to him, only possible with the help of a museum (Heithuis, personal interview, 2011, 12 April).

However, not only positive aspects surface. Especially for the older generation some doubts prevail. While to Prevoo education is of major importance, he fears the tourism which might be connected to building a Memorial Center. Tourism for him equals consumerism and sensationalism.

“All these buildings and people who will work there and walk other people around, a museum could easily turn into pure commercialization. One should not forget the most important thing, our thankfulness towards the Americans for the liberation” (Prevoo, personal interview, 2011, 21 May).

It is important to stay faithful to the site itself, to what it actually stands for – namely the horror of the war, as well as the blessing of the liberation. To use Jos Perry’s words, a

historian specialized on Limburg one has to pay “respect [to] the emotions of the war survivors and the relatives” (Perry, 2005, 04 May, p.5). As long as this is taken into account, the Memorial Center might be a successful way to prevent the cemetery from losing its importance as a *lieu de memoire*. More so, it might turn the site into a national symbol against war and for freedom by showing, that freedom is no natural value but something that must be contained and taken care of. Or, as Felix Prevoo says

“I hope that the youth will always remember what happened during World War Two. I hope they will always think about the Americans and Dutch who gave their lives for our freedom. The war should not cease into oblivion together with my generation who have experienced the war. But I am sure that this will not happen”. (Prevoo, personal interview, 2011, 21 May)

4.4.2 Ysselsteyn’s Future – The Cemetery as a Warning!

After seeing how the future plans in Margraten look like, it is now time to examine those of the cemetery in Ysselsteyn. Two main factors have settled here the direction and role the *German Military Cemetery* in Ysselsteyn will in the future and for forthcoming generations take on. It is first influenced by the political consensus, resulting of the successful integration process of Germany in a unified Europe, that only cooperation on a supranational level secures freedom and peace. It is in connection with a general perceptual change of the image of yesterday’s offender featured by the Dutch population in general today. The second factor is, however, the outcome of a natural process: the disappearance of visitors for whom the cemetery was initially constructed – to mourn their kinship. It leads either to the consequence that the site falls into oblivion or attracts a different visitor ship. Yet, the purpose of these visitors, emotionally distanced and detachedness to World War II, will be different as wells (Reijt, 2010, p. 167).

“The Germans did not want the war either. The German soldiers – they had to do their job because they had no money, nothing to eat, no choice.

In such a situation we would have done the same. We are not better than they and they didn't want that either!"³⁵

The interview partners of all three generations alike expressed this new perception that had been developed since the 1990's in the Netherlands, as Maud van Reijt states in her recently published book *Sixty years of noise for two minutes of silence*³⁶. It is a perception which regards German as "(mede)slachtoffers"³⁷, who were suffering from the Nazis and the war themselves, being victims themselves (Reijt, 2010, p 13, p. 169)

The manager of the *German Military Cemetery*, Karl-Heinz Voigt, perceives the change of this mental concept in praxis – directly on the current visitorship of locals to the cemetery in Ysselsteyn. The few locals left of the war generation, for instance, pay more frequently than in former times a "finally deserved" sort of tribute to "their former enemies" through visits to the soldiers' graves (Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 03 May; Voigt, K-H., personal interview, 2011, 11 April).

It is a recent perceptual shift that had an impact also for the style of commemorating the dead in the Netherlands. Seen in the outline of the programme of the local commemoration ceremonies at *Dodenherdenking* (the Remembrance of the Dead) at the fourth of May, taking place in Venray. So far, the national holiday has always been exclusively designed for commemorating only the dead of the Dutch nation. Yet, no longer focused on a Dutch, but a shared Dutch-German past it is now developing to a joint commemoration on a partnership basis (Reijt, 2010, p. 176). Since the late 1990's had Venray under which Ysselsteyn falls into its administrative area, been a sort of role model. The mayor, Jos Waals, had been arranging the involvement of Germans, such as the ambassador, at the Dutch ceremonies. And in addition, he incorporating thereby Ysselsteyn's war cemetery in the official commemoration programme which should bring the site away of being a "taboo" for the Dutch (Reijt, p. 174). According to Waals, this day will be no longer anti-German coloured but commemorating the dead as "all fallen in their fight for freedom of the whole world"³⁸.

