

Ninth Polish History Competition
“Everyday Life at the Breakthrough 1944-45”
2004/2005

Report

The competition was announced as part of the “History at Hand” Program by the Stefan Batory Foundation and the KARTA Center in June 2004. The competition final coincided with the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II, and the intention of its organizers was to inspire young people to investigate that period, especially through the accounts of eyewitnesses — the passing away generation.

A total of 549 works (266 group and 283 individual ones) authored by a total of 1060 pupils (of which more than 76 percent were girls!) were sent from 252 schools in 155 localities in Poland. Nearly 35 percent of the works were sent from junior high schools (youth aged 13-15), and more than 65 percent from high schools (youth aged 16-19); 11 percent of all works come from schools taking part in the competition for the first time. Compared to the previous year, the number of works increased some 47 percent, and the number of participating pupils more than 48 percent. It happened due to the apparently easier (as we think) subject — pertaining to the history that can be investigated through the accounts of not only eyewitnesses (which is always most attractive) but also the eyewitnesses from the close environment, e.g. family — which seems to be the easiest.

This year’s subject, however, has turned out to be very difficult. On the one hand, it applied to everyday life — whose scope seems to be broad and diversified — but not always easy to specify, on the other hand — it excessively narrowed the time of historical exploration. This not only required great discipline on the part of young researchers, but also often exceeded the capabilities and willingness of history eyewitnesses to sort out their recollections or assign events to a specific time. Especially when it was to be determined by the “breakthrough nature” (and not “uniqueness” or “tragic nature”). For this specific reason, many works did not meet the basic criterion of evaluation, which the “consistency with the subject of the competition” was.

The difficulties of the topic is reflected in the groups of subtopics. Some works

- covered the whole period of World War II, frontline or guerilla fighting, and wartime trails of family members;
- described hardships of life in exile in Kazakhstan or Siberia starting from 1940, in the Jewish ghetto in 1941, or the Polish-Ukrainian relations in 1942–1943;
- showed “undated” everyday life — abstracted from the specific time assigned in the competition — e.g. “everyday life” in a concentration camp in an unspecified year;
- described an “ahistoric” reality — rural customs unchanging for generations, religious or family holidays presented in a manner that made it impossible to assign them to the period of the years 1944-45. Sometimes in such cases the authors seemed to have arrived at an important (or even revealing!) conclusion that some spheres of everyday life did not change — in spite of the tragic and changing conditions brought by the war and its dramatic end. But this conclusion called for its conscious expression and strong support with a source analysis.

In view of the above — even though sometimes the works were based on a great number of interesting and valuable, well-elaborated and excellently presented sources — the Jury had to either reject them entirely (as inconsistent with the subject of the competition), or evaluate

them much below their objective value because of their marginal treatment of the relevant subject of the competition.

Speaking with eyewitnesses who were children (sometimes very small ones) at the end of the war made the authors of the works often assume exactly such — childish — perspective of the events being described. Instead of verifying (sometimes incredible or fragmentary) stories in other sources, they entered into or played the roles of their heroes, trying to invent the ending of their story or give it an artistic expression. An exceptionally large number of works was in the form of fictional letters, memoirs, or played genre scenes — yet these attempts were seldom successful, in spite of sometimes tremendous efforts of their authors, visible also in a perfect, laborious form.

Therefore, the greater the satisfaction that so many pupils have lived up to the challenge of showing history not through wartime battles or reprisals, but exactly through everyday life. The life in villages, cities, and small towns — through which not only fronts moved but also their reality was changing — as was changing the rule (German, Soviet, Polish...) and its regulations.

They showed:

- how people lived on ruins and rables deprived of everything that is needed for life;
- how they had to — often being forced to do so — leave their homes and, after a long and often dramatic journey, enter “alien” places deserted by other people in equally dramatic circumstances;
- how they organized public order, schools, transport, postal services, offices, cinemas and theatres, or sports events anew;
- how they tried to get a flat, a job, food, water and clothes, newspapers and entertainment;
- how they loved, married, cherished family life, brought up children, celebrated holidays, cultivated traditions...

The descriptions sometimes focused on one walk of life or family history, but on other occasions on the situation of entire cities occupied by the changing enemy, defended in frontline struggles, conquered, destroyed, looted, rebuilt, and, then, settled and organized anew. A full panoramic view of “everyday life” in “unusual” time was shown.

A two-stage Jury analyzed and evaluated the works during three months of a very intensive procedure. The Nominating Jury consisted of 13 historians — employees and associates of the KARTA Center. The ultimate division of prizes was determined by the Final Jury composed of Professors: Anna Radziwiłł, Hanna Świda-Ziemba, Zbigniew Gluza, Jacek Kochanowicz, Andrzej Paczkowski, and Tomasz Szarota.

A total of 12 group prizes and 7 individual ones on levels I, II and III, and 18 group distinctions and 10 individual ones on level I (monetary ones) — were awarded to a total of 114 finalists. As well as 62 individual and group distinctions on level II in the form of books mailed to 121 winners. Thus, a total of 235 authors of 109 works were awarded.

Thirteen prizes were awarded to teachers supervising the works, and distinctions to the remaining supervisors of the awarded and distinguished works.

During the final ceremony held in the Grand Hall of the Royal Castle in Warsaw on June 9, 2005 the subject of the next, 10th jubilee competition was announced:

“Religious Life in the Polish People’s Republic — Individual, Community, Institution.”

Alicja Wancerz-Gluza

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