

**Sixth Polish History Competition
- Historia Bliska -**

**“Stranger among Familiars – Experience of the 20th Century”
2001 / 2002**

Report

The topic of the sixth Polish competition in the History at Hand programme was: “Stranger among familiars – experience of the 20th century”. The topic was announced in June 2001. It was considered to be more abstract and more difficult than previous topics in the past five years when our competition had been organised.

There were neither any restrictions regarding particular dates, periods, events – on one side, nor any social, ethnic or religious groups – on the other. We wanted to give more freedom to the youth taking part in the competition, to let them look for their own definition of “strangeness” and “familiarity” in the 20th century Poland. Our idea was to make young people aware of diversity of roots, which influenced our identity. We also expected their critical approach toward often-repeated stereotypes about uniformity or homogeneity of the society we build.

What we expected in the first place as a response to the topic, was youth’s interest in the situation of national, religious and cultural minorities in Poland. In fact, most of the works submitted dealt with strangeness of Poles among Germans, Russians and Ukrainians – and vice versa (which is understood in the context of Polish history). In many other works another problem was presented: Jews, Gypsies, Tatars, Eastern Orthodox, Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses and other minorities were presented as “strangers” among the Polish majority.

But apart from this historical approach that fulfilled our expectation, we received many interesting papers whose authors took a rather sociological and psychological perspective. To this category we could count these works that dealt with problems of homeless, handicapped, blind, elderly and dying people, but also such “strangers” as youths subcultures, contemporary migrants, artists, repatriates, forced labourers, internees, refugees...

Our task was to decide how this latter perspective should be treated in our historical competition. We decided to accept this approach on the condition that all other criteria are fulfilled. Thanks to that, and without changing any rules, we could appreciate the work of all those pupils and teachers who understood our topic in a wider sense.

Until 10 February, the deadline for submitting research papers, we received 473 works (242 individual and 231 group). Altogether there were 890 pupils who took part in the competition. They represented 288 schools from 165 Polish departments/provinces. Approximately one fourth of the papers were sent from Gymnasiums (lower secondary schools after educational reform of 1999). We have not changed any criteria of judgement for this works of 13 – 15 years old pupils. Nevertheless we took into consideration possibilities of this age group. Most pupils from Liceums (upper secondary schools) who were engaged in the competition were 18 –19 years old. In both groups girls were dominant – 617 of them took part in our contest.

Even though we received not as many papers as in the previous years, the general level of the competition was higher. That caused of course stronger rivalry among participants. There were not many papers that contained short essays referring only to history textbooks – most works were based on pupil's individual research. The most common research method was interview with potential "strangers", but also with representatives of "familiar" to investigate their attitude to the former. Such interviews were usually completed with studies of photographs and documents. Copies of the latter were usually attached to the works. Some pupils tried to conduct a poll among those whose opinions they wanted to research. However it cost a lot of effort to prepare and distribute questionnaires, this method gave rather less interesting effects than interviews.

Some works included a lot of materials – long and thorough interviews, many questionnaires, files of documents and photographs. All of that was not enough to give the author a prize, unless his individual, critical approach was evident. We stressed and consequently required it from the very beginning, that we expect individual attitude, own opinion and research: just gathering information – albeit extraordinary – was not enough to be appreciated in the competition.

Several works were presented in the form of VHS films. Only in a few cases pupils managed to take advantage of this difficult technique. However among those who succeeded were the winners of the first prize. Their film has documentary as well as artistic values. Some pupils prepared also multi-media presentation or attached digital version of their paper work. Apart from very few exceptions pupils have not treated the form of their work as more important than its merit.

As far as the qualitative generalisation could be done, it must be stressed that a considerable majority of young participants got deeply engaged, intellectually as well as emotionally, in the work they had completed. Many young researchers started their work – we think so – with a false assumption that each "difference" means or leads to "strangeness". Or even that each particular human being is under specific conditions, somewhere, at some time, a stranger. After the research and its intellectual evaluation it turned out, that it does not have to be always true. In their conclusions many participants of this year competition expressed their concern about tolerance, about bridging gaps between "us" and "them". This educational aspect of the competition is of crucial importance not only to us, the organisers, but also to the authors and, in further perspective, to the openness of the society they not only participate in, but also generate. We are convinced this is one of the most important outcomes of this year's competition.

Another outcome is much easier measurable. The collection of 473 competition papers give us, and all who will be interested in the subject, broad perspective on the Polish history of the 20th century, or to be more precise – unique perspective of different aspects of strangeness in contemporary history of this part of Europe.

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