³⁵ Original quote: "Aber die Deutschen wollten den Krieg ja auch nicht. Die Deutschen Soldaten mussten doch auch nur ihren Job tun weil sie nichts zu essen hatten, kein Geld und hatten auch keine Wahl. Wir waren nicht besser und die haben das ja auch nicht gewollt" (Bos, personal interview, 2011, May)".

³⁶ Original title: *Zestig Jaar Herrie om Twee Minuten Stilte*

³⁷ Original term: "co-victims"

³⁸ Original quote: „alle gefallenen voor de strijd om de vrijheid van de hele wereld.“ (Reijt, p. 180).

How in the future commemoration of the dead might look like, has in the last years in the Netherlands generally been in discussion (Hoduis, 2010, p. 12). Venray, however, demonstrates a transformation from a national or Dutch, towards an internationally emphasis that stresses a shared future in a united Europe. Yet, the Second World War is relevant only in so far as being a starting point or example to discuss other war-related issues, like the genocide in Darfur, the political agenda of Geert Wilders or memorialize other wars, such as the one in Afghanistan. The commemoration is not merely dedicated to the fallen of World War II, but also to those of other war periods – even soldiers of other nations (Reijt, p. 174, p. 179).

The official ceremonies at *Remembrance Day* at the German war cemetery in Ysselsteyn, demonstrate this recent pursuit and wish to a more and more conjointly international oriented commemoration by the amount of wreaths of flowers laid down by embassies of different nations. Last year, in 2010, there were more than seventeen wreaths of over six nations – Austria, Czech Republic, France, England, USA and even Japan – lying on central memorial square. This “is a clear sign for the development to a more and more shared and collaborative commemoration in the future³⁹” as the cemetery’s manager states (Voigt, K-H. Personal interview, 2011, 11 April; 2011, 06 June). However, not to be underestimated should here be the influence of the commemoration organizers as well as the role politics plays in the construction of the war memories in the Dutch as well as the German commemoration day. The strive towards a collaborative orientated commemoration stems less from a collective request of the citizens but is desired and impelled by institutions or governments and individuals (Reijt, p.180).

As the previous sections of this investigation pointed out, the German Remembrance Day had always been perceived as specifically designed “for Germans only”, who had come in a sort pilgrimage since the 1950’s in particular for this occasion and had in general been representing the cemetery’s constant and main visitorship (Kusters, personal interview, 2011, 03 May; Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 11 June; “De Dodenherdenking”, 1959; Derix, 1996, p. 110). However, as the present moment displays, the fading away of the war generation means as well the abating of the mourning kinship. However, in accordance with the Geneva Convention declaring ‘eternal rest right’ (“Ewiges Ruherecht”) for the fallen

³⁹ Original quote: „Das ist ein klares Anzeichen auf der Entwicklung hinzu einem in der Zukunft mehr und mehr geteiltes und gemeinschaftlichen Gedenken.“ (Voigt, K-H, personal interview, 2011, 06 June)

soldiers, the cemetery will, however, remain as a constant for the future (Erinnern für die Zukunft, 2011, 10 June). Mia Rongen-Roelanzia, the owner of the *Café-Restaurant Roelanzia* in Ysselsteyn, had always had German visitors of the cemetery as customers. Today, however, less frequently. Rongen-Roelanza comes, hence, to the conclusion that

“the cemetery is there and now we need to do something with it. Otherwise it stays merely a burial ground, where no one goes to because right now the eyewitnesses are dying out. The Second World War is over – it is already *so* long ago – but today there are also other wars like the one in Afghanistan where soldiers also die. Maybe the cemetery can also be used for them?”⁴⁰ (Rongen-Roelenzia, personal interview, 2011, 04 May).

Thus, as Rongen-Roelanza already points out, in order to prevent the cemetery falling into disuse and oblivion, one needs to deploy a different concept that secures its utilisation in the future. Karl-Heinz Voigt, director of the cemetery, claims that the soldiers cemetery needs to broaden its national but also in particular internationally awareness. Thus, he utters the wish, which is, however, at the given moment financially not feasible, to rebuild and enlarge the already 30-years-old visitor centre, in order to allow an encounter between old and new generations, between the past and the future and between people from various nations. (Voigt, K-H., personal interview, 2011, 06 June). Venray’s mayor Waals, sees the future role of the *German Military Cemetery* not only secured through new groups of visitors but through the opening up the national commemoration ceremonies towards one international orientated commemoration, in which the cemetery becomes a warning symbol and a monument against suppression, hate and dictatorship (Reijt, p. 169).

