

## 7-MÜTZENICH

### **Mützenich, the village on the “sinful frontier”**

Coffee smuggling was rife on the German-Belgian border in the years between 1948 and 1953. In history books, this slice of post-war history goes under the tongue-in-cheek name of “Aachener Kaffeefront”. As the English need their tea, so the Germans have to have their coffee. But it was very, very expensive due to high customs taxes. The “coffee front” arose, not only from the crass difference in price between the two countries, but also from the porous nature of the frontier, criss-crossed by the Vennbahn, which had effectively created en- or exclaves. Mützenich, at the time a German exclave on Belgian territory, perfectly served the smugglers’ purpose. This curious status entered German oral history when the village became famous for its “sinful frontier”.

### **A village with a lucky streak**

Mützenich is close to Steling, at 658 metres the highest point in the Aachen district. The first mention of the village goes back to 1361. The village arms feature a Roman helmet, as one such was found at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century while digging for peat. Theories about the village name also have to do with headgear. In the village’s PlattGerman hymn, “e Dörpsche lid im Monscher Land” (“A hamlet lies on Monschau soil”), the vicious westerly is held responsible for the name, as it can tear the cap (Mütze) from your head, leaving you without one (nicht) “un daropp ewischlich, häisst dat Dorp nu Mötzenisch!” (“and clearly therefore, the village is now called cap-not”) [*translator’s note: if there were any truth to this tale, the name would more likely be “Mützelos” or cap-less*]. Another, even more far-fetched story involves Charlemagne, who either did or did not spurn the offer of a warm cap on a cold night near Mützenich. The village school, church and parish house were all built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since 1<sup>st</sup> January 1972, Mützenich has been a part of Monschau. Following this change, Mützenich has struck gold a few times in the federal competition for the village with the brightest future. Yet Mützenich has struck gold elsewhere too. With a creative attitude to its own border, it has shown a talent for turning a coin, even an illicit one.

### **The border continues to be a bone of contention after World War II**

As with the First World War, so with the Second: once again the zone beyond the German border became a Belgian reparation area. After liberation from the Nazis, the German west frontier ran for a while in its familiar pre-war groove. The unusual frontier relationships that had been created by the Vennbahn still had to be observed in the post-war period. However, with the end of the war, voices grew loud in Belgium for an extension of sovereignty at the expense of Germany in these areas. In November 1949, Belgium submitted a demand to the Allied Powers for the five enclaves along the Vennbahn, as well as the two frontier localities of Mützenich and Roetgen to be ceded to the Kingdom. The Six Powers Conference in London supported this demand. Similar demands were submitted by various mayors of the Belgian Eifel for the completion of traditional territories (divided farms, family domains split by the border) which would involve wide stretches of the Monschau and Schleiden districts. Some of the German populations affected definitely considered the possible advantages of changing their nationality to escape the grim realities of post-war West Germany. Belgium was a wealthy state at the time, with an industrial infrastructure that was largely intact. Those opposed to these changes were mainly civil servants with steady jobs or industrial workers with jobs across the border. They had an unexpected ally in Paul-Henri Spaak, who would win Aachen’s Charlemagne Prize in 1957 and go on to become General Secretary of NATO. Spaak was Belgian Foreign Minister at the time and had his eye on storm-clouds gathering in the East of Europe as the chill of the Cold War between the USA and the Soviet Union was beginning to bite. He thought such minor border considerations were distracting attention from substantial issues.

### **Wood taken illegally from their own communal forest**

The Treaty of Versailles in 1919 made Mützenich an enclave through the Belgian Vennbahn. The communal forest also became Belgian, so that the villagers had to pay a land tax to the Belgian state, as stipulated in the frontier agreement. Timber and hunting subscriptions brought money into the

communal coffers. In 1944, German property in Belgium was confiscated, including the communal forest. Belgium permitted the felling of trees and export of wood. However, Germany prohibited its import. So the German villagers of Mützenich were left with no alternative but to take and use the wood from their own forest to secure their existence, as they had always done. In strictly legal terms, this was technically theft. Thus, they were obliged to seek new sources of income. In the early fifties, life in the frontier villages of the Eifel was still as hard as it had ever been.

