

HOW SWISS SOLIDARITY FUNDING REBUILT DUTCH DISTRICT NURSING – AN ARCHIVAL REDISCOVERY

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Figure 1: Collection of the North Sea Flood Museum (Watersnoodmuseum), object WNM Burgh-Haamstede 135, right from the windmill the Groene Kruis building (district nurse building) in Burgh-Haamstede Zeeland after the North Sea flood February 1953.

Abstract

Images of the 1953 North Sea flood that affected the coastal areas of the United Kingdom, Belgium, and the Netherlands are etched in many people's memories. Photographs and film footage brought this disaster vividly to life, making its terrifying scale visible. Iconic images include vast waterscapes with only a single farmhouse or tree remaining, as well as families on rooftops or in small boats as rescue approached. These are all representative of the visual narrative of the North Sea flood.

Among the materials related to district nursing in the collection of the Museum for Nursing in the Netherlands, photographs were found that did not depict the disaster itself, but rather the reconstruction of district buildings that formed the backbone of health care infrastructure in the Dutch province of Zeeland. At first glance, these photographs do not seem emblematic of the flood. On closer inspection and after further research, however, they reveal a surprising reconstruction story. An article in the August 1956 issue of the Groene Kruis's monthly journal¹ provides additional clarity.

Keywords: flood, district nursing, fundraising, Swiss solidarity, The Netherlands

¹ Het Groene en Witte Kruis, official organ of A.N.V. Het Groene Kruis



Figure 2: "district building" (photographer unknown). Source: Dutch Museum for Nursing, photo G1544.

1 THE DUTCH MUSEUM FOR NURSING AND ITS COLLECTION

The Dutch Museum for Nursing is an (online) museum and knowledge center for the history of nursing. In recent years, it has become part of the Dutch professional association for nurses and caregivers (V&VN).² The museum collection includes an extensive array of objects, personal documents, and photo, film, and audio materials related to the history of nursing and caregiving. Most of it is digitized and searchable. Like in any other museum collection some parts, however, remain undigitized or poorly documented, with unclear origin or context. Both known and unknown artifacts offer valuable material for research within specific themes.

Much is known about district nursing in the Netherlands. There are detailed books that describe its history chronologically.³ The museum depot in Culemborg houses many objects that represent district nursing, including the furnishings of a district building which served as a health center and comprise loan materials, medical instruments, and even daily-use items like cups with logos of the district nursing organization. The aforementioned books serve as excellent references, placing these objects in a historical context, with insight into how they were used and the key figures, institutions, and events surrounding them.

Re-examining objects from fresh perspectives can yield new insights. Aspects relating to the object itself – such as date, maker, or subject – but also its context can uncover deeper stories, offering new angles on the heritage of district nursing. One striking example is a series of photographs from 1956 showing district buildings in the province of Zeeland, sometimes including groups of people. In this article for the *European Journal for Nursing History and Ethics*, the series of images connected to the North Sea flood of 1953 serves as a case study for Lost & Found that traces the rediscovery and investigation of the images and their context. Interpretation of this photo series is crucial for unlocking

² Historisch College FNI | V&VN.

³ Examples include: Huige 2011; Jamin 1999.

the broader district nursing collection at the Museum for Nursing and shines new light on the history of nursing and the position of health care, not only in the province of Zeeland but in the rest of the Netherlands as well.



Figure 3: "Group on boat in Zeeland" (photographer unknown). Source: Dutch Museum for Nursing, photo G1528.

2 LOST & FOUND: PHOTOS OF DISTRICT BUILDINGS IN ZEELAND

In 2023 the Netherlands commemorated the 70th anniversary of the flood of 1953 which affected the Dutch provinces of Zeeland and South Holland. Occurring in the early morning of February 1, 1953, this storm surge was caused by a combination of factors. An exceptional windstorm coincided with high tides, and the weak dikes were unable to protect the land behind them. Dikes were breached and the sea flooded the islands of Zeeland. It is reported that Zeeland suffered 1,835 casualties, and over 70,000 people were forced to evacuate. The flood is considered to be the defining traumatic event in that region and influenced daily life for many decades afterwards. Besides Zeeland, the provinces of South Holland, NorthBrabant and coastal areas of the UK and Belgium were also affected.