Subsequently, the cemetery’s capacity to function as a monument – the last 66 years it had been devoted to the fallen of merely one nation – will be broadened to another level. Harry Seuren ascribes these prospects also to the military cemetery in the coming years.

“What the cemetery will mean in the future? Well, I think that the cemetery will receive a different meaning than it had in the beginning –

⁴⁰ Original quote: “Der Friedhof, der ist da. Dann muss man damit etwas machen, sonst bleibt es nur ein Friedhof, wo niemand hingeht. Die Augenzeugen sterben ja jetzt aus und der Zweite Weltkrieg ist ja schon *so* lange vorbei, aber es gibt auch jetzt andere Kriege, zum Beispiel der in Afghanistan, wo auch Soldaten sterben. Vielleicht kann man den Friedhof auch für die benutzen?” (Rongen-Roelenzia, personal interview, 2011, 04 May).

than I used to have. I think it is already a bit different than when it was opened. In the beginning there came brothers and sisters of the soldiers. They were here [in the supermarket], as well to buy asparagus and coffee. Germans always buy asparagus here [laughs]... But now not any longer. Now... yes, it will be a monument. A monument for the future! It will be a monument that one never forgets that there was this horrible war. You should never forget that. And then – then the memories of the war stay alive⁴¹” (Seuren, personal interview, 2011).

Similarly, Wim Claessens sees the *German Military Cemetery* obtaining a monumental function to freedom and peace. However, to guarantee this he stresses broadening the responsibility of the youth of today and their involvement with the cemetery. Only by this means, which is of high priority, future wars might be prevented.

“We all must stop another war! And we can make sure will come true. Actually this is *your* [the third generation] task! Look, I am eighty-four years old and now it is you that need to see that a war won’t happen again! Never! It is *you*!”⁴² (Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 06 June).

Thus, the cemetery carries certainly very valuable functions for future generations. The worth of it was previously addressed in the context of the third generation, which can make already use of it: World war memories, concentrated and bound to the site will be activated through engagement or visits and can be further on used to warn and inform about war, the value of peace and allude to other war-related issues. The cemetery becomes an educational institution. The foundation for that was already laid in 1982 with the establishment of the pilot project “Projekt Ysselsteyn”. It is a result from the already existing youth work and exchange of “Verszoening over de graven heen” and developed further to today’s *Youth Meeting Centre (JOC)*. The centre is administrated and endowed with educational and pedagogical concepts

⁴¹ Original quote: “Was der Friedhof in der Zukunft für eine Bedeutung haben wird? Eigentlich denke ich, dass er eine andere Bedeutung bekommen wird als wie am Anfang – wie ich es noch hatte. Es ist ja schon anders als er geöffnet wurde. Am Anfang da kamen die Brüder und Schwester von den Soldaten. Die waren dann auch hier und haben Spargel und Kaffee gekauft. Die Deutschen kaufen immer Spargel hier... Jetzt nicht mehr. Jetzt... ja, ich glaube es wird zu einem Monument. Ein Monument für die Zukunft! Es wird ein Monument damit niemand vergisst dass hier dieser schreckliche Krieg war. Man darf das niemals vergessen. Ja und dann – dann bleiben die Erinnerungen and den Krieg lebendig!” (Seuren, personal interview, 2011).

⁴² Original quote: “We moeten allemaal een volgende oorlog voorkomen! En we kunnen ervoor zorgen dat dit gebeurt. Eigenlijk is dit jullie taak! Kijk, ik ben vierentachtig jaar oud en nu zijn jullie het die er voor moeten zorgen dat een oorlog niet weer gebeurt! Nooit! Het is aan jullie!” (Claessens, personal interview, 2011, 06 June).