### **After the war, some of the villagers considered a change to Belgium advantageous**

In a surprise move on Good Friday 1949, a few days after the founding of NATO, Belgium suddenly renounced its territorial demands. It was speculated that economic factors were decisive, such as the sober estimate that a reopening of the Vennbahn for passenger services between Eupen and St Vith would never give a solid return on investment. The people of Mützenich reacted ambiguously; they were not entirely averse to being annexed. Some of them actively promoted the idea of annexation to neighbouring wealthy Belgium. Among these was Mayor Weißhaupt, some of his councillors and various other inhabitants, though Werner Thoma insists they were always a minority. The Mayor turned to Belgium's Foreign Minister Spaak, to try and win him over to the idea of annexing Mützenich. Meanwhile, this apparent revolt of the Mützenicher – it lasted until the late summer of 1949 – was greeted with understandable displeasure by the North Rhine Westphalian Government in Düsseldorf. The immediate suspension of the Mützenich Council ordered by the Head of the Aachen Provincial Government was confirmed by the North Rhine Westphalian Interior Minister. But this was not before demonstrations had taken place at the border. German banners called for the village to remain German, but there were others on the Mützenich side that read: "Long live Belgium!" In the wake of all this, tempers eventually softened. The historian Christoph Brüll sees the whole affair primarily as a "cry for help intended for the ears of Düsseldorf", because no sooner had the NRW government pledged material support for the border regions, than the protests quickly evaporated. With the signing of the "Treaty of 24<sup>th</sup> September 1956, between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Kingdom of Belgium, concerning corrective measures for the German-Belgian border and other issues affecting the relationship between these two countries (BGBl. 1958 II S. 263)" the time of mutual trust and cooperation began. But before this could happen, the smugglers would have their day in the limelight.

### **Coffee smuggling boosts the economy of a suffering region**

Smuggling coffee was a lucrative business after the Second World War. But the trade flourished against a specific background. The populations of the German border area were hungry and suffering hardship. Their buildings had been shot and shell damaged, meadows and fields torn up by tanks. Historians generally agree that most of the smuggling took place out of existential necessity. Only a few made their fortunes from it. Yet roughly two thirds of the coffee drunk between the Rhine and the Ruhr from 1945 to 1953 was contraband, for the taste of coffee brought moments of happiness to weary Germans in the bleak post-war years. Initially, only small quantities were being sneaked across the border from Belgium to Germany. But the introduction of the German-Mark in 1948 ensured that coffee smuggling, rather than only cigarettes, became particularly profitable. Customs taxes on coffee, at 10 DM per kilo, were particularly high. In Belgium, a kilo of roasted coffee could be bought for the equivalent of 8 DM, and sold in Germany for twice that. "In a single week, a smuggler stood to earn what a customs officer earned in a month", recalls the former customs investigator Walter Pohl. With such money, one could easily bribe a customs officer for information on duty schedules and inspection rosters. But from 1948, the trade took on the features of organised crime. Entire convoys of specially adapted vehicles were used, directed by an experienced guide. In 1953, the special tariff on coffee was abandoned and its smuggling as contraband ceased to be attractive. It was the end of an era. In the eight years since 1945, an estimated 1,000 tons of coffee had slipped illicitly across the border. With an annual value of 20 million DM, one can reasonably say that coffee smuggling contributed significantly to the reconstruction of the Aachen region after World War II.

### **Not only the “coffee panzer” and the “sweeper Porsche”, bicycles also saw some action**

Smuggling “brown gold” on the Aachen “coffee front” called for creativity from the smugglers in their choice of ways and means. The resulting escalation of tactics between cops and robbers often took on features of a hare and tortoise race. Decommissioned armoured reconnaissance vehicles from the Belgian army made light work of forest tracks, ditches and hedgerows. But the customs authorities also engaged in the arms race. A few officers were trained as high-speed pursuit drivers for two specially-equipped Porsches, which could reach speeds of 180 km/h. These carried adjustable broom barriers on their noses, which could be lowered in a second to sweep away the so-called “crows-feet” tacks strewn in the path of the law by fleeing smugglers. The latter were also imaginative in their customising of vehicles. On two particular occasions, frontier patrols in their “sweeper-Porsches” apprehended a hearse bearing coffee rather than cadavers, and a Red Cross ambulance carrying fresh-roasted java rather than the sick or injured. The final investigative gambit involved an Alsatian trained to wag its tail at the scent of coffee. More grotesque was the sight of cyclists with “elephantiasis”, whose bags of milled coffee concealed in their tights had gradually slipped down like dying dirigibles, wobbling their way through the frontier villages. Anyone getting caught at this game risked three months in prison. A fast-track court in Aachen dealt with hundreds of such cases. And the end of the story was sometimes harsher than this. There were occasional injuries in pursuit, even severe ones, and even fatalities. In his book “Schmuggler, Zöllner und die Kaffeepanzer” (“Of smugglers, excise men and coffee panzers”), the Aachener local historian and journalist Wolfgang Trees has reckoned up 31 smugglers and 2 customs men shot dead between 1946 and 1952.

