

Toespraak burgemeester Krijnen

Receptie Liberation concert – 13 september 2026

Distinguished guests, dear friends,

What a pleasure it is to welcome you all once again, here in our town hall in Margraten.

We have just attended the twentieth edition of the Liberation Concert: a musical tribute unique in the world. This concert is a living symbol of remembrance, gratitude, and the shared history that binds us. A tradition made possible by the generous hospitality of the ABMC, the American Battle Monuments Commission. Thank you.

A warm welcome to His Excellency Joe Popolo, Ambassador of the United States of America to the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Mr. Ambassador, over the past year we have witnessed your sincere interest and dedication to the story of the Liberation of Limburg and the Netherlands. Your efforts to ensure this history is told fully and fairly do not go unnoticed and are greatly appreciated.

The same gratitude extends to Mr. Robert Edsel, whose commitment to giving a voice to these stories is truly inspiring. It is an honor for us to have you both here, you are both true friends of Margraten.

A recent initiative, led by the Black Liberators in the Netherlands Foundation, aims to highlight the contributions of more than 15,000 African American soldiers to the Liberation of the Netherlands, particularly in Limburg. Just outside, in Wiggins Park, a new panel will be installed, providing more information and honoring those who dug graves and laid the fallen to rest at the Netherlands American Cemetery here in Margraten.

History isn't just written in books. It is kept alive by people who care.

We take pride in honoring our liberators, through monuments, educational projects, and of course through music. This afternoon, we heard Brigitte Heitzer (born and raised in our beautiful village of Noorbeek, just a few kilometers from here), perform songs both modern and old.

In the hymn *Amazing Grace*, she sang:

'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

A song that gains new meaning each time it is performed.

Music can be a bridge between the times, places and people.

While we were listening, children from our community held their own commemoration right here.

It was a moment for our youngest generation to not just remember the past, but to become part of the way that memory is carried forward.

Earlier this week, the province of Limburg organized a gathering of the European Union's Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs. Delegates from all over Europe paid a visit to the cemetery. I had the privilege of addressing the plenary session. There, I described the cemetery as a scar in our landscape. For a scar tells us that there was once a wound. It reminds us of what was lost. At the same time, a scar becomes part of who you are. You carry it with you. You care for it. You never forget how it came to be.

During the conference, high school students from Limburg entered into debates with the delegates, discussing the importance of democracy and the rule of law. Well aware of the current security threats of the world we live in, they spoke about the importance of civil resilience and active citizenship, as a safeguard for our freedom. I take great courage and optimism from listening to their perspectives. It reminds us adults, especially those who carry responsibility, that we should lead by example.

We are now entering an era in which all those who liberated the Netherlands during the Second World War will eventually have passed away. When that time comes, we will no longer hear their stories firsthand. Yet their stories remain as relevant as ever.

One such story is that of Private First Class Leo Lichten. He enlisted in August 1943.

Highly intelligent, he was admitted to a special army training program for doctors, engineers, and interpreters. However, this program was soon abandoned due to a shortage of soldiers, and Leo, along with over 100,000 other students, was sent directly into service.

By November 1944, he found himself in the Battle for Geilenkirchen, attacking bunkers in cold, rainy weather. Leo was killed by machine gun fire.

Today, he is one of the 179 Jewish American soldiers buried at the cemetery, having given his life for our freedom.

Leo's story is one of many.

The Second World War brought immense suffering and sacrifice. Especially to our Jewish fellow citizens.

The responsibility for keeping all of these stories alive increasingly falls to our generation and the next. We have numerous ways of doing so. A fine example of course is Mr. Edsels latest book *Remember Us*, as well as *Forever Old Hickory*, written by volunteers under supervision of Jurgen Mingels. Books like these preserve memories, voices and stories that might otherwise be lost.

At the same time, we must continue to find new ways to help young people discover and understand history. Not to replace the stories we already tell, but to give them new ways to encounter them.

One example is Pierre Rieu's idea for an immersive experience center. This concept, which he presented last Memorial Day, lets visitors safely step into the era of the occupation, making history tangible and engaging - especially for young people.

By the end of September, a pop-up with a preview of five scenes will be ready. We will invite stakeholders, including some of you present here, but also council members, residents, schoolchildren and of course potential funders, to experience it themselves. For sure, the feedback will help refine the proposal and hopefully bring this initiative to life.

Hopefully, a future experience center, just like the books, commemorations and all those other traditions, will keep our history alive for generations to come. If we continue to remember, to share our stories in new ways and old, I am certain that we will keep our greater 'forever promise'.

So today, I ask you to join me in this promise: that a musical tribute to our liberators will always have its place here in our municipality. In whatever form, this tradition will continue to honor their memory, carry their stories forward, and connect us all in remembrance, gratitude and friendship.