and projects by the German non-profit governmental organization *Volksbund DeutscheKriegsgräberfürsorge e.V.* (*German War Graves Foundation*). The webpage explains “that the war graves remain a warning sign of peace and understanding among peoples as well as places to remember the victims of war and tyranny. Through its activities the *Volksbund* proves its commitment to reconciliation, understanding and friendship between people (www.joc-ysselsteyn.com).” The educational programme focuses hereby in particular on actively involving the youth through practical work on the cemetery, but also through various interactive exhibitions and theatre plays, such as: “Gedichten over vrede” (Poems for peace), “Vergeven en Verzoenen” (To forgive and to reconcile), “Kind met baggage” (A child with baggage) (“Rode handen”, 2010; “Gedichten”, 2010; “JOC”, 2011). The *JOC* had been a model for other youth meeting centres in Europe and contributing to the increase of the number of visitors, in particular on an international level, to the *German Military Cemetery* (Voigt, K-H, personal interview, 2011, 06 June). Concluding, Mia Rongen-Roelenzia explains the international success due to the *JOC*’s awareness that the youth of today “does not like museums” but needs to be engaged practically in order to realize the value of a peaceful world (Rongen-Roelenzia, personal interview, 2011, 04 May).

4.4.3 Margraten and Ysselsteyn - Comparing the Future prospects

To realize the value of a peaceful world – This notion indicates, that the communities of Ysselsteyn and Margraten have both been realizing the importance of war memories. They carry inherently a fundamental warning function for future generations. However, in order to use this function, Margraten and Ysselsteyn are both confronted with a two-fold natural development: First, the carriers of first-hand war memories are dying out and will take important memories with them. The villages’ residents see a need to fixate these communicative memories onto external carriers, allowing future generations to access these. Therefore future plans are set. Margraten, on the one side, plans to bond the village’s war memories in an external building, a Memorial Center, which will function as a museum. In Ysselsteyn, on the other hand, the plans for creating a bigger visitors centre at the cemetery should attract the new visitorship to the site, whose bond with war memories is rather weak. The site should not fall into oblivion, as the cemetery’s management.

Second, with the progression of time also an emotional distance to the war memories is broadening and impeding an engagement with the past for future generations. In Margraten

the *Stichting Akkers van Margraten* tries to secure future generations access to war memories through an interactive monument, placing special attention to the involvement of the younger ones with individual life stories. This feature, namely involving the youth, is already very distinctive in the educative programme of the *Youth Meeting Centre* in Ysselsteyn.

However, while the cemetery in Margraten should especially symbolize the local memory of the liberation of Limburg, Ysselsteyn, on the other hand, with an international focus dedicates its site to commemorate all people fallen in their fight for freedom all over the world. Thus the importance lies neither on nationality, nor a locality as in Margraten.

Concluding, both cemeteries alike leave their initial function of being a mere burial place behind. They do not any longer only symbolize a space to mourn ones family or loved one. Instead both sites have evolved into symbols and monuments for securing freedom and peace in the future.

5. Conclusion

“Those who cannot remember their past are condemned to relive it.”

George Santayana

It is 2011 – a time when the Second World War is history. However, stepping onto the grounds of the *Netherlands American Cemetery Margraten* and the *German Military Cemetery Ysselsteyn*, although each conveys visually two different views – the one pretentious, the other expressing humbleness – a visitor immediately feels the striking presence of this war and is confronted with its cruelty. Since their establishment, however, these two massive soldiers’ cemeteries have been confronting residents of two Dutch communities – Margraten and Ysselsteyn – in diverse ways. We set out to capture this confrontation with this paper. We asked whether there is a difference in how the communities of two Dutch villages perceive and engage with the World War II military cemeteries in their neighbourhood, which honour not Dutch soldiers, but the fallen of the liberators and the dead of the occupiers, how much their perceptions have changed from the first generation, the war generation, to the present one, the third generation, finally, and how these will look like in the future?

The examination of the present investigations led us to the following conclusions: First, the perception of the two cemeteries in the communities of Margraten, on the one hand, and Ysselsteyn, on the other hand, differed considerably, in particular, in the period right after the Second World War. This is due to a crucial fact concerning the soldiers’ role in the war – either being the perpetrator or the liberator of the Netherlands – which the cemeteries in Margraten and Ysselsteyn host: The first-generation residents of Margraten ascribed the American war cemetery as a symbol of the Netherlands’ liberation from its German occupiers. In contrast, Ysselsteyn’s war cemetery initially signified almost solely the country’s 5-year occupation by Germany. The perceptions surrounding Ysselsteyn’s war cemetery, however, was perceived negatively. As a consequence, of the Dutch residents’ thankfulness towards the Americans, the memories that became bound to the Margraten cemetery at the time of its establishment were very positive, which allowed the residents to incorporate the site into the village’s identity from the beginning.

