

# Target Kortrijk

WW 2 - 1944 - CITY IN RUINS



KORTRIJK

# TARGET KORTRIJK

In 1944, Kortrijk came under heavy fire. The end of the Second World War was nearing and the Allies had hatched a plan to block German supply lines to Normandy. This was where the major landings would take place in June, and as the Allied soldiers advanced, any hindrance they encountered from the German opposition had to be reduced to a minimum.

All rail transport hubs had to be targeted, and this included Kortrijk station.

'Target Kortrijk' is a reminder of this time, when hundreds of pilots set off from England to bombard our city. The fact was that not all the bombs hit their target with precision. Over 400 victims perished. A great many buildings next to the station and the train tracks were destroyed. The Grote Markt was strewn with rubble.

This booklet shows you the parts of the centre devastated by this campaign.

## Here are some figures:

- Total number of buildings destroyed: 1,850, of which 1,625 were houses
- Total number of damaged buildings: 3,350, of which 3,000 were houses
- Victims that lost their lives during the bombardment of Kortrijk in 1944:  
26 March 1944 - 250 | 15 May 1944 - 2 | 10 May 1944 - 10 |  
21 July 1944 - 168
- Number of wounded during the bombardment of Kortrijk in 1944:  
18 March 1944 - 24 | 26 March 1944 - 116 | 10 May 1944 - 23 |  
15 May 1944 - 13 | 21 July 1944 - 100

# GROTE MARKT



*Views from the city hall in July 1944 reveal that all the buildings on the corner of Rijselsestraat and Grote Markt had been reduced to rubble.*

*The three towers are those of St. Martin's Church, the Belfry and the former Post Office building on the corner of Graanmarkt.*



# GROTE MARKT

## Cinema with no cellar

*When the film ended everyone had to head for the exit and stay calm. The doors remained shut until the air raid was over. The cinema had no cellar in which its patrons could shelter.*

The drama of the Rex cinema in Antwerp is well known. On 16 December 1944, almost 600 people were killed when a German V-2 missile hit the building... Seeking entertainment in wartime could have serious consequences. This was avoided in Kortrijk. The Royal cinema opened its doors in 1913 and was very popular with German military personnel during WWI. Film screenings also took place during WW2 but had to be halted in the event of an air raid. During the night from 20 to 21 July 1944, all hell broke loose in the skies above the city. Every building from Hotel Damier to the Royal cinema, up to Rijselsestraat was severely damaged or blown to bits. The devastation was catastrophic.

### Pathfinders

The main issue with the aerial bombings was their lack of precision. In 1941, a secret report revealed that just one in ten bombs dropped hit their intended target. This had to be improved. In 1942, the Brits began experimenting with the elite Pathfinder Force unit, which consisted of Mosquito combat aircraft that dropped target markers used to light up the target beforehand. The markers contained around 60 flares that brightly lit up the area for a few minutes.

Additional light flares or phosphorous flares in diverse colours completed the preliminary firework display. Soon after, the real bombers attempted to drop their deadly loads on the illuminated targets. People were naturally terrified by this method during the night raids. They knew that the 'light pots' (as they referred to the target markers) would soon be followed by deadly direct hits, the collapse of buildings and fires.

# LEIESTRAAT



## The fate of 't Katje pub

*“Oh dear, my stockings, my stockings”, moaned one of 't Katje's customers in the cellar.*

The devastation on the corner of Leiestraat and the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwestraat was terrible following the bombardment on Sunday 26 March 1944. A number of houses toppled one against the other, like dominoes, and collapsed. The owners and several customers of 't Katje pub, Leiestraat no. 2, got stuck in the cellar like rats caught in a trap.

Fortunately they were rescued, but only after calling out for help for quite some time. Before scrambling out of the cellar, one of the women stuffed her expensive nylon stockings in her handbag. You can see the façade of city hall on the left in the photo. After the war the corner house on Leiestraat was rebuilt a few metres further back from its original position, so that the entrance to Onze-Lieve-Vrouwestraat was wider.



