

SPEECH mayor Leendert de Lange
May 4th 2024

‘Israel's Information and Documentation Centre sees number of reports of anti-Semitism more than doubled’

‘Fear of war in the Netherlands has increased considerably’.

These are some of the headlines of national newspapers in recent weeks.

Four hundred 17-year-olds in Wassenaar have received a letter from our government. This so-called Conscription Letter is customary, only this year the tone is sharper. It specifies that there is really something going on in the world. That we are living different times, and that the security situation has deteriorated dramatically.

These examples reflect the current state of our society. That is why I am delighted that you have all taken the trouble to commemorate with us.

Every year, on May 4th, the Netherlands commemorates all over the country the victims, civilians and soldiers who have died or been killed in the Kingdom of the Netherlands and elsewhere in the world, in war situations and in peace missions since the outbreak of the Second World War. So do we, in Wassenaar, on the Waalsdorpervlakte and here at the monument of the dying warrior on the Schouwweg.

84 years ago, our freedom was taken with brutal force. The occupiers removed our freedom of choice and replaced democracy with a dictatorship. Jews were ordered to wear a yellow star. Free press was banned and standing up for your opinions was dangerous.

Most of Wassenaar's Jewish citizens were deported. They were evicted from their rented homes, their residential property was looted, and their household effects confiscated. I received in April, on behalf of the municipal executive board, the ‘Jewish citizens in Wassenaar: expropriation and restoration of rights’ report. We now have a better and more factual picture of this dark period in the history of Wassenaar.

This report, which you can read on Wassenaar municipality's website, covers the expropriations, rights restorations, and treatment of our Jewish fellow villagers.

It is particularly painful to read of the municipality's lack of empathy and compassion towards those who survived the Holocaust. This has led me to apologise, on behalf of the municipal executive, out of moral and historical awareness, for the municipality's heartless and cold-hearted actions during, but also in the aftermath of World War II.

This research also clearly highlighted that both the community and the newspapers paid extremely scarce or no attention at all to the persecution of Jews and Jewish victimisation after the war.

This report helps keep the stories alive and raises our awareness that we never want to experience events like World War II again.

That is why this year's commemoration is more relevant than ever.

Peace has proven fragile in recent years and has taken on a completely different meaning. With all the wars in the world, the threat has never been greater. This threat brings uncertainty, and it is getting closer. Especially as we in Wassenaar deal daily with displaced people who know what it is to live in a situation of war.

Two years ago, saw the outbreak of this terrible war in Ukraine. Wassenaar is currently home to over 200 Ukrainian war refugees whose stories make us realise that we really must do all we can to maintain security and peace. Therefore, I urge you to keep listening, without judgement, to these stories.

We learn from examining our past, listening to victims, and sharing stories. Then we can we go against the grain, just like the fellow villagers who resisted the German occupiers in World War II. Like Geesbert van Barneveld. They put their lives on the line and gave them for the freedom they believed in. They must not be forgotten.

Tomorrow, we celebrate Freedom. We celebrate the fact that we live in a democracy. In a country where everyone gets to think along and decide.

The Netherlands is known as a country where you can be yourself and can believe what you want. A model of tolerance.

But this tolerance is decreasing. We are increasingly confronting each other in our search for solutions and the answers to significant issues.

September next marks the kick-off of the *80 years of freedom* anniversary celebrations and the timing couldn't be better. In our country you are allowed to demonstrate and voice your opinion. These are values we must continue to stand for. Let us seek each other out and engage in dialogue. But then with respect for each and everyone's opinion.

We need each other in order to be resilient, but that requires us to sincerely listen to one another. To remain critical of people who try to stir up hatred and polarisation with falsehoods and agitation. To remain tolerant. Only then will we be truly connected.

Let connection around peace be the guardian of our freedom.

Lest we forget.