

Report

Estonian Students' History Competition for the President's Award

11th round

OUR COMMON HOME ESTONIA

The 11th competition “Our common home Estonia” was announced on Sept 1st 2009. The idea for this topic was offered during the round table discussion held after the 10th competition. History teachers supported the idea and the topic was finally worded during the Estonian History Teachers' Association summer days in August 2009 in Saaremaa. In September, an information booklet was published containing the terms and conditions of participating in the competition, and this booklet was sent to all Estonian schools. Information on the competition is also available on the Estonian History Teachers' Association web page which also provides guiding materials on how to write a research paper. These terms were used by the jury as the basis for assessment. On October 30th an information seminar was held in Tartu for the participants and their tutors where 89 participants (49 students and 40 teachers) were present. During the information seminar the general topic of the competition was explained, and recommendations for finding a narrower topic were given. Historians, museum and archive employees, history teachers who are experienced in supervising research papers all spoke at the seminar, giving advice.

121 entries from 144 students were sent to the competition – 48 papers came from the basic school level and 73 from the secondary school level. 55 basic school students and 89 secondary school students participated in the competition, and out of the total 144 participants 32 were boys. There were also 11 group papers.

43 schools were represented in the competition. 74 teachers from basic schools, secondary schools, special activity groups and schools supervised the papers.

Some conclusions from the jury:

1. Choice of the topic

As in previous years, the dominant themes were personal histories and family stories and the typical approach was comparing and contrasting the life of three generations. In biographical papers the focus was not only on the author's family members but also persons known either on the local or national level.

The second most popular theme this year was related to the various peoples living in Estonia (such as the Roma, Ingrains Finns, Russian Old Believers, Ukrainians, and others) and their integration into Estonian society.

Next to these themes there were also other and quite original single topics: *The past and present of Jägala manor as a military contingent base*, *Cafés of the town of Võru*, *Estonian schools almanacs*, *Mills of Tamsalu*, *Juvenile Crime*, etc. The participants said that the major influence on the choice of the topic came from their home and interest towards their local surroundings.

The research aims stretched from recording the past (writing down the memories of their family members) to changing the future (for example the aim was to help the amicable relations of the people living in Estonia, or to hamper inter-cultural conflicts).

2. Choice of materials and sources

Finding sources caused no problems to the young researchers. Similarly to previous years, **oral sources** were most popular and they were harnessed in most of the papers to quite a large extent. First and foremost, the family and acquaintances of the author – grandparents and parents, teachers, neighbours, occasionally also public figures – were interviewed. In order to interview them there were questionnaires of various quality (some very thorough and detailed) prepared for the interviews. It is praiseworthy that many very interesting interviews were also added as appendices to the papers, and therefore they can be used by other researchers in the future.

The larger part of **written primary sources** was formed by family related manuscripts, but also materials from school archives, and letters.

The most part of **visual sources** were photographs that indeed are invaluable representations of everyday-life that demonstrate the details that written history sources sometimes fail to convey. Mostly, the photos used had only an illustration value, but

some were also successfully presented as historical evidence that was paired with relevant explanations. To give an example, there were photographs of a choir that eloquently mirrored the development of financial possibilities in the re-independent Estonia as it was shown how the choir's performance dress changed from the humanitarian aid black and white combinations to outstanding performing attire. As a novelty this year, some authors used posters as written sources in their research. Compared to previous years, the use of literature had diminished considerably, and the proportion of using the Internet had risen even further.

3. Composition and interpretation

Compared to previous competition entries the structure of the papers has become more problem-centred and structures following the life stages of the person portrayed have become fewer. A new trait this year was building up ones paper using a previous paper on a similar theme as a model. In a number of cases the paragraphs were not proportionate to each other, the shortest paragraph being only half a page long. However, it was a real pleasure to read thorough introductions that often also explained the author's choice and use of terminology.

It can be said that the research papers that applied comparing various sources also gave quite successful results. For example, a written document was analysed side by side with the contemporary oral opinions, or written documents of the same type from various time periods were compared to one another, the information from an oral source was confirmed by adding a photograph, etc.

Wording the text has become better over the years and in general it is quite good. Only a few papers merely reported a person's memories word-for-word.

Overall, the use of language was good, and expressions not suitable for research papers occurred only on a few occasions and these cases can be linked to the minimal editing of the interviews. Youthful expressions of emotion such as *boldly upholding freedom* in itself do not constitute a flaw, but can be considered as more of a characteristic of a different style.

The formatting of the research entries was quite good and it is noteworthy that many papers were nicely edited and used versatile illustrations (photos, historical maps, etc).

However, there were still a number of papers lacking the keyword, and some were submitted as loose pages.

Conclusion

Not all papers can become the winners of the competition; however, all authors did win. Many authors mentioned in their papers that they had gained new knowledge by taking on their research. One true history researcher even claimed that *every bit of information gathered for the paper made him happy*. The students mentioned that now they have learned to work better in a group, manage their time, and analyse sources and the media. And what is exceptionally positive is that according to the students this year's topic helped them to develop friendly relationships with others groups in society and gave them a positive experience for building their joint home of Estonia.

Tiiu Ojala
Viivi Rohtla
coordinators

09.06.2010