*At Leiestraat 22-24 the impact of a bomb destroyed the Sarma, the first warehouse in Kortrijk. You can still make out the letters 'SA' in the photo.*

*The bombardment on 26 March 1944 razed a total of seventeen houses to the ground in this street.*



# HANDBOOGSTRAAT

## 't Fonteintje remains intact

*A beautiful stepped gable and anchors that reveal the year it was built, 1661. Only Het Fonteintje pub is still recognisable among the rubble. Did you know that there was once an actual water source in these cellars?*

The lowered banks of the Leie you see today provide no indication that until WW2 lots of houses stood here. The narrow Handboogstraat had buildings on either side, but no footpaths. The buildings visible on the left in the photo stood with their backs to the water of the Leie. The Pierre Tack brewery could be found on the same side, in the direction of the Leie Bridge.

The devastating events of 1944 reduced the entire neighbourhood to rubble. Therefore, the decision was taken to construct a car park here.

Het Fonteintje is one of the few buildings that survived the terrible destruction. Perhaps the small chapel in the façade had something to do with it?

### Bomber Harris

The man in charge of the Allied air strikes during WW2 was the Brit Arthur Harris (1892-1984), nicknamed Bomber Harris. He was a veteran of the First World War and fought in South Africa, Namibia, France, British India and the Middle East.

As of 1942, he sharply increased the number of bombers. The most famous carpet-bombing under his command was that of the night of 13 February 1945, targeting the German city of Dresden. A storm of fire released by 750 aircraft cost at least 250,000 people their lives at the time.



## The Broel Towers

*Bridges are always targets during wartime. The Leie Bridge and the bridge at the Broel Towers had already been destroyed in 1940. They were replaced by emergency bridges.*

## Final resistance

After the bombardments, the liberation began at the beginning of September 1944. The first jeep full of English soldiers drove into Kortrijk on 4 September, but encountered some resistance near the Broel Towers. Eight members of the resistance lost their lives in the shooting. In memory of this final deadly skirmish two memorial plaques were hung near the southern Broel Tower, and this side of the Leie was named Verzetskaai (Resistance Quay).





## ONZE- LIEVE- VROUWESTRAAT

### Escape in the nick of time

*When 21-year-old Honoré Verschoore heard the first bombs drop on Kortrijk during the night of 21 July 1944, he was petrified. He was imprisoned in the Mount of Piety (Berg van Barmhartigheid).*

The large building on the corner of Guido Gezellestraat was used as a city library. But during the German occupation it served as an extra prison for work refusers and other lawbreakers. Honoré found himself with dozens of other prisoners on the two floors of the building. Everyone was in a panic.

Suddenly, the door of the room burst open. Someone shouted: "Hurry boys, get out of here, quick!" The German prison guards had decided to abandon their post and the coast was clear. The prisoners managed to escape in between two night air raids. They later discovered that they had escaped death by the skin of their teeth, because the Mount had been hit during the second attack and had collapsed.



## The Church of our Lady

*During the bombardment on 21 July 1944, the north side of the Church of our Lady was hit particularly hard. The Counts' Chapel was also damaged.*

## Konventstraat

*You can already see it in the bend in the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwestraat at Konventstraat. These are all new buildings. In 1944, the damage here was devastating.*

### Hail Mary in French

Anyone that lived through the heavy bombardments of Kortrijk will never forget them. But what else could you do when the air raid siren sounded, except shelter in a cellar that was as sturdy as possible and tremble with fear? One witness, Pol Descamps, recalls how parents tried to reassure their children. But everyone knew things could end badly. Underground the cellars were often connected, so that if a building collapsed there was still a way out. The cellars were also reinforced. Did you know that the safest place in a cellar is underneath the stone steps?

