

Description of my contest entry

The topic of this years Belgian Eustory competition, By Hearsay, was free. But as always the competition was about oral history and testimonials on interesting parts of Belgian history. My topic was the bombing of Mortsels, a suburb of Antwerp, where the family of my grandmother lived. On April fifth 1943 American and British air forces tried to destroy the former Erla Works, where the famous Minerva cars were made before World War One. They were a target because they were used by the German Luftwaffe to restore crashed airplanes. Instead of hitting the factories the bombs were dropped on the centre of the village of Mortsels. Several primary schools were hit, including the one of my great aunt. She was lucky to survive but dozens of her classmates and teachers did not.



Hilda's house before the bombing



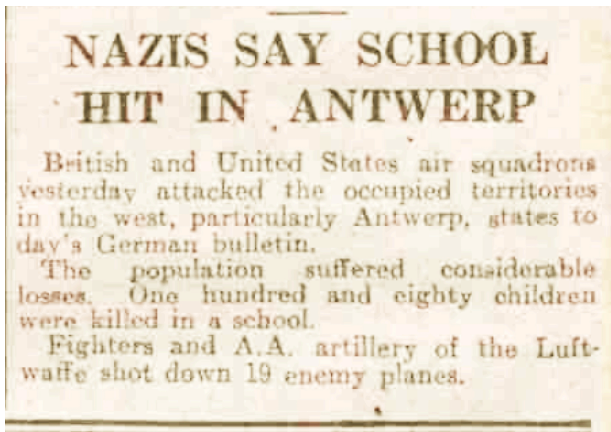
Hilda's house after the bombing

For my paper I interviewed two sisters of my grandmother, Maria and Martha Jespers, and one of their friends, Hilda Ketels, who was willing to tell me all about the great tragedy that she had experienced. They told me about how it was to live in a war and about how difficult it was to understand that their liberators, the American and British forces, had been able to make such a painful error. On top of that many German soldiers had been helping to pick people

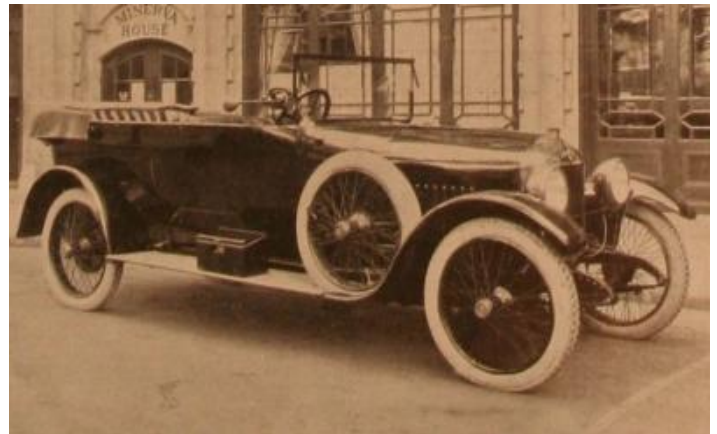
from under the debris, that was caused by the explosion. While I was writing this paper I began to understand that there is not really a good and bad side in times of war. Every side makes terrible mistakes and is guilty for the bloodshed of innocent citizens.

Part of the task was to place the events in a historical time frame. I wondered how I could understand the spirit of the age in the best possible way. The answer was by consulting multi-channel sources. I went to the local library of my hometown Turnhout and I looked for books on the topic. I found only two, a recent one and one of the seventies. Because I had not really found what I was looking for, I started searching for other ways to learn and read about my topic. I figured that the best ways for me to learn about the bombing was to consult the same sources as the people at the time. So I began to search for war newspapers and magazines. There were plenty of them available online. While reading the news articles, I found out that the information was not always compatible with what I read in the books.

I realized I had to understand the different points of view with regard to the bombing. I was rather surprised when I found out how the people of my country were misled by the German Nazi News Agency, that censored every legal Belgian newspaper during World War Two. I wanted to know more about the way people looked at the same events in foreign countries. In allied countries but also in occupied territories. I came to the astonishing conclusion that in Great Britain the events were played down, in contrast to the German presentation where the suffering of the victims was wide spread in the news papers. And the allied forces depicted as devils.



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a Minerva automobile

I really enjoyed it to make my work. While learning about my topic, I understood that my life is quite easy and enjoyable compared to millions and millions of people on this planet who live in a war and have to fear for their lives every minute of each day. Another thing I discovered was that there are also other types of history than reading books and following lessons in school. History is made by everyone who walks around on this earth. Within a hundred years people will talk about us as history. That is such an interesting thought!