This 70th commemoration of the 1953 flood in 2023 led to the rediscovery of 49 photographs. A search in the museum collection database using the keywords "[wijkverpleging]" ("district nursing") and "[watersnoodramp]" ("flood") brought up several images directly related to the disaster. In 1953, district nurses had been called to assist and were active in emergency shelters, such as the one in Ossendrecht. These images show nurses in action. There are also images that clearly depict the devastating impact of the disaster.⁴

⁴ Pictures and video of the North Sea flood in the Dutch province of Zeeland www.watersnoodmuseum.nl/en/the-flood

Additionally, another series of images appeared in the search results, although it was not immediately clear how they related to the flood. These show new district buildings with waving flags, groups of people listening to speeches, or scenes of the sea and dikes. The descriptions sometimes read “Flood 1953 and reconstruction of Zeeland district buildings” and occasionally include “realized with aid from Switzerland and Italy and others.” But were these images really from 1953?

Artistically, the photographs are not remarkable because their composition, subjects, or print quality are not particularly engaging. Descriptions in the archive include phrases like “group on boat”, “group by the sea”, or “presentation of honorary medal”, all of which are quite vague. In some cases, descriptions are more specific e.g., “group and two women in traditional dress visiting a district building built with Swiss and Italian help”, but the overall story behind this photo series remains unclear.

What is certain is that the photos must be from the post-1953 period, as they involve the reconstruction of district buildings aided by Swiss and Italian contributions. The Swiss flag, white cross on red background, is also visible in some of the photos, easy to identify even in black and white. Only two out of the 49 photos list a location in the province of Zeeland: Stavenisse. All the others lack location data, and all are generically dated “1953”.



Figure 4: “Stavenisse district building”, July 1956 (photographer unknown). Source: Dutch Museum for Nursing, photo G1559.

3 RESEARCH & CONTEXT

The full series of 49 photographs is archived at the Dutch Museum for Nursing under the title “1953 Flood Disaster and Reconstruction of Zeeland District Buildings”. To accurately interpret these photos, it is crucial not to rely solely on archival descriptions. Gradually, a fuller picture emerges when external information is incorporated.

A search of Delpher, the Dutch online newspaper archive, using alternative terms such as “[stormvloed]” (“storm surge”) instead of “[watersnoodramp]” (flood disaster”), a more modern term) yielded relevant results.⁵ These articles revealed that, in July 1956, a Swiss delegation visited Zeeland to officially hand over 20 new health centers (district buildings) to the population. The effort had been funded by Chaîne de Bonheur (“Chain of Happiness”), a solidarity campaign organized by Swiss-Italian radio stations that raised over 2 million Swiss francs for the Netherlands in 1953.⁶ Other reports indicate that, at the time, this amounted to more than 800,000 Dutch guilders, which is equivalent to approximately €3.8 million today.⁷

The goal of this fundraising was to construct a total of 32 district buildings, of which 20 had already been completed by 1956. Documents in the Zeeland archives, preserved by various local branches of the district nursing organization Groene Kruis (“Green Cross”), contain details of the construction, blueprints, and financing of these buildings from 1953 to 1956.

All this information recontextualizes the rediscovered photo series. It is no longer just a group of unremarkable images, but a key to understanding the international aid that supported the rebuilding of Dutch district nursing and local health infrastructure. This story can be summarized as follows:

The then Queen’s Commissioner in the province of Zeeland, Mr. A.F.C. de Casembroot, received a Swiss delegation in July 1956. The group included Ms. M. Jöhr of the Swiss National Red Cross, who had advocated for spending the relief funds on district buildings. She had visited Zeeland in early 1953 and advised that project funds be allocated there. The photographs suggest she unveiled a commemorative plaque during the visit. That plaque, shown in the photo collection, is now in the possession of the Zeeland North Sea Flood Museum under inventory number WNM0289.⁸

The delegation also included Mr. Roger Nordmann (1919–1972)⁹, the initiator of the successful Chaîne de Bonheur campaign, which raised funds via Swiss radio directly after the flood. He was awarded an honorary medal by the Groene Kruis in recognition of his contribution. The awarded medal appears to be unique, but exactly how unique remains unclear from the archive. Similar medals exist in the archive of the Museum for Nursing, but how often they were awarded, and whether that was decided regionally or nationally, is still unknown.

⁵ Other terms for the 1953 North Sea flood include in Dutch: Springvloed, St. Ignatiusvloed, Beatrix-vloed, Februari-ramp.