Residents of Veldstraat organised a street committee that jointly purchased shovels, pickaxes and other digging material to have at the

ready in the event of an emergency. Everyone promised to help one another. Architect Caessens came up with the idea of marking who had a place and where on a map, so that nobody would be left behind during a search. Another clever precautionary measure involved preparing buckets of water and towels. This meant you could quickly get hold of a wet towel to place over your face, to cope with an excess of dust or smoke.

Many people turned to God, Our Lady, and the saints to beg for solace. One woman that was praying in her need discovered that it was not helping and the bombs continued to rain down. "Our Lady does not understand", she moaned. "Let us continue to pray in French!"



## Alarm

Official sources claim that the alarm was sounded in Kortrijk at least 557 times during the course of 1944. The worst disaster took place on Palm Sunday 26 March, the day devoted to communion celebrations. Many people had just enjoyed family gatherings to celebrate the occasion, when at around 9 p.m. a hundred bombers roared above the city for over 20 minutes. First they dropped 1,800 kg of target markers, followed shortly after by 472,200 kg of explosives in three successive waves. The entire district between Minister Tacklaan, Bruyningstraat and Marksesteenweg was wiped out. There were 250 fatalities. From then on many city residents headed to the surrounding villages every evening to spend the night there.

# GRAANMARKT

## Proud tower succumbs

Only the steeple of the neo-Gothic post office building on Graanmarkt, inaugurated in 1906, remained following the bombardment on 21 July 1944.

Kortrijk's prestigious post office building was built by the architect Pierre Langerock (1859-1923). Not only postal services were conducted here, it also housed the telegraphy service and telephone switchboard. These functions were previously based at the station, but had outgrown it. During WWI, thousands of postcards sent by soldiers had reached their destination via this post office building.

After 1945, there were calls for the valuable building to be restored, but the plan did not have much support. It wasn't until 1960 that a modern post office building was formally opened on the same site. It has already been replaced by a residential block.

In 1944, there was an SS recruitment office on the other corner of Graanmarkt.



## SCHOUWBURG- PLEIN

### Artwork lost forever

*"The Grote Hallen, Kortrijk's showpiece, are a crackling sea of fire", reports a fire chief.*

Schouwburgplein, currently a large open space for markets, concerts and other events, used to be home to a very large building, known as the Grote Hallen. It was built in the 16th century and for a long time served as a textile market. At the beginning of the 20th century, following comprehensive restoration work, the first floor housed Kortrijk's Museum of Archaeology and Decorative Arts.

Until Friday 21 July 1944, when a major air strike hit the building, transforming it into a mass of flames. Only part of the art collection could be saved.

The large painting 'The Battle of the Golden Spurs' by Nicaise De Keyser was lost forever.



# WATERPOORT

## Departed this life far from home

*You stood ready for battle, gathered a few men around you, formed part of the underground movement and gave it your all.*

Like lots of buildings in Kortrijk, the Banque de Courtrai et de la Flandre Occidentale, founded in 1873 and sponsored by the Société Générale de Belgique, was destroyed during the great bombardment on 21 July 1944. On Belgium's national holiday! A 40-45 memorial plaque in Hazelaarstraat commemorates three bank clerks, victims of WW2. They are Jean Mahaut, Jerome Josson and Frits Spriet.

Clerk Frits or Frédéric Spriet, died on 26 December 1944 in a concentration camp at the age of 35.

He was a resistance fighter, affiliated with 'de Weerstand' (the Resistance). Following his arrest, his wife Coralie Debusschere did not hesitate to take his place in the underground movement. His in memoriam card reads 'Long live King Leopold III – Long live Belgium!'



# STATION

## Train tracks completely destroyed

1944 was a disaster year for Kortrijk. Thousands of tonnes of bombs rained down on the city with the intention of obstructing the German transit.

The complete station area was hit so badly that people referred to it as the 'devastated regions'. The furniture company De Coene, on Weggevoerdenlaan, was hit several times. The villages of Marke and Bissegem also suffered major damage.

