

Arie de Bruin

ORCID: 0009-0009-4010-7113

Janusz Korczak Stichting, Nederland

Lessons for Life: An Example

Lessons for Life: An Example

Abstract

In Rotterdam, some primary schools carry out a project around the Jewish Children's Monument. Students investigate the historical background of the names on the monument from children who lived in their neighbourhood. They investigate the consequences of racism, anti-semitism and discrimination in the past and in their own lives. Rotterdam is a multicultural city, many children sometimes experience all kinds of racism and discrimination. In this lecture, the project is explained and the results of the project become visible. Children learn about the Holocaust and they learn in the spirit of Korczak to respect each other and their backgrounds, to live together in a democratic way. The project was co-developed by the Janusz Korczak Foundation and Foundation Loods24/Joods Kindermonument Rotterdam.

Keywords

extermination; antisemitism; education for peace; memory of holocaust

1. Introduction

Rotterdam is a multicultural city and a large port city. More than 60% of the children in primary education have a non-Western background. Immigrants came from all over the world, migrant workers, sailors, refugees.

Since 2013 there is a children's monument with the names of all Jewish children who were deported from this city in World War II and murdered in the camps. The names of 687 Jewish children between 0 and 12 years old are written on a circle at the place of the former Loods 24, a warehouse on a former port site where Jews, Sinti and Roma were gathered before they were sent to the Westerbork, a transit-camp.¹

¹ See: <https://www.kampwesterbork.nl/>



This monument is the basis for a special education project about racism, anti-semitism and discrimination that is being implemented by several schools in Rotterdam. Children adopt a few names of the Children's Monument and investigate their history. Then they connect this with their own life. They share their experiences about racism and discrimination, incorporate this into stories, poems and drawings. Human rights and especially the Children's Rights are explicitly discussed.

Finally, they visit the monument and discuss in their classrooms and in their children's council at school what they can do to prevent discrimination, racism and anti-semitism in their school environment and in the world.

2. History

In 1940 there lived about 12,000 Jewish inhabitants in Rotterdam. Some of them lived already for centuries in the Netherlands; they were fully assimilated and most of them had Dutch names like "van Gelderen, Walvisch, Biersteker," and so on.

There were also refugees from Germany and other European countries; during the thirties they found a safe place in this city.

On May 14, 1940 the center of Rotterdam was bombed and totally destroyed by the German Army. About 900 people were killed by the bombs; 80,000 people

were homeless. Most people who survived found a place in other districts of the city and tried to build up their lives again.

During the first years of the war there were more and more restrictions and prohibitions for Jews. In 1942 they were called up to report to the so-called labor camps in Eastern Europe. Some fled and went into hiding but most of them were gathered in Loods 24, a port area with a railway yard near the harbours of Rotterdam. They were transported by train to the transit-camp Westerbork and from there to Auschwitz, Sobibor and other extermination camps. Among them also many children, of which 687 names (children between 0 till 12 years old) can now be found on the Jewish Children's Monument in Rotterdam that was erected on the site of Loods 24.

There was in Rotterdam also a Jewish orphanage at the Mathenesserlaan. The children of this place were also all deported with their supervisors. Korczak was not the only one. On October 8, 1942, the Nazis took ten children from the orphanage, including six German children. After a night in Loods 24 they were transported to Westerbork. On February 26, 1943, the other orphans were transported to Westerbork via Umschlagplatz Loods 24. Most of these children were deported to Sobibór, where they all were murdered on March 5, 1943.

After the war there were only a few hundred Jewish people left in Rotterdam.²

3. The Project “Jij hoort in onze klas” (You Belong in Our Class)

In 2013 when the monument was erected more than fifty primary schools in Rotterdam took part in the project. And now every year several classes of primary and secondary schools are visiting the Jewish Childrens' Monument and they implement the project yearly in their next class.

3.1. The Program Step by Step

- Teachers give introduction lessons about World War 2.
- The class receives a list of names and addresses of “disappeared” Jewish children, who lived in Rotterdam; mostly we try to give them a list of addresses in their own district. Each small group select one or two names and they are investigating what happened to this children during the war.

² More information you can find in A.W. Oosthoek, *Kaddisj: Ter nagedachtenis van de joodse Rotterdamse burgers 1940–1945*, Rotterdam 2000.

