



Speech mr A.J. Kottelenberg, mayor of Neder-Betuwe at the ceremony unveiling Air War Memorial 'Vliegers in het Vuur', Parallelweg in Opheusden on Friday September 20, 2019, spoken by mrs. Marijke van Dijk, wife of the mayor.

## **Een leven in de schaduw / Shadowlands**

Dear ladies and gentlemen, dear girls and boys,  
The title of my speech is: Een leven in de schaduw / Shadowlands

You and me – today we remember together whilst standing in the shadow of the past.  
Of the past that we learned about again just now.

Events from the past have shaped our society. And they have partially determined who we are today. Our knowledge of the past also sustains our ability of moral judgement, an ability that lies at the root of our open society and our democratic state. And when we commemorate, like we do today, we are summoned to vigilance. Because after all, we know what happened in the past.

Are we – are you and I – aware that all achievements of the democratic state are in danger when we heed the call of those who want to close and seal the book of the past?

In the place where we stand now, the shadow of the past is visible, yes, even tangible. Here, at the commemorative monument for the crews of the airplanes that crashed during the Second World War in the Betuwe, in these lands that were soaked in the blood.

16 aircraft, 132 crew members, from the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, Australia and New-Zealand. They all fought against the boundless evil of the humiliation, the exclusion and the systematic murder by the Nazi regime.

They are our liberators. They made it possible that our democracy and the institutions that safeguard the rule of law could rise like a phoenix from the ashes of a destroyed continent.

Without their sacrifice, Europe, the Netherlands and Neder-Betuwe would not know the incredible prosperity and the infinite freedom that we experience today, in 2019.

Why were they prepared to risk their lives? They were young people, they had a whole life ahead of them. They did their duty. They knew the difference between good and evil.

*That brings us to the inevitable question: what would I have done?*

The easiest answer is that we cannot know, since we have not lived through such events. But that answer does not touch upon the heart of the question. Because not

knowing what we would have done does not relieve us of the duty of knowing what we should have done.

And it does not relieve us from answering the question how we should behave if – *God forbid* – history were to repeat itself. In short: Do we know the difference between good and evil?

The last question matters. Because after all, we do not only live in the shadow of **yesterday**, but also in the shadow of **tomorrow**.

In 1935 the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga published his book *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*. Huizinga was one of the very few people that recognized the nature and the danger of the Hitler regime. His book opens with the famous lines:

- *We are living in a demented world. And we know it.*

And he continues:

- *We see before our very eyes that almost all things which once seemed sacred and immutable have now become unsettled: truth and humanity, justice and reason.*

Huizinga recognized what mankind was capable of. Are we as clear-sighted as he was? We should not fancy ourselves as *different* or *better* human beings. Here, in this place of commemoration, we realize again that our history is vital for determining our attitude towards the present. As an answer. An answer to the unsolved problems of our time.

In 2019 national egoism and intolerance are undergoing a revival. It sometimes seems as if hatred is now regarded as courage. And empathy as weakness. And it seems as if the people *with no memory* will prevail.

Abel Herzberg wrote in his book *Amor Fati*:

- *There are no pure and unpure people... There are no chosen peoples. There are only people who see the dividing line between fair and foul, and people who not only do not see, but also don't want to see. Between them there can be no peace.*

This monument reminds us of the courage and the fears of the airmen in combat. It reminds us of the very foundations of human civilization: that there are things that **can** be done and that there are things that **should not** be done

**We know it.** And that's why we know of war, and peace. The choice is clear. This monument reminds us.