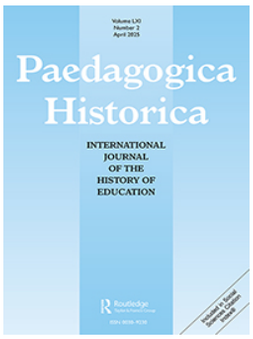

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International Journal of the History of Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cpdh20

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To cite this article: Antti Malinen & Mervi Kaarninen (2025) Safety between the lines – the role, meaning and practice of pen-pal writing in the life of a young Finnish evacuee girl (1939–1945), Paedagogica Historica, 61:2, 228-246, DOI: 10.1080/00309230.2023.2293737

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2023.2293737

Published online: 03 Jan 2024.

PAEDAGOGICA HISTORICA
2025, VOL. 61, NO. 2, 228–246
https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2023.2293737

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Safety between the lines – the role, meaning and practice of pen-pal writing in the life of a young Finnish evacuee girl (1939–1945)

Antti Malinen [a] and Mervi Kaarninen [b]

[a]Academy of Finland Centre of Excellence in the History of Experience, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland; [b]History, Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

ABSTRACT

This article examines the role, meaning, and practice of letter writing in the lives of two Finnish girls during the Second World War (WWII). We use a particular set of letters ($N = 41$) from the wartime letter collection kept in the Tampere University Folklife Archives and argue that they give us an interesting perspective on not only the girls' wartime experiences, but also on the role of communication and pen-pal writing in everyday life. In particular, we focus on one evacuee – Ritva – who during the period 1939–1945 changed class six times, requiring her to constantly adapt to new class environments and peer relationships. However, from 1942 onwards, the correspondence with her pen pal Ella provided Ritva with a sense of continuous friendship free from the pressures of local peers. We suggest that pen-pal writing formed an arena of communication which allowed the two girls to share experiences, nurture mutual feelings, and give each other support – elements which might have sometimes been lacking in relationships they had locally with adults and peers at this time. In theoretical terms, this article is inspired by approaches from the history of experiences and history of emotions. These provide useful concepts for pinpointing the historical and cultural layers involved in the social process of cultivating a pen-pal correspondence.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 29 June 2023
Accepted 2 December 2023

KEYWORDS
History of childhood; WWII; letter writing; pen-pal friendship; Finland

1. Introduction

> Liebe Ella!
>
> I'm just writing you a quick postcard to let you know where I am – which is somewhere near Mikkeli. Not much time, so I haven't been able to write. Please write soon and a lot! Letters and the post are my greatest joy here.[1]

This was the message that 15-year-old Ritva sent on a postcard to her pen pal of the same age, Ella, in September 1944. These two Finnish girls started their correspondence in January 1942, and for three and half years they shared their hopes, dreams, and

CONTACT Antti Malinen antti.malinen@tuni.fi History, Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Pinni B3056, SOC, Tampere 33014, Finland

[1]Ritva to Ella 13.9.1944. Wartime Letter Collection 120. Tampere University, Folklife Archives. German was a compulsory language at secondary school, and both girls occasionally used German words and greetings in their letters.

experiences of everyday life in letters recounting the various challenges they faced during the Second World War (WWII). Ritva's life especially was deeply impacted by the hostilities, which forced the whole of her Karelian family to move several times – disrupting both Ritva's peer relationships and school routines. Finland was involved in three separate conflicts during WWII: the Winter War (November 1939 – March 1940), the Continuation War (June 1941 – September 1944) against the Soviet Union (USSR), and the Lapland War against Germany (September 1944 – April 1945). Karelia was the area of Eastern Finland next to the USSR that was most directly affected by the Winter and Continuation Wars. Over 400,000 Karelians were displaced further west into Finland, and often they had to evacuate more than once. Their need for housing, work, and schooling posed challenges of adjustment and resettling not just for the individuals involved, but also for Finnish society at large.[2]