Second, the early divergence in perceptions and memories at the two sites resulted in the marked difference in the local residents’ involvement with the sites in the years that

followed. Margraten's residents developed practices, such the attendance of the annual American *Memorial Day* and the adoption of graves, which provided a stable and lasting platform with which they could express their gratitude to their liberators. This stands in sharp contrast to Ysselsteyn, where the locals did not voluntarily seek involvement and felt no reason to develop practices surrounding the cemetery, such as attending the German *Remembrance Day* of their former enemy. This difference in local involvement and awareness of the two cemeteries was demonstrated to us very early on in our investigation, when we initially tried to make contact with the village residents. The village residents' responses to the notices we put in local newspaper asking them to share their perceptions and memories of the sites offered much insight. After a notice appeared in one of the Margraten community's newspaper, residents reacted immediately. We received almost thirty responses, primarily from the first- and second-generation residents. In Ysselsteyn, on the other hand, not a single resident replied to our call, regardless of the generation.

Third, the clear-cut distinction in involvement and perception of the cemetery sites diminished with temporal distance to the Second World War. Each succeeding generation is temporarily and thus, also emotionally, increasingly detached from the war, which had the effect of enhancing the burden to connect with the site. Both Margraten and Ysselsteyn sites were confronted with this natural development. We found that it was harder for the second generation to build up a relation with the cemetery than it was for the first who endowed with first-hand war memories. This connection is even more difficult with the third generation. The third-generation residents in both case studies showed very little interest in the cemeteries. For example, no third-generation residents – not even in Margraten – reacted to our newspaper notice. Thus, the relationship and perceptions of the locals to the sites, which were so different immediately after the war, have grown more similar with the progression in time. Neither positive nor negative memories appear to affect these residents' involvement with the cemeteries very strongly. But the cemeteries future functions will allow the two war cemeteries to approaching a similar level of significance. Both cemeteries are no longer devoted solely to the dedication of the fallen soldiers; instead, they have transformed themselves into symbols for freedom and peace and make a stand against war. However, whereas in Ysselsteyn, the original memorial to the soldiers loses nearly all of its significance and the *JOC's* educational work has broadened awareness of the cemetery on an international level, the cemetery at Margraten has stressed its local importance, which still represents the liberation of their province for which they still feel gratitude.

Since we first visited Margraten and noticed the scope of its various practices – laying down flowers, attending memorial services, caring personally for a grave – we set out to identify Ysselsteyn’s practices as a subject for comparison. However, as our research proceeded, it became clear that Ysselsteyn’s residents had developed hardly any full-blown practices. Instead we found that the first generation engaged in ad-hoc activities, such as telling school children personal war experiences. In Margraten on the other hand, we could not even approach the site without constantly being confronted with an variety of practices strongly associated with memorializing the war. Hence, we found that a comparison of practices could not be made as intensely as we thought in the beginning. However, we do not regard this as a failure of our study; rather we consider it as a very insightful result, which illustrates just how much memories of the war influenced each community’s perceptions and involvement with the sites. This finding also influenced the analyses of the two case studies of our investigation. While the Ysselsteyn analysis focused primarily on perceptions and memories, the Margraten site could not be investigated without paying close attention to the practices that had developed around the cemetery and served as the conduit through which most of memories were established.

Given what we discovered about the two sites in our investigation, what would we propose for further research in the field of memory studies? The Second-World-War memories bound to the American war cemetery in Margraten and its history have already been the subject of much recent research. In Ysselsteyn, however, we see a high potential for further research. In particular, given the increasing age of the war generation, there is a real need for further oral history research to collect the war memories of this generation. This has yet to be done in Ysselsteyn, but could significantly enhance the perception of the cemetery’s role for the village’s residents.

