



Gathering in Ypres, Belgium, 10-15 September 2012

In 2012, I was lucky to attend two 5W Gatherings, in Chicago and in Ypres. As an extension, from Chicago I travelled to Canada and in Ottawa, I was very surprised to discover on Parliament Hill the names Ypres, Passchendaele, Somme and even a painting of Ypres in ruins and the text of the poem "*In Flanders Fields, the poppies blow, between the crosses, row on row...*" I was familiar with these names on war memorials in almost every Belgian town but did not expect to come across them in distant Canada.

I had subscribed for the 'Flanders Field Gathering' in Ypres because I was confident that it would be very interesting. There

were more than 25 participants from nine different countries. Some brought along their very personal and moving stories about family members who had been sent from their faraway countries to the frontlines of the Great War in Belgium and in France. They wanted to visit the locations where all these non-fiction stories had taken place and where relatives, they never should meet, had been killed and buried or had never been found. Some of these soldiers returned home to tell their story. The tale of others was written down in a letter by a fellow soldier, of some only remained an administrative record in a national archive.

Some participants joined out of sympathy with their friends, out of interest in world history and some perhaps because they knew about the reputation of the initiator and the organizers. The program was a mix of seriousness and relaxation, of touristic and cultural interest. There was time to a chat around a nice meal and a time to rest in a comfortable hotel in the city centre of Ypres.

In Ypres we made a guided city walk and visited the renovated 'In Flanders Fields Museum' in the Cloth Hall. We could not have wished for a better ambassador than Jennie and got real VIP treatment. The mayor of Ypres presented us with a reception at the Town Hall. There was a press conference and articles published in the local newspapers about the purpose of our meeting and our organisation.

A place of honor was reserved for our group at The Last Post ceremony. Every evening since 1928 (except for a period during the second World War when Ypres was occupied by Germany), whatever the weather, at the stroke of eight hours, traffic around the arches of the Menin Gate Memorial is stopped for a short ceremony and *The Last Post*, the final salute to the fallen, is played by the buglers of the local fire brigade.

We visited some of the hundreds of military cemeteries in Flanders and in the region of the Somme where relatives of our friends on both sides of the war found a final resting place or a memorial plaque with their name.

A lady told stories about relatives who had prophetic dreams about the fate of their loved ones at the front. A German lady gave an interesting lecture on the role of women at the front. We learned how medical care was organised.

In Poperinge we visited Talbot House where soldiers found a comfortable bed, some recreation and for a short while could forget about the war and the trenches.

And of course, a visit to Belgium would have been incomplete without tasting the national delicacy in an artisanal chocolate factory.

During the traditional but exquisite farewell dinner we could thank the city of Ypres and the organising team and we all left with a goodbye souvenir and a warm feeling in our heart. For me it was an intense experience and now I understand the full meaning of the term World War in which soldiers from more than 50 countries and cultures participated.

Irene, Belgium