### **The Mützenich smugglers – Arnold Koch was one of them**

The smugglers of Mützenich differed from their “colleagues” on the Aachener “coffee front”. They were a more peaceful conclave, none of them were armed. If you were caught, you threw away your coffee and ran. Five organised convoys of smugglers brought their hundredweight loads of contraband goods every week from Eupen to Germany. Arnold Koch, born in 1928, is one of the villagers from Mützenich who was involved in the trade. “But”, he insists, “I never had to throw my coffee away!” In other words, he was never caught, thus never condemned or imprisoned. According to Koch, initially only cigarettes and coffee for private consumption were smuggled. But then, he remembers, “there were always more and more people buying coffee and bringing it up to the border.” He recalls the trade really taking off in 1948. Arnold Koch would pick up his sacks of coffee at a drop-off point close to the Weser reservoir wall near Eupen. Then he would set off towards Mützenich, walking the long, straight forest corridor that ran parallel to the road. He would cross the border only 100 metres from the customs office and then drop off his contraband at a nearby farm. Other smugglers preferred to cross at more distant points. The coffee was then transported into the interior on motorbikes. These bikers very rarely saw their couriers, just as the customs officers never saw Arnold Koch. He would choose his moment to cross carefully. Ideal was when the searchlights were directed onto road traffic and thus the smugglers, slipping across in the contrasting black background outside the lit-up zone, were invisible to their enemy. Koch, like many other couriers, made the ten-kilometre journey, on foot and laden with coffee, some two or three times a week. That so many chose this “profession” is strange for him to recall today, but he summarises his feelings succinctly: “It was a beautiful time and I was a free man.” Werner Thoma takes up the story there, but with a difference. For him, the smugglers on the German side loaded the coffee into powerful American cars. The seats were removed; the driver sat on a wooden chest filled with sacks of coffee. In the open trunk sat another man with another sack, but this was filled with “crows feet” tacks to scatter in the path of pursuing customs officers.

### **Exodus of the men of Mützenich to the “Hotel Eifeler Hof”**

As mentioned above, the smugglers of Mützenich were a non-violent crew, who tended to stay on the side of discretion. Thus, they were doubtless surprised by the level of attention their court appearance received. Because in 1952, no less than 52 smugglers languished in Cologne’s “Klingelpütz” prison awaiting trial. Of these, fully 45 of them came from Mützenich. Indeed, each new arrival was greeted with the sarcastic call of “Welcome to the Hotel Eifeler Hof”. The court

record was a full 3,000 pages long which, according to the magazine “Der Spiegel”, made it the weightiest legal document since the Nürnberg War Trials. With regard to Mützenich, the state prosecutor was obliged to observe that almost the entire young male population of the village were engaged in smuggling. This led to grotesque side effects: the trial was to blame when the local football club “TuS Mützenich” failed in its bid to reach the next league, because not enough players were available to ensure a valid team. Pastor Scheidt, Mützenichs young catholic priest, visited his black sheep in jail, and not only to offer them moral and spiritual succour. He advised them to “keep quiet and on no account incriminate one another”. He assured them that their “coffee sins” would be overlooked in the great divine scheme of things and to let the trial serve as warning enough. He was personally convinced that they had taken this path out of necessity, not choice. He was perhaps referring to the Christmas sermon delivered in 1946 by Cardinal Frings of Cologne when he pleaded that in times of hardship, “a person might well steal that which was necessary to his health, if there were no other way, either by request or honest work, that he might attain it legally” and anyway, the pastor reasoned, the youth of Mützenich, with their close ties to Belgium, were used to “thinking European” in such matters.

### **The Mützenich frontier today**

On 3rd June 2012, the people of Mützenich erected a monument to the unknown smuggler on the road border to Belgium. The bronze sculpture is by local sculptor Klaus Gehlen, whose father was once one of the smuggler cohort, just like the father of Jaqueline Huppertz, who is currently Mützenich’s Village Representative. Back when smuggling was common here, borders were experienced by the locals as another wearisome nuisance in the daily hardship of life. Today, with the Schengen Treaty and the Euro, the international context has been so far altered as to render us insensitive to the formal differences that exist between neighbouring countries, to the abrupt sense of otherness that crossing a frontier used to bring. We appreciate borders only as lines on a map. The little quotidian traffic, the to-ing and fro-ing, even illegally, has receded into the past as a sort of folktale or collective memory. But the new context of modern, flexible borders causes one to reflect on Europe and its four fundamental liberties.