⁶ Chaîne de Bonheur is a Swiss non-profit organization that has been running solidarity campaigns since 1946. <https://www.bonheur.ch/collectes/toutes-les-collectes-de-1946-a-aujourd'hui/>, accessed June 20, 2024. It is a foundation that collects contributions for emergency assistance after catastrophes, including natural disasters in Switzerland and abroad, through radio and television broadcasts. See Maurer

2003. The Swiss Red Cross is one of the parties that takes the lead in the realization of the emergency assistance projects.

⁷ <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/visualisaties/prijzen-toen-en-nu>, accessed June 20, 2025.

⁸ Collection of the North Sea Flood Museum (Watersnoodmuseum), object WNM0289, <https://hdl.handle.net/21.12128/322539488> accessed December 3, 2025.

⁹ Mäusli 2006.

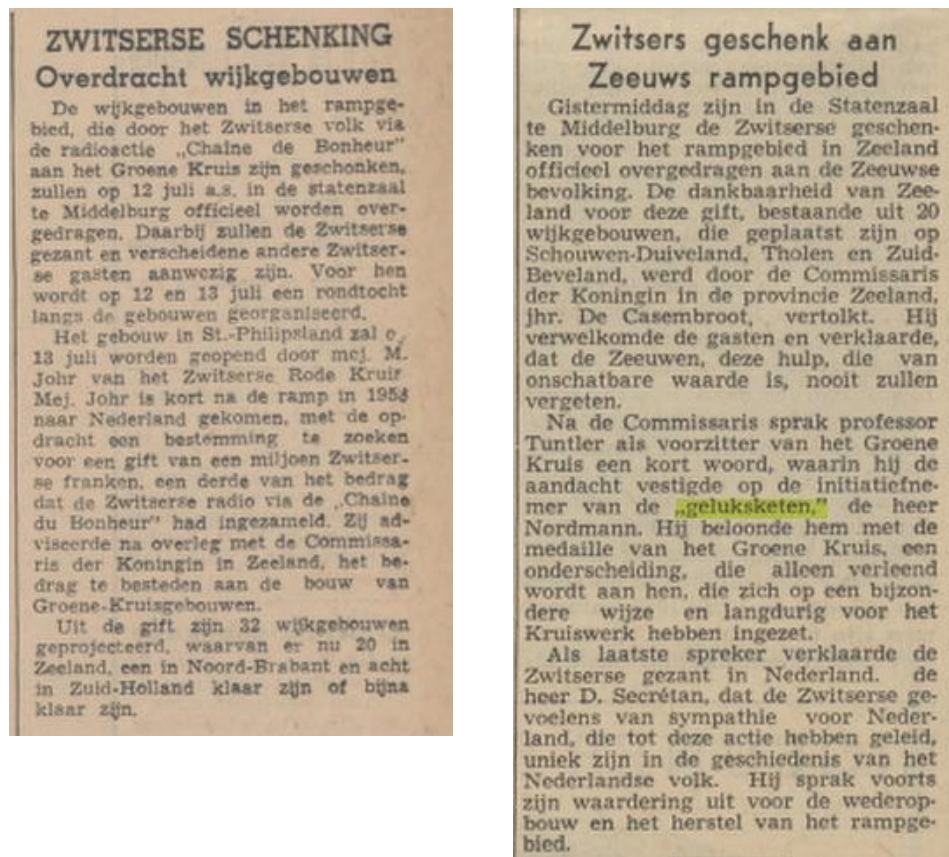


Figure 5: Two newspaper articles: one from Provinciale Drentsche en Asser Courant dated July 7, 1956, and one from *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* dated July 13, 1956.

Swiss Donation: Handover of Community Buildings (district nurse offices)