After the war, the railway lines had to be rebuilt quickly to help the economy back on its feet. The new station building opened its doors in 1956.



# CONSERVATORIUMPLEIN

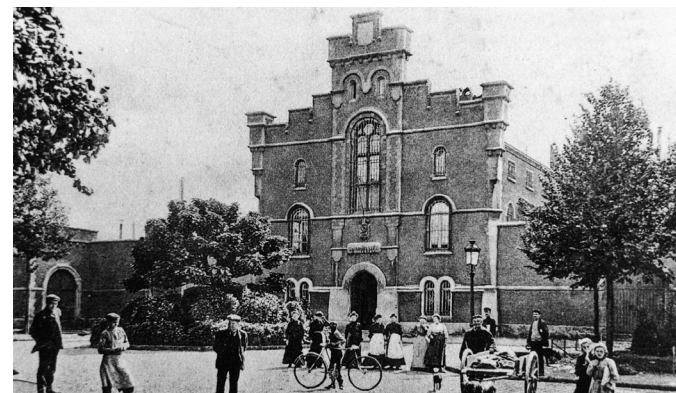
## Bodies ripped apart

*The narrow rooms increased the power of the air displacement tenfold. For the prisoners it was a nightmare.*

Kortrijk's city prison, built in 1854-56, was located close to the railway lines and the station. It was an extremely modern institution for its time and counted 110 cells. The façade looked out on to Casinoplein (see the photo below).

During the bombardment on 26 March 1944, the building was hit by seven bombs. The prisoners, tightly packed together, had no chance. Seventy-one dead were identified. Many bodies had been blown to pieces or literally crushed against the walls.

The cell occupied by Marcel Collez from Beselare was on the second floor. The impact blew off his cell door and he jumped down. After hastily freeing four other prisoners, he decided to flee.





# LOUIS ROBBEPLEIN

## Statue relocated

*In 1889, the statue of the animal painter Louis Robbe (1806-1887) adorned Kortrijk's prestigious Nieuw Kwartier, which begins at the station. This district, with lots of stately homes, stretches up to the courthouse.*

After the bombardment on 21 July 1994, the bust of the Kortrijk painter had been separated from its pedestal, and the immediate vicinity was severely damaged. Robbeplein forms the central point between Rijselsestraat, Koning Albertstraat, Roeland Saverystraat, Hendrik Consciencestraat and Koning Leopold I straat. On the photo you will recognise Rijselsestraat on the left and the top of Saint Martin's Church in the distance.

When it was reconstructed after the Second World War, the statue of Louis Robbe was moved to a new location on the side of Roeland Saverystraat. Savery (1576-1639) was a famous Kortrijk artist, just like Robbe.

## School's out

Bombs come in all shapes and sizes. On 18 March 1944, a heavy air mine weighing 2,000 kg, landed in a meadow behind Sint-Amandscollege.

It produced a deep crater in Burgemeester Vercruysselaan, where St. Martin's Hospital was later built. Water collected there for a long time.

As a result of the impact, all the windows of Sint-Amandscollege were blown out and the students were sent home for an indefinite holiday period.

Lessons did not resume until 13 October 1944.





## SAINT MICHAEL'S CHURCH

### Centuries-old statue is spared

*The residence of the Jesuit Fathers is a ruin, the church a glowing torch.*

During the night of 21 July 1944, most of the interior of Saint Michael's Church in Kortrijk was destroyed. The nave burned down completely and only with great difficulty did the firefighters succeed in preserving the library and the sacristy.

"Deo Gratia", stuttered the prior when he found the safe intact and could see that the centuries-old statue of Our Lady of Groeninge had been spared. The ivory artwork can still be found there.





