

Part Five: Excursion to “Flanders Fields”

5.1

Program

“Flanders Fields” is the name of battle fields of World War I, after the famous poem of the Canadian doctor John McCrae:

*In Flanders Fields the poppies blow
between the crosses row on row...*

Monday July 12: in/around Ieper (Ypres)

- 9.00: Departure by bus from Notre Dame du Chant d’oiseau
- 10.45: Visit to *Tyne Cot Cemetery in Passendale*: biggest British war cemetery on the continent: 11.956 graves, remnants of a German bunker. The battle of Passendale (July 31 till Nov. 10, 1917) cost half a million dead and wounded. Gains: a few kilometres of territory. “We died in hell. They called it Passendale.”
- 11.30: Visit to the *Essex Farm War Cemetery* (1.185 graves), with restored dug-out where J McCrae wrote “In Flanders Fields”.
- 12.00: Free for lunch.
- 14.00: Visit to *Museum “In Flanders Fields”* (2-3 hours): explanations in four languages, includes the visit: of a temporary exhibit *Belgian War Refugees 1914-1918*. Also go to the *Cloth Hall and Belfry* (built 1260-1304, rebuild after WW I), symbols of the power of the cloth guilds; and the renaissance *City Hall*, built against the side-façade of the Cloth Hall; and the bookshop.
- 18.00: Free for dinner.
- 19.45: Gathering at the *The Menin Gate* (with the names of some 55.000 Commonwealth soldiers whose bodies are missing). *Daily ceremony* (15 minutes) at the Menin Gate with the “Last Post” at 20h.
- Afterwards: *Walk on the city walls* (from various periods, but mostly built by Vauban around 1680).
Night in hotels in the historic center of Ieper.

Tuesday July 13: in/around Diksmuide (at 20 kms from Ieper)

- 9.00: Departure by bus.
- 10.15: Visit to the *Museum IJzertoren* (Tower of the river IJzer): by elevator up to the top floor of this 22-storied tower with panorama of the now green fields to be compared with the pictures of mud and despair in the same fields just after the war. Excellent museum of WWI and the Flemish emancipation movement during the 20th century (one topic per floor coming down the stairs). Explanations in four languages.
- 12.30: Lunch.
- 13.45: Visit to the *Death Trench* (restored): a unique site.
- 14.45: Visit to the German war cemetery at Vladso with Käthe Kollwitz’s “*Mourning Parents*”.
- 15.15: Stop in Koekelare for refreshments + visit to the Käthe Kollwitz Tower (with her drawings).
- 16.15: Departure for Brussels. Arrival in Brussels around 18.00.

* * *

5.2

Some thoughts

By Rosa Packard (USA)

After the conference some of us visited memorials and museums in the western part of Flanders (Belgium) where in World War I so many died and so much was destroyed. We went first to the British Cemetery at Passendale and walked among rows of white crosses which had heartbreaking inscriptions - “known only unto God,” “till we meet again,” “all he knew of life was death.” Red poppies still in bloom in Flanders fields.

The German cemetery was a quiet glade of mature trees sheltering rows of flat black markers each with twenty names. Overlooking them are two statues of Grieving Parents by German artist Käthe Kollwitz. The statues are of herself and her husband and the stone nearest to them includes the name of their son Peter who died early in the war at Essen at the age of eighteen. It took her the next eighteen years to finish the statues. This was a place where the grief of all wars could be felt and some of us were drawn into worship there.

Our guide for the trip, one of the conference organizers. Koen Moens, gave us information about the Belgian experience of World War I, especially that of the Flemish population. Flemish speaking soldiers were under the charge of French speaking officers and much misunderstanding and tragedy occurred because of that. After the war, a movement for Flemish autonomy emerged blended with a plea for no more war and for tolerance. Every year there is a procession to the Flemish soldiers museum and memorial that we visited at Diksmuide. Out of this movement Belgium has recently created separate legislatures for Flemish speaking, French speaking and German speaking citizens - these in addition to the federal legislature. We learned that the Flemish parliament has just approved an institution for nonviolent defense, an idea first mentioned at the gatherings at the memorial.

* * *

5.3

An Impression

By Evelyn Nana-Fosu – Randall (USA/Ghana)

Learning what I have control over and then understanding what I don't have control over eliminates a lot of frustration. And life holds no guarantees.

Our visit to the war museums brought back to me all the war torn areas I have worked in during my 29 years of service with the United Nations. The horrible things I saw in Liberia – the stench alone – that heavy stew of mold, waste, rot, urine, sweat and tuberculosis mixed with one hundred percent humidity, cooked in hundred degree F. heat, with ventilation only enough for mosquitoes to fester - the overcrowding, the starvation. Listening to the stories in the museums and seeing the statue of parents crying over the death of their eighteen year old son reminded me of a pregnant girl and her grandmother who gave testimony of surviving a massacre in which the rest of their entire community was wiped out.

It is amazing to me to see the horrible atrocities that happened during World Wars I and II . The museums gave me goose pimples. I remember the faces in the pictures and am still haunted by them.

As I look around me today, I see the people who suffered atrocities sitting side by side with people who perpetrated them, joining together to come up with a common understanding of human rights. What is happening in Africa is not called World War I or World War II. But the history of the Flemish people being oppressed, is it not the same thing that is happening in the Sudan? The stronger trying to suppress the weaker?

My question is: *“When will we learn to live in peace?”*

It is heartbreaking to hear stories from children and women in Iraq, Liberia, the Sudan and the Middle East. Children, many of them forcibly conscripted, committed arson, rape, murder or were forced to walk the front lines, so as to shield their commanding officers instead of attending schools.

The successful conference and this excursion to Flanders Fields encourage me to work with Voice of African Mothers for justice, freedom and human rights for all peoples.

* * *