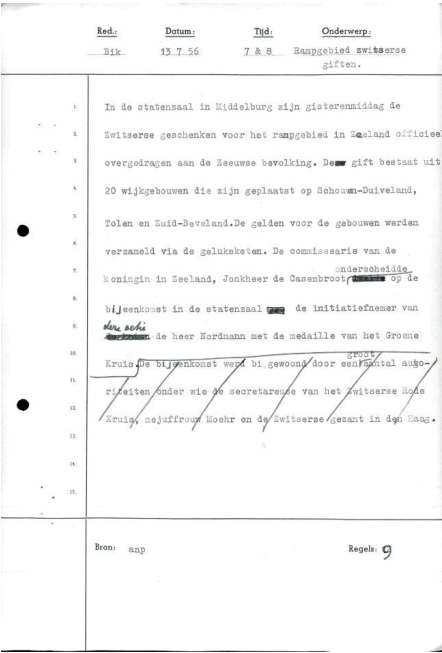
The community buildings or district nurse offices (wijkgebouwen) in the disaster area, donated by the Swiss people through the radio campaign Chaîne du Bonheur to the Groene Kruis, will be officially handed over on July 12th in the State Hall in Middelburg. The Swiss envoy and several other Swiss guests will be in attendance at the event. A tour of the buildings will be organized for them on July 12th and 13th. The building in Sint Philipsland will be officially opened on July 13th by Ms. M. Johr of the Swiss Red Cross. Ms. Johr came to the Netherlands shortly after the 1953 disaster, tasked with finding a purpose for a donation of one million Swiss francs – a third of the amount raised by Swiss radio through the Chaîne du Bonheur campaign. After consulting with the Queen's Commissioner in the Netherlands, she advised that the funds be used to construct Groene Kruis buildings.

From this donation, 32 community buildings were planned. Of these, 20 are now complete, or nearly complete, in Zeeland, one in North Brabant, and eight in South Holland.

Swiss Gift to the Zeeland Disaster Area

Yesterday afternoon, the Swiss donations for the disaster-stricken region of Zeeland were officially handed over to the people of Zeeland in a ceremony held in the State Hall in Middelburg. The gratitude of Zeeland for this gift – consisting of 20 community buildings, which have been constructed in Schouwen-Duiveland, Tholen, and Zuid-Beveland – was expressed by the Queen’s Commissioner in the province of Zeeland, Mr. De Casembroot. He welcomed the guests and declared that the people of Zeeland will never forget this invaluable assistance. After the Commissioner’s speech, Professor Tuntler, as chairman of the Groene Kruis, delivered a brief speech in which he drew attention to the initiator of the “chain of happiness”, Mr. Nordmann. He awarded Nordmann the Groene Kruis medal, a distinction granted only to those who have made exceptional and sustained contributions to the work of the Groene Kruis. As the final speaker, the Swiss envoy to the Netherlands, Mr. D. Secrétan, stated that the Swiss feelings of sympathy for the Netherlands, which led to this action, are unique in the history of the Dutch people. He also expressed his admiration for the reconstruction and recovery of the disaster area.¹⁰

Although many questions remain, the period in which the buildings were constructed is mentioned in various Dutch newspapers. For example reports from June 1954 states that Queen Juliana paid a two-day visit to the affected areas in the provinces of Zeeland, South Holland and West Brabant, during which she opened a Groene Kruis consultation center in Heiningen.¹¹ This news item received wide coverage in both national and regional newspapers with circulations that extended well beyond Zeeland. The hand-over of the district buildings (health centers) in 1956 and the Swiss delegation’s visit were reported widespread as well; not only in various national and regional papers, but also during the national radio (ANP) news bulletin of July 13, 1956. That bulletin reported on the first day of the visit with the following quote:



Yesterday afternoon, in the State Hall in Middelburg, the Swiss donations for the disaster area in Zeeland were officially handed over to the people of Zeeland. The donation consists of 20 district buildings located on [the islands of Zeeland] Schouwen-Duiveland, Tholen, and Zuid-Beveland. The funds for the buildings were raised through Chaîne de Bonheur. During the meeting, the Queen’s Commissioner in Zeeland, Mr. de Casembroot, presented the initiator of this effort with the Groene Kruis medal.¹²

Figure 6: A section of the bulletin that was crossed out, but was still legible, reads: “The meeting was attended by a large number of dignitaries, including the secretary of the Swiss Red Cross, Miss Joehr, and the Swiss envoy in The Hague.”

¹⁰ Newspaper clippings translated with the help of Le Chat Mistral.
¹¹ E.g. Het Binnenhof, June 22 1954
¹² ANP Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau (national radio broadcasting bulletin) July 13, 1956.



Figure 7: "Group in front of district building" (photographer unknown). Source: Dutch Museum for Nursing, photo G1535.

