

DSM Firmenich Freedom Meal, 6 May 2025, Maastricht

Good afternoon, everyone.

Today we celebrate 80 years of freedom,
here in the Netherlands,
here in Limburg...

A freedom that has become so normal for us
that it's sometimes hard to imagine
it was ever lost.

At the same time,
we no longer know
- or perhaps we have simply forgotten -
how long that liberation actually took.

Here in Limburg, it took
the Americans, the British, and the Belgians
almost six months
to defeat the Nazis.

And those were not just
six long months,
but six tough months as well.

Six tough months of:

- fierce fighting,
- towns and villages bombed, looted, and reduced to rubble,
- countless deaths and injuries, including many children,
- forced and life-threatening evacuations,
- and the brutal repression of the resistance...

For 80 years,
these stories have come from a past

that feels ever more distant,
with the number of people who actually experienced the occupation and liberation
growing smaller every year.

While those same stories
still sound sadly familiar today.

The only difference is that now,
they are happening elsewhere:
in places like Ukraine and the Middle East,
which for us Europeans
feel both geographically and emotionally
quite close to home.

All the while, in other parts of the world too,
the most horrific things continue to happen,
while here, for such a long time,
we have had the luxury of saying,
"never again."

But above all, these stories remind us
once again
just how much 'suffering and loss of life'
it costs to win back
lost 'peace, freedom, and democracy'.

Let these stories,
especially in today's unstable world,
also serve as a wake-up call.
A wake-up call
not to take for granted
something we here
- in this rather privileged part of the world -
have known for so long,
but to cherish it,
and to be prepared to defend it,
if necessary,

with all our strength...

... trusting - and I truly believe this -
that we, who refuse to seek solutions
in hatred, exclusion or injustice,
are still the majority,
here in Limburg, in the Netherlands,
in Europe, and in the world.

Let us draw 'hope, strength, and courage' from this.

'Hope, strength, and courage' to stand together
against the brutal forces
that want to persuade
the world otherwise.

Let us stand together
by coming out of our shells,
by breaking out of our own safe bubbles,
and above all, by remaining people among people.

... among ... not against ...

And what better way
to truly be 'people among people'
than by sharing a meal together,
in this case, a Freedom Meal?

A Freedom Meal that,
yesterday and today,
has been enjoyed at many tables
across the Netherlands and Limburg,
and now also here,
at a company like DSM-Firmenich.

And I find that truly wonderful,
especially because so many different people work here.

So many people,
from just as many different countries all over the world,
each with their own stories of freedom.

Stories that may be very different
from our stories here
in Limburg, the Netherlands, and Europe
and which can be so insightful and eye-opening...

As employees of an international company,
you are, of course, already skilled
in finding connection and common ground,
in bringing together your unique talents,
and in bridging differences
to achieve the best results together...

But today, I invite you
to also listen to the differences
in those stories of freedom.

Be curious about your colleague's story,
whether they come from
Heerlen, Hyderabad, Lagos, or New York.

Perhaps that is the greatest strength
of a Freedom Meal like this:
that by sitting together at the table,
by sharing our stories,
we truly see one another.

Because freedom is
- and we must realise this now more than ever -
freedom is *not* just something
to remember or to celebrate;
it is also something
to maintain together

and to defend,
every single day.

I wish you a wonderful meal,
shared in connection, in friendship, and in freedom.