

The Federal President´s History Competition Results of the 18th competition 2002/2003 in Germany

Report

»Departing - Arriving. Migration in History« was the title of the 18th competition of the German Federal President´s History Competition. It focused on the migration experiences from the 16th century up to the present. Why did people leave their home? What were their decisive hopes, wishes and fears? How were people welcomed and received? Off the beaten tracks of political discussion about the role of Germany as an immigration country the topic offered the chance to give migrants a voice and to understand their biographical backgrounds. And the competition asked for successful and failed examples of integration. The theme and task tried to include all the different forms and aspects of migration in German history: Emigration, immigration of foreign workers, remigration of ethnic German settlers, flight and escape during the World Wars, expulsion and deportation. All schools in Germany were provided with the competition magazine "SPUREN SUCHEN" presenting examples for migration processes, an overview of possible questions and practical recommendations for teachers and students.

The response has been enormous. 8 632 participants between 8 and 21 submitted 1 902 papers. This set a new record comparing the cycles of the last ten years and takes the third place behind »National Socialism« (1980/1981) and »Monument: Remembrance – Reminder- Provocation« (1992/93) in the competition´s history since 1973. Another result is that theme selection has an effect on the age-group distribution. As the competition »Protest in history« (1998/1999) has been dominated by the group of 15 years and older and the cycle »Animals in history« (2000/2001) has been more supported by the students younger than 14 years »Migration in history« is obviously an issue that found interest in the group between 12 and 17 years.

What were the main topics, which aspects found a particular interest? The thematic feedback to the competition extended from emigration to America, flight and escape from the former German Democratic Republic of Germany, the fate of Jewish emigrants and displaced forced labours during National Socialism, immigration of Southern European foreign workers from 1950 – 1970, love affairs between people from different countries up to reconstructed life traces of missionaries.

One issue found greater attention: Flight and expulsion. Over 500 contributions – more than a quarter of all received papers – dealt with the flight and expulsion phenomena during the Second World War. At first glance an astonishing result that can be explained by the priorities of the participants. The first steps of investigation lead many young researchers to their direct social environment – their own family. Many parents and grandparents are deeply characterized and formed by their personal flight experiences. A sixth class girl: »The work for the competition was a chance for me to hear about the history of my relatives, especially of my great-grandmother and grandparents. Up to that point I knew nearly nothing about it. And my grandmother said that talking to me helped her by overcoming her experiences.« For a long time flight and expulsion has been a taboo in the public discussion in Germany. The young researchers made very careful approaches

to the topic and did not appear restricted by ideological blinkers. And in comparison to their parents they belong to a generation that has a greater biographical distance and a more open access to the fate of their grandparents. Nevertheless the recent more open-minded public discussion with this painful chapter of post-war history might have contributed to the fact that parents and tutors encouraged young people to participate in the competition.

The desire to do research in the own family touched another important group of students – young people with a Russian-German family background. These young researchers are often children of ethnic German settlers from Russia and Kazakhstan (called “Ausssiedler” or if they arrived in Germany after 1990 called “Spaetaussiedler”), direct descendants from German settlers who were invited by the Russian Tsarina Katharina 2nd from Russia during the 18th century. More than 4 million “Aussiedler” are now living in Germany. Even though they form almost the greatest group of migrants they are comparatively unknown in the public. If mentioned in media the reporting is often related with cases of drug abuse, crime and violence. More than 360 students used the competition as a forum to inform about their origins and current situation. An eighteen-year old Russian-German girl from Leipzig made a survey within her class: »It is typical that many students are unsure how to assess the Russian-Germans. The majority see us simply as Russians. They haven't a clue about our history.«

Avoiding to be realized as German-Russian many children do not declare themselves for their family background. This put many into a state of uncertainty as they - on the other side - do not feel accepted as “normal Germans”. Their research within the competition helped to clarify their own identity. At the end of her report a twelve-class girl wrote: »If you really have the will to be integrated and accepted as a German, there is no reason to deny yourself or your family origin. I have no choice but to live within two cultures and be a Russian-German.«

Looking for the own roots and identity and the desire to let other people participate in migration experiences may have been key motivations for the competition. In schools a lot of teachers used the competition as an opportunity to investigate different lifelines and cultural backgrounds. In more than 50 projects students reported their family stories and explained their origins. A long experienced tutor summed it up: »These projects form a basis for confidence between cultures and enhance solidarity in the classroom.

Most of the participants dealt with questions around the understanding of home: What is home? Where is home? What does home mean for the individual? »Home is often characterized by nationality but can be the place where you are well treated and warmly welcomed as well.« remarks a student. Many realized that human contacts are the best way to build up a feeling of closeness to a place. These contacts to local people were often enabled by social and religious organizations that function like a market place for the integration of new arrivals. But still, this has been often remarked by participants, it needs in most cases a long time until migrants feel familiar or socially integrated.

All in all the competition has enabled young researchers to bridge the gap to other cultures and personal fates and to develop a feeling for the importance of migration as an integral component of our own history in Germany.