4 THE PHOTOGRAPHER AND THE UNKNOWN CONTEXT

Although the photos may not stand out in terms of composition or quality, this Lost & Found item is special as a whole. It provides a snapshot of a moment in time: the opening of district buildings that might otherwise be forgotten. The destructive power of the 1953 flood remains a dominant visual in public memory. The reconstruction afterward is largely symbolized by the immense dike protection works, known as the Delta Works. Beyond the Delta Works, however, many smaller reconstruction efforts are less well remembered. The flood occurred not long after World War II, and materials were scarce. Foreign aid was essential to rebuilding affected areas. The fact that district buildings were considered a priority and that the reconstruction was commemorated with plaques and medals shows how deeply embedded district nursing was in local health care and society.

The awarding of the honorary medal from the Groene Kruis was described in newspaper reports as unique and emphasized the special appreciation shown for the creation of these buildings, witnessed by a large and attentive audience.

This transforms the photo series entirely. What were initially seen as unremarkable images, unsuitable for exhibition due to artistic quality or unknown origin, suddenly become a cohesive photo report of the visit, consisting of no fewer than 49 photos.¹³ This places the photographer at the center of the story: Why were these photos taken? Was it a journalist who took them? A local amateur? Or was it an official commission? After all, film rolls and development were expensive. So who paid for them?

¹³ Museum for Nursing photos: G1527 to G1566, G1570, G1577, G1580 to G1583, G1585 to G1587.



Figure 8: "Group visiting district building", July 1956 (photographer unknown). Source: Dutch Museum for Nursing, photo G1561.

The series seems to suggest that someone accompanied the entire visit, but were there other journalists present? Was there a lot of press present, or was this photographer the only one? One of the photos appears to depict a radio interview, judging by the visible microphone. Yet research in the provincial Zeeland archives, the Delpher digital newspaper archive, and the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision (Beeld en Geluid) failed to provide the answer.

Closer study sometimes leads to answers and sometimes to new questions. It remains unclear exactly which islands and municipalities were visited. There are photos of a boat crossing, but from where? In one image, people are looking out from a dike toward the sea, but where exactly is this? Could one of the bus stops where the group gathers be the Coolsingel in Rotterdam? These details cannot be confirmed from newspapers and would require further research or local knowledge of Zeeland and Rotterdam. What is certain is that at least three different district buildings were visited, as these buildings can be identified and appear multiple times as background settings in different photos.

Given that no similar photos are found or stored in the Zeeland archives, and no photos like these were used in newspaper articles from July 1956, it is likely that the photographer was not a journalist. The assumption is that the photos were either taken by an amateur (and perhaps later donated to the Groene Kruis) or were taken by someone working for the Groene Kruis's PR or communications department. The latter seems more plausible, given the size of the collection and the high cost of photography at the time.

This hypothesis was tested by reviewing the summer 1956 issues of the Groene Kruis association's journal – with positive results. The July 1956 issue explicitly states:

Two activities have occupied our attention in recent weeks:

- A. The handover of Swiss buildings in Zeeland, South Holland, and North Brabant;
- B. The New Guinea campaign.

As for the first, it involved a few exhausting but very successful days. The goal of showing the Swiss what we did with their money and expressing our gratitude was completely achieved. We will elaborate on this in the next issue.¹⁴



Figure 9: "Group by bus on dike", July 1956 (photographer unknown). Source: Dutch Museum for Nursing, photo G1583.

The August 1956 issue provided the missing piece of the puzzle. Not only were several of the 49 photos published with location labels (Stavenisse, Sint-Annaland, Sint Philipsland, Nieuwe Tonge, and Herkingen), but it also confirmed that the two-day trip began by bus in Rotterdam and continued on the second day by police boat, made available by the province.¹⁵ The article describes the itinerary and the speeches, interwoven with memorable moments:

It was difficult to time these expressions of gratitude properly, which meant we were running late and arrived about an hour behind schedule in Sint-Maartensdijk. [...] The story may seem monotonous, but the reality was anything but; each place had its own unique atmosphere. A number of women wore traditional costumes from Thole [one of the Zeeland islands] and treated the delegation to all kinds of delicacies, including sausage buns [worstenbroodjes], a Zeeland specialty. For Mr. Bastiaanse, who played a major role in the realization of this building, it was a great satisfaction to be present, after consulting his doctor.¹⁶

Descriptions of the weather and anecdotal details about the group dynamics bring the story of the visit further to life: "Apart from the hazy sky and lack of sunshine, this was an impressive journey, one that was particularly beautiful for the Swiss visitors; a trip through the mouth of the Eastern Scheldt is

¹⁴ Hulpverlening 1956.