Would more research reveal interesting findings? Broadening the focus of this research to the reactions of communities to Second World War cemeteries hosting foreign soldiers elsewhere in Europe might also yield many interesting insights. Forty-five countries in the world host German war cemeteries. For example, a comparison of the results of our investigation with a study of two cemeteries in France or Poland which host World War II soldiers from Germany and the United States, or the Allied Forces as a whole, could produce interesting findings with respect to how different cultures and experiences of the war impact memories and perceptions of the liberators and occupiers. Just how much have the local experiences of the war been a decisive factor in the perception and evolution of military

cemeteries in other countries? More locally, the Belgian German War Cemetery Lommel provides another potentially interesting case for comparison. Situated close to Limburg, merely an hour's drive from Margraten and Ysselsteyn, a comparison with a site that is so proximate yet belonging to a different country could prove particularly effective in highlighting the differences created by national cultures versus local circumstances. How does the fact of belonging to different countries with different cultures and traditions impact the local perceptions of the former occupier's cemetery? How much impact do local circumstances on the one hand and national cultural traditions on the other make in how residents view World War Two cemeteries that host foreign soldiers? Our more limited study suggests that the answer would provide fruitful results, particularly now when the representatives of the first generation are dying out and the preservation of the memories surrounding these cemeteries is left with generations who did not witness the war. However, the results of our study suggest that the striking difference in how first-generation residents perceived cemeteries for the two sides and the power of temporal distance to the war in shaping attitudes towards these cemeteries would be similar in the memories associated with Second World War cemeteries throughout Europe.

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Appendices

Appendix A: List of Interview Partner

Interview Partner Margraten

Berendsen, T. Personal interview. (2011, 13 April).

Berendsen, T. Personal communication (2011, 02 April).

Dijk, G. Personal interview. (2011, May 24).

Hautmans, H. Personal communication. (2011, 03 April).

Heithuis, T. Personal interview. (2011, 12 April).

Heithuis, T. Personal interview. (2011, 11 May).

Prevoot, F. Personal interview. (2011, 21 May).

Prevoot, F. Personal communication. (2011, 15 May).

Purnot, J. Personal interview. (2011, 24 May).

Interview partner Ysselsteyn

Arts, J. Personal interview (2011, 02 May).

Backer, P. Personal communication (2011, 03 May).

Bos, M. Personal interview (2011, 03 May).

Claessens, R. Personal interview (2011, 03 May).

Kusters, K. Personal interview (2011, 03 May).

Rongen-Roelanzia, Personal interview (2011, 04 May).

Seuren, H. Personal interview. (2011, 02 May).

Voigt, T. Personal communication (2011, 03 May).

Voigt, K-H. Personal communication (2011, 11 April).

Voigt, K-H. Personal interview (2011, 01 May).

Voigt, K-H. Telephone interview (2011, 06 June).

Appendix B: Image Credits

Figure 1: A field of marble crosses, Margraten (Photographed by Hannah Röhlen, 2011, 23 February). Front page.

Figure 2: A field of crosses, Ysselsteyn (Photographed by Christiane Gorzalka, 11 April 2011). Front page.

Figure 3: Gravestone on Memorial Day (Photographed by Hannah Röhlen, 2011, 29 May). p. 16.

Figure 4: Memorial stone Bonbruck (Photographed by Christiane Gorzalka, 2011, 11 April). p. 21.

Figure 5: A field of crosses, Margraten (Photographed by Hannah Röhlen, 2011, 4 May). p. 26.

Figure 6: A field of crosses, Ysselsteyn (Photographed by Christiane Gorzalka, 2011, 11 April). p. 29.

Figure 7: Coop Seuren (Photographed by Christiane Gorzalka, 2011, 2 May). p. 32.

Figure 8: American and Dutch military during Memorial Day, Margraten (Photographed by Hannah Röhlen, 2011, 4 May). p. 39.

Appendix C: Questionnaires for Interviews

Interview Questions Margraten

Background information interviewee

- How old are you/ When were you born
- Where were you born?
- What do you do for living?
- How long have you been living here in Margraten?
 - Why do you live here?
 - Are you feeling at home here?
 - What does the town mean to you?

First Memories about the cemetery

- When did you first hear about the cemetery?
- What did people in Margraten tell about the site?
- Which first memories do you have about the cemetery?
- When did you visit it for the first time and how was it?
- In how far is the cemetery a point of discussion in your community? Do people think or talk about it?
- What is the role of the cemetery within your community?

Practices surrounding the cemetery

- When do you visit the cemetery, during which days and events?
 - Memorial Day
 - 4th of May
 - Memorial Concert
 - Adoption of a grave
- Can you describe your experience during these practices?
- What are you yourself doing when you are at the cemetery (who do you go there with, etc.)
- What do these practices mean to you?

