

## Time Travel at Tallinn School No 8, Estonian SSR in 1986

### Facts

After the Russian revolution Estonia declared its independence from Russia in 1918, an independence lasting for 22 years. The Second World War was a disaster for Estonia. In 1940 the Soviet troops conquered the country, in 1941 the German troops and in 1944 the Russians came back and “liberated” the country. Estonia was annexed as a part of the Soviet Union. The Communist Party took gradually over as the leading power in the society. Serious repression followed including deportation of tens of thousands of Estonians, ideological propaganda, russification and certainly new history textbooks to make people forget the old concept. The economic system changed, many people lost their private property, collective farms - *kolchozes*, were introduced, and the industrialisation increased. The contacts with the western world were drastically cut off and the “iron curtain” was raised. Some connection with the western world still remained, but in a very cautious way. In the mid-1980s the Soviet Empire was facing many challenges and a movement for Estonian autonomy started, first for economic independence but very soon for political independence as well. The Estonian language and culture came into focus for those who wanted a change.

The star political event of 1986 was the 27<sup>th</sup> USSR Communist Party Congress in February. It was announced that every family would have a house or an apartment of their own by the year 2000. The serious warning concerned provincialism and nationally based separatism. The first secretary of the Estonian Communist Party Karl Vaino complained in his speech at the congress that Estonia stood on the frontline of imperialist propaganda and provocations.

At the end of April of that year the explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear power station took place but the people were not informed. Many people in Tallinn heard about it though thanks to the Finnish TV.

### The school system in 1986

Most of the children in Tallinn schools at that time joined the so called October kids in primary school, became pioneers in the fourth or fifth form – both of them political organisations to prepare the children for becoming communists. Having finished the basic school, they joined the Young Communist League, *comsomol*. Being a member of the youth organisation made it easier to go to secondary school, i.e. forms 9 to 11. Every school had a Communist Party local organisation, supervised by the secretary and the pioneer organisation was supervised by the pioneer leader.

Quite often Lenin’s words - *To learn, to learn, to learn!* - or a quotation from the national epic *Kalevipoeg* - *Knowledge is worth more than a treasure-trove of silver or loads of gold* - decorated some of the school walls. Portraits of Lenin and since 1985 Gorbachov were also obligatory at least in some rooms.

In **history** the greatest attention was paid to the battles of the Great Patriotic War (the Soviet name for the Second World War) In **art** the topic of Space flights dominated, especially in 1986 when the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Gagarin’s space flight was celebrated and in January the same year the US space shuttle Challenger perished with eight people on board. In **music** studies songs like “Lenin our Father” and songs to celebrate the Communist Party were obligatory. **Economic geography** made it clear to the pupils how the capitalist countries and their economies were degenerating and Soviet economy prospering. In **military training** classes the dangers of the nuclear war were talked about. The pupils had to know all the Soviet Army ranks by heart, train to pull the gas masks on at speed, assemble and dismantle the sub-

machine gun kalashnikov (AK-47) within given time, learn to shoot air-guns. The nightmares of many a child concerned a nuclear war.

One of the popular methods of ideological upbringing was **meeting the war veterans**. There were compulsory visits to classes and some pupils visited the veterans and interviewed them.

Secondary school pupils had to be guards of honour at the monument to the Soviet soldiers – the so-called bronze soldier – on Tõnismägi. As officially it was dedicated to the liberators of Tallinn, this duty was very much against the grain for Estonian pupils.

Teachers differed. The so-called keen communists were rather an exception, there were some quite liberal teachers, not afraid to express their opinion in class. The great majority were just cautious, trying to keep their pupils in harness and not let them express their teenage rebelliousness.

Some pupils seemed to be interested in green ideology, vegetarianism, pre-Christian religions, horoscopes etc. The opportunity to oppose was demonstrated in costumes – punks, heavy metal, hippies. Patriotic songs were sung and small blue, black and white flags were scribbled on notebook margins.

The Time Travel will be held in school number 8 on former Karl Marx Avenue in North Tallinn. This part of Tallinn has still retained much of its soviet past and a Russian population.

### **Scenario, At Tallinn School No 8, 4 June 1986**

School No 8 of Tallinn is a remarkable school seen as a model in organisation and education.

The school team has several times won the patriotic military game Pouaväik (heat lightning) and the school has a very active Nations Friendship Club.

Today is a very special day. Guests from many neighbouring regions and countries have been invited, teachers and educators from Latvian SSR, Asebaijan SSR, German DR, Finland, Sweden, Ireland and others. The guests will take part in the classes and hopefully get a good and positive idea of how this model school is run. And of course be inspired to do something similar in their own schools.

But this year 1986 has brought a lot of confusion. There are many rumours in Tallinn and when people travel they hear even more news. People talk about changes in the society. Quite many emphasize the Estonian culture and the importance of the Estonian language and traditions. The Estonian flag is painted in many a student's book. And some teenagers dress almost like hippies or punks.

The Soviet leaders talk about imperialist provocations and they give serious warnings concerning provincialism and separatism.

Rumours and tensions, silent talk and loud voices, everybody understands that there are changes in the air. What is happening in Tallinn and in other parts of the Soviet Empire? In the schools? For most persons the discussions and rumours create confusion. What is our way for the future? Can we do anything ourselves? Many fear the possible violence.

But today is a day of celebration at Tallinn School No 8. The director and the teachers of the school hope that everything will go smoothly. And that the celebrations and classes won't be disturbed by any provoking discussions or arguments. The guests will be very well taken care of.

## **Key questions**

- Are we moving towards a change in the society? In the Estonian SSR? In neighbouring regions or countries? Why? In what way? What kind of changes can be observed in everyday life or in the schools?
- What is our way in a process for a new Estonia? In the other Soviet regions? What is my contribution? Or is the best way to stay calm and stick to the established society?

## **Roles**

Foreign visitors (mostly teachers and educators from the Soviet Union and Soviet-friendly countries)

Teachers (some from the local school, some from other schools in the district)

Director of the school, deputy head, other school staff

Communist Party local organizer

Leader of pioneers

Officials from the Ministry of Education

Parents, Students (about 40)

## **Activities**

- Visiting classes of military training, literature, history, drawing (art), Russian and taking part in class activities
- Prepare performances on the culture of the own country
- Make posters

## **Time plan**

09.00 Transportation to the school

09.15 Preparations

09.45 Time travel begins with an assembly in the hall

10.00 First class

10.20 Break

10.25 Second class

10.45 Break

10.55 Third class

11.15 Lunch break (soup and dessert, a typical school lunch in 1986)

11.45 Assembly in the hall (speeches, local pupils' performance, foreign visitors' performance, round dance and a party)

13.15 Time Travel ends

Reflections

14.30 Back in the centre of the town

1 June 2011, Estonia

A team at Tallinn City Museum and Bridging Ages