

The Dutch Zouave Museum owes its creation to Brother Christoffor van Langen, member of the Congregation of Saint Louis in Oudenbosch and for many years teacher of history at the local teachers training college. He was keenly interested in the history of the papal Zouaves and collected all the documents and items he could find on the subject. His extensive collection was housed in the teachers training college. It was officially opened as a museum in 1947. After Brother Christoffor's death in 1968 the collection was given on loan to the Oudenbosch local authorities, who determined that the former town hall, dating from 1776, was henceforth to be the permanent accommodation for the museum. And so the museum was reopened in the former town hall on May 1, 1975.

The History of the Zouaves

During the first half of the nineteenth century nationalist sentiments matured in Italy, manifesting themselves in the pursuit of geographical unification of the country. As a result of this the independence of the Papal States, over which the Pope had sovereignty, was endangered. In 1860 King Victor Emmanuel II of Sicily occupied part of the papal territories in central Italy. With his successful 'Expedition of the Thousand' the popular hero Garibaldi then conquered Sicily and southern Italy in the name of the king. All that was left to Pope Pius IX was the so-called Patrimonium Petri, Rome and the area around it. The pope saw that a stronger army was needed to defend his territory. He therefore called upon the catholic youth around the world to come and help him. A 'Regiment of Papal Zouaves' under the command of a French general was established, and many youths from various countries volunteered. Over 3000 Dutchmen enlisted, which made them the largest group in the papal army.

The Zouaves derived their name from a brave indigenous tribe in Algeria that had surrendered to the French; soldiers from this tribe formed an élite corps in the French army.

In the period 1864-1870 Oudenbosch was the main point of assembly and departure for the Dutch recruits, which is why the memory of these times lives on here.

In 1870 the remaining papal territory was occupied by the Italian army. The unification of Italy was achieved with Rome as the capital. Pope Pius IX withdrew inside the Vatican as a voluntary prisoner. The papal Zouaves returned to their native countries.

The Museum and its Collection

There are three rooms in the museum. In the first some authentic uniforms are on display.

Their somewhat oriental look is due to the fact that they were inspired by the dress worn by the French army contingent in North Africa, from which the Zouaves derived their name. A slide show with commentary provides some introductory information about the museum.

In the second room two paintings by a Dutch artist, Faber, catch the eye. One depicts the heroic courage of the best-known Dutch Zouave, Pieter Janszoon Jong from the village of Lutjebroek, in the battle of Monte Libretti. The other shows the willingness of the Dutch Zouaves to help during the cholera epidemic in Albano, e.g. in burying the dead. Some of the Dutch Zouaves themselves died of this dreadful disease. What also deserves mention is the precious Mentana banner, a reminder of the victory of the Zouaves at Mentana in 1867.

Back in their native countries the veteran Zouaves founded brotherhoods and associations that, at first, were intended to be ready for mobilization as soon as the Pope would again appeal to them for help. Later they set themselves the task of supporting each other and of organizing social and church activities. All these brotherhoods and associations had banners of their own, of course, and those banners that have been preserved are displayed in room three.

Possibly the most interesting part of the collection is the large number of personal letters, photographs, petitions, diaries, letters of discharge, and decorations: all tangible evidence of a most remarkable chapter in the history of the Dutch Roman Catholics.