PROJECT HARVESTING

Seniors' fourth meeting at the Kilingi-Nõmme Club House on the 29 April 2009.

Number of participants: 13

Mari gave an overview of what she had heard and seen at the European Cultural Village 2009 opening conference at Tommerup.

• **Current year is the year of elections in Estonia**: at the beginning of June elections of the European Parliament will be held and in autumn we will vote for local authorities. That is why we decided to recall and compare the changes concerning elections throughout the years.

> *Rista, ´I was 17 when I voted three times during the same elections. (As today during the Soviet times people aged 18 and older are eligible to vote). I was a student. Polling station was 3 km away, not everybody cared to go there. But I felt like going, so I voted instead of them.´*

Which are the differences between the elections to the European Parliament and to the Supreme Soviet of that time? How very well did we know the Soviet-time candidates, how much do we know about the members of the European Parliament we voted for?

> *Rut, ´Today we vote for parties. During the Soviet times we had no choice, there was only one candidate appointed by the authorities.´*
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> *Jaago, ´At first there were several candidates proposed – comrade Stalin - the first on the list and then somebody else´s name. Everybody voted for Stalin and then he himself decided which town to represent. Everywhere else the second person on the list won. This all happened at the beginning of the 1950-ies.´*
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> *Ada, ´As a matter of fact people don´t have much of a chance to express their opinion. Lists of parties are voted for to the European Parliament, not people. The first candidates on those lists are the leaders of the parties or just famous people to catch more votes. They may not even consider becoming a member of the parliament.´*
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> *Jaago, ´ Well, those people we have elected to decide have decided so. This is being afterwise if we say that they all are making wrong decisions. It means that next time we should be cleverer while voting.*

As for the elections of the European Parliament, it would be interesting to know how our politicians representing opposite parties and fighting for power, will be able to work together for the greater good at the European Parliament.

• **Elections to local authorities** (first Soviet, now local municipal or parish-) are totally different.

> *Rut,´ In the Soviet times everything had been decided by the party long before the elections. Once upon a time I was working in a factory and it was known that the*

candidate had to be young, female and a worker. But it happened that people started doubting why this very person and suggested their own candidates. The whole thing turned into a big scandal. The candidate had to be the same person the Communist Party had appointed and nobody else. Everything had been planned beforehand in detail.´

The lists of the candidates were fixed in the sense that whoever was put on the list also became the member of the council. Even this was fixed: how many of the candidates had to be the members of the Communist Party, how many had to belong to the Young Comunist League or be Heroes of Socialist Labour. To create an illusion of democracy, even the percentage of non- Party persons was notified.

Jaago, ´But there was always a chance to cross out the name of the candidate and ruin the voting paper.´

Reet, ´In some cases a mark was made on an envelope where voting paper was enclosed. Code of the voter was written on the envelope with a sharp pencil. So the mark remained on the voting paper as well. Each of the voting papers was in a separate envelope. The envelope was opened by a member of the voting board and then it was clear who had ruined the voting paper. An enormous trouble could arise from it.´

Today we have many candidates and only some of them will be elected. On the election day there are special programmes on TV reporting the results of the elections as well as showing discussions, interviews with the politicians etc.

Propaganda was popular both in the Soviet times and today. Agitation back then was of course purely Soviet propaganda which really had no meaning for people. To make sure everybody voted, so-called agitators vistited homes to force people to go and vote.

Vella, ´ When I was young I didn´t know that one had to vote for sure, and on my first elections I went to my aunt´s place. So those agitators had come every once and a while to see whether I had returned. They coulnd´t close the polling station before everybody had voted. So, a few minutes before closing time a car had been sent for my father and he went and voted instead of me. First-time voters were given a flower but I´m not sure my father got one.´

Jaago, ´In those days only few people didn´t vote. Their names were known and a few minutes before closing polling stations somebody voted in their name. And the members of the election committee didn´t fill their own voting papers till the last minute in case some of those last-comers would have appeared. The number of the votes in the box had to match exactly the number of eligible voters. Depending on whether it did or not, the polling committee was either praised or punished. Everybody knew and accepted it. Nobody complained, there was nobody to complain to.´

To attract people to vote the government organised all kind of festivities and concerts. Goods which were ususlly hard to find were sold in the polling stations and shops. To get people out of their homes,cinemas showed films for free. People remember this until today.