## Rijselsestraat

*Viewed from the Grote Markt, a considerable part of the southern side of Rijselsestraat had collapsed during the bombing on 21 July 1944.*

*On the right-hand side you will recognise the tower of the former Stadswaag, which is home to the Petit Paris bar today.*

# THE LIBERATION

Following the landings in Normandy in 1944 and the Liberation of Paris in August, Kortrijk's residents hoped the Allied troops would reach them quickly. Their wait came to an end on 4 September 1944: when the first Allied troops drove into Kortrijk.

Lieutenant Walter Goodman and his driver James Bentis entered Grote Markt in Kortrijk unsuspectingly (see the photo on the rear), unaware of the historical significance of their action. In fact, they were on their way to Doornik (Tournai) and ended up in Kortrijk (Courtrai) by accident. Earlier that day the Municipal Council had convened once more and attempted to maintain order under the leadership of Mayor Mayeur.

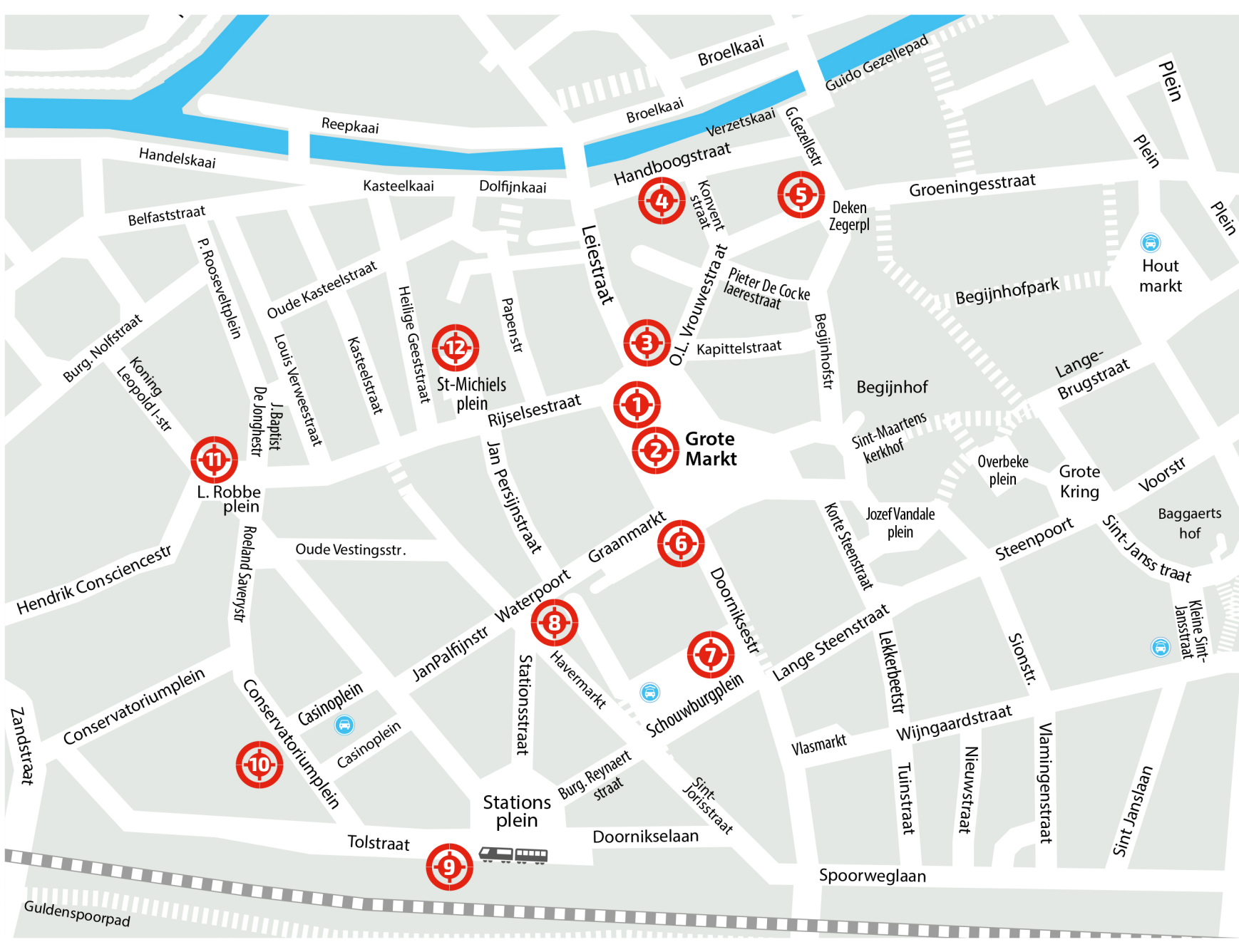
Nevertheless, not all the danger had passed. The following day a convoy of German soldiers entered the city and took control of several Leie bridges. Thanks to the Kortrijk resistance fighters' tenacity the Germans were forced back.

