

The Lessons of Mortsel

April 1, 2012

The Commemoration of the Mortsel Bombing
Ambassador Howard Gutman

Goedemiddag.

Minister Turtelboom Beste Annemie, Burgemeester Pira Beste Ingrid, Generaal Andries,
Burgemeesters, Schepenen, Dames en Heren, Beste Vrienden

Dit is mijn derde bezoek aan Mortsel. Ik ben naar elke herdenking in April geweest sinds ik tot Amerikaanse Ambassadeur ben benoemd geweest in 2009.

On my first two trips, I believed I was in a field with chairs placed around and a microphone in front. But on this, my third visit, I realized that, when I have come to Mortsel, I have not been in a field. I realized that, instead, I have always been in a classroom. The classroom of Mortsel. For I am here, and we are here, always to learn and remember the lessons of Mortsel.

They are important lessons – the lessons of Mortsel.

Dit zijn belangrijke lessen - de lessen van Mortsel

Lessons first about our shared past and about our partnership.

We stand together – Belgians and Americans – many times during the year to remember those brave Americans who travelled thousands of miles from their home to free a country they had not known, but in which they would soon be buried forever. Belgians stand in Ieper every single night and thousands come out in the cold in November at the Last Call to say we will not forget that you freed our grandparents. Thousands of Belgians spend their Memorial Day weekend, not at the beach in Knokke, but at the Ardennes American Cemetery, or Henri-Chappelle or Flanders Field, to say we will not forget that you also freed our parents. And daily, Belgians adopt and tend to those graves, of young boys they never knew but will always admire.

So if we stand together in ceremonies that commemorate the sacrifices of American lives, we will be darn sure to stand together in ceremonies that remind us of the horrible toll in civilian lives paid by Belgium during the First and Second World Wars. We will be darn sure not to forget Mortsel. So in coming to Mortsel for my third straight year, I am heartened to have converted what was once a visit into what is now a tradition.

We zullen verdorie zeker zijn om Mortsel nooit te vergeten. Dus in mijn derde jaar op rij in Mortsel steekt het mij een hart onder de riem om te zien dat wat ooit een bezoek was nu een traditie is.

Indeed, Americans have never been indifferent to the suffering of Belgians. In the First World War, Herbert Hoover channeled the American desire to alleviate Belgian suffering into concrete actions that brought relief to this war-ravaged country. And it was that same desire of Americans to help others in need that led to the very tragedy of Mortsel. The aerial bombing campaign intended to help, a campaign flown during the daylight hours particularly to minimize civilian casualties, led to a cruel twist of fate in which our American pilots became easier prey for the enemy and consequently the

innocent citizens of Mortsel became casualties of the horrors of war.

And thus the second type of lessons that are always present in this classroom of Mortsel are lessons about war.

You see, days like today are a reminder that civilians almost never choose war. War is a reality usually forced upon them by circumstances outside of their control. And it was days like these and tragedies like Mortsel that strengthened the conviction of the international community after World War II that wars of such indiscriminate scale must never again be allowed to happen, and to ensure that such a conflict as the one that took the lives of so many in Europe should never again consume the globe. Indeed, tragedies like Mortsel have been critical building blocks in building the brotherhood of man, a brotherhood wedded to preventing the human tragedy that evil can cause.

The third type of lesson in this classroom of Mortsel is about the worse type of death we can experience—the death of children.

Two weeks ago I spent Wednesday in Lommel and Thursday in Heverlee grieving with Belgium as it buried some of its youth. As each picture of a smiling 12 year old with a face from God was projected on the screen above the caskets, another piece of our hearts broke, so that by the time we watched 22 smiling faces leave this earth, we had no more heart with which to feel.

In Mortsel, we buried 10 times that many children. A city lost its heart and could feel no longer.

Which brings us to our last lesson in the classroom of Mortsel.

The lesson about the importance of remembrance.

We build back our hearts by knowing that we will never forget. We begin to feel light and warmth again by working together to prevent the repeat of such horrors. We rebuild by working as partners to be stronger tomorrow than we were yesterday.

The lesson of remembrance is a just one. We learn to appreciate that during war, people are forced to do things that they abhor. Survival often leaves little choice. We learn also that unintended tragedies occur from those who mean best. We learn that while we should never forget, we must learn to forgive. As I noted last year, in making sure that we don't forget, sometimes we don't truly forgive. And the final lesson of Mortsel is that we can honor our loved ones lost and remember the evils of war, but still truly forgive. We can come together for a better future, even if we were not always together in the past. It is a lesson that can ring from Mortsel through Flanders and Wallonia, from Belgium across Europe and from Europe throughout the world.

Thanks so much and all the best.