

“Meeting in No Man’s Land” – German and British elders exchange family histories from The First World War



Age Exchange, the leading UK charity working in the field of reminiscence, has received an award of £83,900 from The Heritage Lottery fund to support a unique project on The First World War.

Thanks to National Lottery players, the project will focus on British and German family heritage of The First World War shared and recorded through a unique meeting and exchange between elders from London and Munich in April 2016, resulting in a documentary film to be screened in the UK and in Germany.

“Meeting in No Man’s Land” will enable largely unexplored comparisons to be made between how German and British families have held and interpreted their First World War family histories across the generations. This is within the context of their national experience of the First World War and its subsequent effect on their family's life across the 20th Century. The project will explore the War in the context of identity, remembrance and commemoration, and its meaning to British and German participants today. In bringing German and British elders together we will focus on themes that will be significant in helping us reveal similarities and differences across the two groups.

The heritage will focus on the 'children's' experience of a story shared or passed down to them by parents or grandparents and how, over time, that story has obtained significance within their family, and been reinterpreted and shared. The heritage will also focus on the nature and symbolism of the First World War family artefacts the elders bring to share with each other and specifically with descendants of those who fought as enemies. In gathering and recording this heritage we will give time to value and record how these descendants respond to and feel about sharing family heritage between their two nations and to record how they choose to describe and share that 100 year old history in the present and what importance they place upon that experience.

We believe there is huge value to ourselves as European citizens and to our understanding of our history and heritage in enabling opportunity for older people from Germany and Britain to meet and share family history of how the war affected their family at the time and across subsequent generations.

Filmed individual and group interviews with German and British elders, and the digitalisation of their First World War family artefacts, letters, diaries etc, will be used to create specific outcomes benefitting audiences in the UK and in Germany. In the UK the documentary film will tour galleries, museums, libraries, schools, including a premiere screening at The National Film Theatre in London (BFI Southbank) to mark the 100th anniversary of The Battle of The Somme in July 2016. The recorded film of German and British elders exchanging their histories will also be edited to create Smartphone learning material for British children studying the First World War. This project element will be supported by intergenerational workshops in schools. The film and heritage material from “Meeting in No Man’s Land” will be used to encourage young students firstly to learn and then to interpret that learning in the context of their own cultural backgrounds, experience and interests.

In our experience projects that have been supported and delivered during these anniversary years of The Great War do not bring the descendants of former enemies together to enable the exchange of family histories of British and German citizens. This project meets that need, and creates in turn a powerful opportunity to compare and contrast how the War affected families on opposite sides and how it affected those families subsequently during the inter-war years through to how it is experienced and commemorated by descendants today. We believe this project, by its nature, will address the need to work closely with families and reflect more deeply on personal present and historical thinking about remembrance and commemoration.

All resulting filmed interviews, digitised family artefacts and family history contributed during the project, including at project open days in London, will go on-line at History Pin and rest in archive form with The British Library and at Age Exchange.

Stuart Hobley, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund London, said: “Thanks to National Lottery players, projects right across London are helping to deepen our understanding of the First World War. This fascinating project will enable people to get a different perspective on the War in general, and learn more about how its impact on ordinary people from both sides.”

“Meeting in No Man’s Land” will benefit from research carried out on the project by Professor Mike Roper and Doctor Rachel Duffet from the University of Essex and part of University of Hertfordshire's AHRC/HLF Engagement Centre “Everyday Lives in War: experience and memory of the First World”.

Professor Mike Roper, from the University of Essex, said: “For us the project provides a unique opportunity to observe the differences between German and British perspectives on the First World War, as seen through family memories and the testimonies of descendants. We are interested in the kinds of historical understandings that emerge from Age Exchange's work with descendants, and how these compare with more academic approaches. Finally, we want to observe the impact of Age Exchange's activities on the commemorative cultures of each country. We will write an article at the end of the project which develops these themes in relation to Professor Roper's work on children of the Great War in Britain and Australia”.

Notes to editors

In creating this project concept David Savill (Artistic Director, Age Exchange) would specifically like to thank Elfriede Pauli, Caritas in Rosenheim Bavaria, and Hedwig Petzet, Caritas, Karin Wimmer-Billeter, Münchner Bildungswerke, Programme Die Lange Schatten des Krieges, Margarita Wolf-Lenz, Bayerischen Rundfunk

And Karen Brookfield, Anne Dodwell, Rebecca Jenkins of The Heritage Lottery Fund

To find out more about '**Meeting in No Man's Land**' and how you could take part, please contact David Savill at Age Exchange

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Follow us on Twitter [@NoMansLand2016](https://twitter.com/NoMansLand2016) and at www.age-exchange.org.uk

For Age Exchange's previous London-based WW1 project from 2014, go to
www.childrenofthegreatwar.org.uk

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