- Pupils look for information about the backgrounds and visit the street where the Jewish children lived; take photos, search for information; also digitally (Joods Monument <https://www.joodsmonument.nl>, Stadsarchief Rotterdam <https://stadsarchief.rotterdam.nl> en Loods 24: <https://www.loods24rotterdam.nl> etc.). Maybe they can interview older people who have experienced the war.
- Processing: poems, photos, pictures, singing a special song, stories, and stones with names.
- In the classroom they tell the other children what they have discovered.
- We have gathered a lot of stories about the children of the monument; there was also an Jewish orphanage in Rotterdam... there was also a teacher Salo Carlebach, who went with the children from Westerbork in the train to Auschwitz, he asked to stay with the children... and they were all murdered... the same story as Janusz Korczak.
- Then we discuss together about racism, anti-semitism and discrimination... in the past and in our present world. Here and Now in Rotterdam.
- For every child they paint a little stone with the name; and then the children make an exhibition and invite their parents. They show them what they have discovered, read poems en stories.
- At the end of the project they visit the monument and look for the names of 'their' children and then they put the stone (and sometimes a flower) near the monument.

3.2. An Example

Helena van der Stam, she was 7 years old, she lived at the Noorderhavenkade in Rotterdam. She went to school, that was the Blijdorp-school, nowadays that school is called "Margrietschool". Children of this school in the neighborhood of the Noorderhavenkade, investigated Helena's history.

In the archives of Rotterdam³ the children of the class found this photograph from 1939. These houses are still there, and... one of the girls of the group is living now at Noorderhavenkade 136C. When she discovered that Helena once had slept in her own bedroom, she was totally confused and cried. They will never forget this history: it is part of their own life now!

³ A lot of information about the history of Rotterdam you can find at <https://stadsarchief.rotterdam.nl>

Helena van der Stam

- A girl: Helena van der Stam 7 jaar
- Adress: Noorderhavenkade 136 C, Rotterdam

- Birthdate: Rotterdam
2-4-1936
- Westerbork:
10-4-1943 /
20-4-1943
- Sobibor 23-4-1943



3.3. Exhibition

After the investigation and the intensive work in the classroom the children organize an exhibition at school. They invite the teachers, the parents, grandparents, neighbours etc. and give them a tour. Children tell about what they have discovered about the history of the Holocaust in Rotterdam, and about racism and discrimination nowadays.



And at the end of the program: the children are visiting the Jewish Children's Monument in Rotterdam. It is placed at Stieltjesplein in Rotterdam-South. We called it Loods 24: This is the place where Jewish and other people were gathered before being transported by train to Westerbork or other concentration camps.

Children are searching for the names of “their” children... The names are intentionally not put in alphabetical order; you really have to search, and then you come across all those names and ages ... that is always very impressive for the children: “Ah... look... look, a baby of three months, a child of 4... my sister is also four years old!... here, that’s my name... yes, we found our child!”

It is also possible to do the program with Stolpersteine; in Rotterdam there are more than 700 Stolpersteine. There are also a lot of Stolpersteine in several other cities and villages in the Netherlands. We have rewritten the program for other cities where there are Stolpersteine (Dordrecht, Zwijndrecht) so the schools can use it.⁴

4. Conclusion

The evaluation showed that children are very involved and motivated in their research. Due organizing an exhibition and the possibility to tell their parents and others about what they have discovered, the learning effect is particularly high.

We hope that children will become aware of the great danger of racism and anti-semitism and that they will contribute to a world of peace in the 21st century! For all the children: from Surinam, Turkey, Morocco, Dutch, German, Palestinian, Syrian, Jewish and...

During the project children share their own experiences with racism and discrimination.

This project is not learning for the test or a grade, it is education in and for real life.

It is a good example of how children become aware of the history of the place where they live through research in their own environment. This can be done anywhere: in Poland, Russia, Germany, but also in the former Yugoslavia, in Israel, in Rwanda, in Suriname and South Africa. Everywhere in the world people know the history of injustice and this program can be a step to work with the children on justice in their present existence.

References

- Activiteiten Janusz Korczak Stichting, <https://korczak.nl/stichting/activiteiten/> [accessed: 14.05.2024].
 Beens E., van der Wal A., *Het gezicht achter een naam: verhalen over de weggevoerde kinderen van het Joods Kindermonument in Rotterdam*, Rotterdam 2014.
 de Bruin A., *Een geluk voor de mensheid*, Janusz Korczak Stichting 2023.
 de Bruin A., *Jij hoort in onze klas*, Rotterdam 2017 (3e druk).

⁴ See: <https://www.loods24rotterdam.nl/>. The program (in Dutch) can be downloaded for free.

Korczak J., *Ghetto Diary*, Yale University Press 2000.

Onderwijsproject “Jij hoort op onze school”, <https://www.loods24rotterdam.nl/> [accessed: 14.05.2024].

Oosthoek A.W., *Kaddisj: Ter nagedachtenis van de joodse Rotterdamse burgers 1940–1945*, Rotterdam 2000.

van der Pauw J.L., *Rotterdam in de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, Rotterdam 2011 (3e druk).

Thissen S., *Loeki Metz en het Joods Monument in Rotterdam*, Rotterdam 2017.

Verhalenhuis Belvédère, *Het verhaal van Schifrah / The story of Schifrah*, Rotterdam 2015.