Practice: Adoption of a grave

- Since when did you adopt the grave?
- Which grave did you adopt?
- Did you get into contact with the soldiers family?
- Why did you adopt a grave?
- How do you relate to the soldiers lying there?
- What do you think about the people coming to the city to visit the cemetery?

The meaning of the cemetery

- What is your opinion/ feeling about the cemetery?
- What do you think about the fact that the cemetery is situated in Margraten?
- How do you relate to the dead soldiers buried here?
- Does it make any difference for you that the dead are perpetrators/liberators of the war?
- Is it important to you to visit the cemetery?

Present and Future role of the cemetery

- Which function do you ascribe to the cemetery in the future?
- Which function would you personally favor?

Ysselsteyn

- Have you heard about the German War Cemetery in Ysselsteyn?
- What do you know about it?
- Have you been there?

Second World War

- What do you remember of the Second World War
- In how far does the Second World War concern you?
- Did someone from your family participated in the war? Told you stories?
- What role does the war still play today?
- Do you talk/ discuss about the war?
- Does it influence the way you relate to your neighbor countries e.g. Belgium, Germany, America etc.?
- Does the cemetery help or hinder you to remember the war?

Interview Questions Ysselsteyn

Background information interviewee

- How old are you/ When were you born
- Where were you born?
- What do you do for living?
- How long have you been living here in Margraten?
 - Why do you live here?
 - Are you feeling at home here?
 - What does the town mean to you?

First Memories about the cemetery

- When did you first hear about the cemetery?
- What did people in Margraten tell about the site?
- Which first memories do you have about the cemetery?
- When did you visit it for the first time and how was it?
- In how far is the cemetery a point of discussion in your community? Do people think or talk about it?
- What is the role of the cemetery within your community?

Practices surrounding the cemetery

- When do you visit the cemetery, during which days and events?
 - Remembrance Day
 - Partnership Bonbruck, Ysselsteyn
- Can you describe your experience during these practices?
- What are you yourself doing when you are at the cemetery (who do you go there with, etc.)
- What do these practices mean to you?
- Have you experienced any Neo-Nazi presence, Demonstrations?

The meaning of the cemetery

- What is your opinion/ feeling about the cemetery?
- What do you think about the fact that the cemetery is situated in Ysselsteyn?
- How do you relate to the dead soldiers buried here?
- Does it make any difference for you that the dead are perpetrators/liberators of the war?
- Is it important to you to visit the cemetery?

Present and Future role of the cemetery

- Which function do you ascribe to the cemetery in the future?
- Which function would you personally favor?

Margraten

- Have you heard about the Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial in Margraten?
- What do you know about it?
- Have you been there?

Second World War

- What do you remember of the Second World War
- In how far does the Second World War concern you?
- Did someone from your family participated in the war? Told you stories?
- What role does the war still play today?

- Do you talk/ discuss about the war?
- Does it influence the way you relate to your neighbor countries e.g. Belgium, Germany, America etc.?
- Does the cemetery help or hinder you to remember the war?

Appendix D: Newspaper Articles

Newspaper articles Margraten

Gevraagd: de mening van de Margratenaar

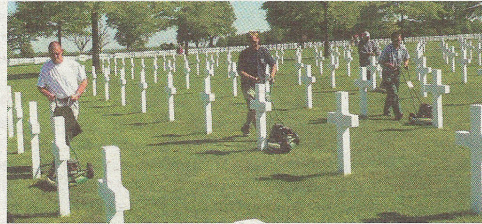
De Trompetter, 30. März 2011, 12.15

Onderzoek UM naar rol van Amerikaanse begraafplaats

MARGRATEN

Hannah Roehlen en Christiane Gorzalka, derdejaars studenten Cultuurhistorie (Art and Culture) aan de Universiteit Maastricht, gaan onderzoek verrichten naar welke plek de Amerikaanse begraafplaats van Margraten in de gemeenschap inneemt.

"Wij willen een beeld krijgen van de wijze waarop de de inwoners van Margraten kijken naar 'hun' begraafplaats", zegt Hannah Roehlen. "De belangstelling voor deze begraafplaats is groot.



Naast de al 65 jaar opererende Adoptiestichting, zijn de laatste jaren nieuwe stichtingen in het leven geroepen die zich vooral met de geschiedenis van de begraafplaats bezighouden. De grote belangstelling blijkt ook uit het massaal bijwonen van de jaarlijkse festiviteiten en herdenkingen zoals Memorial Day, het Concert for the Missing en het Margraten Requiem."