¹⁵ Inauguratie Zwitserse gebouwen 1956.

¹⁶ Inauguratie Zwitserse gebouwen 1956, p. 134.

¹⁷ Inauguratie Zwitserse gebouwen 1956, p. 135.

certainly worthwhile”, and “Along the way, some of the Swiss guests took turns driving [the bus], which caused much hilarity”.¹⁷

It was possible to identify some of the individuals in the photos from the newspaper articles. However, the article in the *Het Groene en Witte Kruis* journal resulted in several corrections to earlier assumptions. Specific individuals could be definitively identified through this piece. For example, the man holding a microphone turned out to be a member of the Swiss delegation and one of the original radio broadcasters from *Chaîne de Bonheur*, not a Dutch journalist, as previously assumed.



Figure 10: “Group visiting district building”, July 1956 (photographer unknown). Source: Dutch Museum for Nursing, photo G1551.

The speeches (partially reproduced in the article) reveal that the plan to build the 32 district buildings originated in consultation with Swiss donors to ensure a purposeful use of the money. In 1956, 20 buildings had been completed in the province of Zeeland, eight in the province of South Holland, and one in the province of North Brabant (in Klundert). The opportunity was used to improve the facilities: while the land for construction had been donated by local municipalities, the inclusion of public bath-houses in many of the buildings was a novelty that was strongly encouraged.¹⁸

All in all, the article demonstrates that the Swiss felt their money had been well spent, and the Zeeland community and the *Groene Kruis* organization expressed their gratitude in every possible way. Many of these buildings continued serving their purpose for decades and in some villages they are still maintained and are in use today.

¹⁸ Toespraak prof. Dr. J.H. Tuntler 1956, pp. 137.

5 CONCLUSION

Managing a heritage collection can be done in many ways and is never static. By studying objects more closely and adding (sometimes newly discovered) context, a new story can emerge that helps legitimize the significance of an object. This is no different for collections relating to the history of (district) nursing. The question of what constitutes a (nursing) object, and how this changes over time, is one historians ask themselves every day.

A good example is this photo series on the opening of district buildings (health centers) in 1956. At first glance, the photos are difficult to interpret in terms of time and context. Only the awarding of the honorary medal or the presence of a commemorative plaque offers a partial glimpse of the backstory. However, when additional material is consulted, in this case, relevant newspaper articles, a relatively unknown story emerges about the Swiss radio broadcasters, their campaign for Belgium, the Netherlands, and England, the solidarity fund *Chaîne de Bonheur*, and the enormous sum of money that led to the construction of 20 new district buildings in Zeeland.

It is particularly notable that 20 of the 32 planned district buildings were built and operational within three years. This took place only a few years after World War II, at a time when (construction) materials were scarce. The decision to allocate the funds to district health centers also sends a message about the role of district nursing in local health care.

The photo series as a whole can thus be seen as a form of documentary photography with considerable historical value. Although several newspapers wrote about the events, neither newspapers nor magazines published any photographs of the visit; only the *Groene Kruis*'s own journal featured these images. In producing this report, the national association of the *Groene Kruis* effectively deployed a powerful corporate identity tool to promote itself. The photos were not forgotten in storage; they have been well preserved to this day, but their interpretation and contextualization within the collection could have been better. This reinterpretation provides an opportunity to reposition all 49 photos and link them to the broader narrative of the North Sea flood of 1953.

In short, even within an existing collection, there are still many discoveries and (re)interpretations to be made in order to fully understand the story. New methods and insights continue to emerge and therefore these photos are a nice example of nursing history for Lost & Found. In this particular case, it would be possible to add international perspectives to obtain a full understanding of the historical encounter in 1956 between Dutch and Swiss authorities and representatives of health care organizations, like the Swiss Red Cross and the Dutch *Groene Kruis*. For this article, only the Dutch side of the story behind this photo collection was researched. For an exhibition or presentation online or on site to mark the 70th commemoration of the official opening in July 2026, the next step would be to explore Swiss archives for additional documentation of the event that took place in the province of Zeeland in 1956, so as to share these new insights into the founding of the district offices, some of which are still in place today.

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