In the end the city was completely liberated on 6 September. After four long years of occupation, Kortrijk locals were able to move around a free city again.

On the first floor of the historic City Hall, as a silent witness, there hangs a photo of the remarkable and somewhat 'accidental' liberation by Lieutenant Walter Goodman.



*On 6 September the British tank units arrive in Kortrijk via Gentsestraat.*



Broelkaai

Guido Gezellepad

Handelskaai

Reepkaai

Handboogstraat

Verzetskaai

G. Gezellestr

Plein  
Plein

Belfaststraat

Kasteelkaai

Dolfijnkaai

Groeningesstraat

P. Rooseveltplein

Oude Kasteelstraat

Heilige Geeststraat

P. Rabenstr

Leijestraat

4

5

Deken Zegerpl

Begijnhofpark

Houtmarkt

Burg. Nolfstraat

Koning Leopold I-str

Louï Verweeststraat

Kasteelstraat

St-Michiels plein

Rijselsestraat

3

Pieter De Cockelaerestraat

O.L. Vrouwestraat

Begijnhofstr

Begijnhof

Lange-Brugstraat

L. Robbeplein

Oude Vestingsstr.

Jan Persijnstraat

1

2

Grote Markt

Sint-Maartenskerkhof

Overbekeplein

Grote Kring

Voorstr

Hendrik Consciencestr

Roeland Saverystr

Oude Vestingsstr.

Jan Persijnstraat

8

Waterpoort

6

Graanmarkt

Jozef Vandaleplein

Steenpoort

Sint-Jansstraat

Zandstraat

Conservatoriumplein

10

Conservatoriumplein

Casinoplein

Casinoplein

Jan Palfijnstr

Stationsstraat

Havermarkt

7

Schouwburgplein

Lange Steenstraat

Korte Steenstraat

Steenpoort

Sint-Jansstraat

Kleine Sint-Jansstraat

Conservatoriumplein

Casinoplein

Jan Palfijnstr

Stationsstraat

Havermarkt

7

Schouwburgplein

Lange Steenstraat

Korte Steenstraat

Steenpoort

Sint-Jansstraat

Kleine Sint-Jansstraat

Stationsplein

9

Burg. Reynaertstraat

Doornikselaan

Sint-Jorisstraat

Vlasmarkt

Wijngaardstraat

Vanningenstraat

Sint Janslaan

Spoorweglaan

Guldenspoorpad

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More info: [www.visitkortrijk.be/kortrijkinhetvizier](http://www.visitkortrijk.be/kortrijkinhetvizier)

Quench your thirst or satisfy your hunger in one of the many outstanding cafés and restaurants in Kortrijk. Indulge in a tasty snack on Grote Markt, relax on an atmospheric terrace on the lowered Leie riverbanks or sip a beer in the popular nightlife quarter. The choice is yours. See: [www.visitkortrijk.be](http://www.visitkortrijk.be)



## COLOPHON

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*Arrival of Lieutenant Walter Goodman and private first class James Bentis in Grote Markt on 4 September 1944.*