De onderzoekers willen een beeld krijgen van de wijze waarop de plaatselijke bevolking van Margraten kijkt naar 'hun' begraafplaats en naar

alles wat zich daar afspeelt. Vinden ze het belangrijk dat er anno 2011 nog zo veel aandacht aan wordt besteed? Of mag het wel wat minder? Moeten de herdenkingen op dezelfde wijze als thans gebruikelijk blijven doorgaan, of moet daar iets in veranderen? En zo ja, wat dan en hoe? Is uw houding t.a.v. de begraafplaats in de loop der tijd gewijzigd?

Heeft u behoefte om uw mening over deze en andere vragen met de onderzoekers te delen, mail dan: H.Rohlen@student.maastrichtuniversity.nl

(Onderzoek UM, 2011, March 30)

De Etalage, 30.03.2011; 12e Jaargang, week 13

DE Etalage

12

VERENIGINGSNIEUWS

Gevraagd: de mening van de Margratenaar

Onderzoeksproject Universiteit Maastricht naar de plaats en functie van de Amerikaanse begraafplaats in de Margratense gemeenschap.

Zoals bekend mag de Amerikaanse begraafplaats in Margraten zich verheugen in een grote belangstelling. Naast de al 65 jaar opererende Adoptiestichting, zijn de laatste jaren nieuwe stichtingen in het leven geroepen die zich vooral met de geschiedenis van de begraafplaats bezighouden. Daarbij mag gedacht worden aan de Stichting Akkers van Margraten en de Stichting Memorial Center Margraten. De grote belangstelling blijkt ook uit het massaal bijwonen van de jaarlijkse festiviteiten en herdenkingen zoals Memorial Day, het Concert for the Missing en het Margraten Requiem.

Nu heeft ook de Universiteit Maastricht de begraafplaats 'ontdekt' als onderwerp voor onderzoek. Hannah Roehlen en Christiane Gorzalka, derdejaars studenten Cultuurhistorie (Art and Culture) doen onderzoek naar de perceptie van begraafplaatsen uit de Tweede Wereldoorlog in Limburg, waaronder Ysselsteyn en natuurlijk ook Margraten. De onderzoekers willen een beeld krijgen van de wijze waarop de

plaatselijke bevolking van Margraten kijkt naar 'hun' begraafplaats en naar alles wat zich daar afspeelt. Vinden ze het belangrijk dat er anno 2011 nog zo veel aandacht aan wordt besteed? Of mag het wel wat minder? Moeten de herdenkingen op dezelfde wijze als thans gebruikelijk blijven doorgaan, of moet daar iets in veranderen? En zo ja, wat dan en hoe? Is uw houding t.a.v. de begraafplaats in de loop der tijd gewijzigd? Zo ja, wanneer en waarom?

Heeft u behoefte om uw mening over deze en andere vragen met de onderzoeksters te delen, aarzel dan niet om contact met

hen op te nemen. Zij zijn zeer geïnteresseerd in uw verhalen. Let wel: het gaat hierbij alleen om inwoners van de kern Margraten en de bijbehorende gehuchten. Omdat beide onderzoeksters de Nederlandse taal niet machtig zijn, is het erg prettig als u zich in het Engels of Duits kunt uitdrukken.

U kunt hen bereiken via e-mail: H.Rohlen@student.maastrichtuniversity.nl

(Gevraagd, 2011, March 30)

Newspaper Article Ysselsteyn

Onderzoek in Ysselsteyn

Twee Duitse studentes, Christiane Gorzalka en Hannah Röhlen, doen begin mei in het kader van hun afstudeerproject onderzoek naar de beleving van omwonenden met betrekking tot militaire begraafplaatsen. Zij deden dit eerder in Margraten. De eerste drie dagen van mei vindt het onderzoek in Ysselsteyn en Venray plaats. Maandag 2 mei is er voor een groep genodigden een kleine bijeenkomst in het JOC-Ysselsteyn, het educatieve centrum bij de Duitse militaire begraafplaats. Mocht u meer informatie wensen, dan kunt u zich melden bij het JOC-Ysselsteyn, telefoon 0478-545916 of info@ioc-ysselsteyn.com.

(Figure: Onderzoek, 2011, April, *Peel en Maas*)