While everything else in Ritva's life was in a state of flux, the pen-pal friendship remained a reassuring constant in her life. In letters, Ritva could eventually confide in Ella not just about problems at school and difficult peer relationships, but also about the more distressing aspects of being evacuated. Since Ella only donated to the Folklife Archive at Tampere University those letters which Ritva had written to her, we only have Ritva's side of their correspondence, and can only infer Ella's situation from glimpses they provide. Nonetheless, the correspondence still gives us an interesting perspective on the wartime experiences of two Finnish girls and the everyday importance of writing to a pen pal.

In recent years, several edited volumes have been published which explore the methodological challenges of accessing children's voices in historical records. These include the "Cultural History of Youth" series (2023), "Perspectives and Experiences of Childhood in the Ancient Mediterranean" (2021), and "Children's Voices from the Past" (2019). Historians of childhood have frequently relied on retrospective sources, such as oral history interviews and written autobiographies, to further their research. In Finland especially, the Finnish Literary Society and Finnish Karelian League have been active in gathering and collating war-time memories with the help of historians, sociologists, educationalists, and cultural scholars, who have then made use of this material in their analysis of children's wartime experiences.[3] Our aim is to contribute to the historical study of childhood and youth by specifically focusing on how communication and friendship has helped children mediate their experiences. By taking the correspondence between Ritva and Ella as a case study, and applying a method of close reading, we aim not only to explore how their pen-pal friendship developed over time, but also to contextualise and historicise the practice and meanings we find therein.

[2]In the Moscow Armistice, agreed on 19 September 1944, Finland ceded more than one-tenth of its national territory to the USSR. See Tiina Kinnunen and Ville Kivimäki. *Finland in World War II: History, Memory, Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); and Aura Korppi-Tommola, "War and Children in Finland during the Second World War", *Paedagogica Historica* 44, no. 4 (2008): 445–55.

[3]Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto-Arponen and Ulla Savolainen, "The Interplay on Memory and Matter: Narratives of Former Finnish-Karelian Child Evacuees", *Oral History* 44, no. 2 (2016): 59–68; Ulla Savolainen, "Muisteltu ja kirjoitettu evakkomatka. Tutkimus evakkolapsuuden muistelukerronnan poetiikasta" [A Remembered and Written Evacuee Journey: A Study of the Poetics of Evacuee Childhood Remembrance Storytelling] (PhD diss., University of Helsinki, 2015); and Essi Jouhki and Kaisa Vehkalahti, "Reconstructed Landscapes of Northern Youth. Reading the Autobiographies of Finnish Youth 1945–1960" in *Reconstructing Minds and Landscapes: Silent Post War Memory in the Margins of History account*, ed. Marja Tuominen, T. G. Ashplant and Tiina Harjumaa (New York: Routledge, 2021).

Recent developments in the history of experiences and the history of childhood and emotions provide the theoretical basis of our study. They have provided us with concepts to describe the specificity of children's experiences, and especially their relationship to prevailing societal and cultural norms. For instance, Vallgårda, Alexander, and Olsen coined the concept of "emotional formation" as a way to describe children's daily realities and emotional lives. The concept suggests that emotional experience is continuously shaped through a variety of factors, such as cultural and social understandings of what is appropriate children's behaviour in certain situations.[4]

Previous research – on post-WWII family life in Finland – indicates that children were not encouraged to share their more troublesome experiences with adults in the family (related to sexuality, for example, or their peers). The Finnish educator, Martti Hela – head teacher of the Helsinki Teacher's Academy in 1948 – summed up the problem with this culture of silence.

> When speaking to educators about character development, one must first emphasise the meaning of openness. Nowadays, children are left alone with their problems both at home and at school, and this is a great tragedy. Children have to deal with even the most sensitive and dangerous problems by themselves, without any support or empathy. Homes are filled with all kinds of chatter, but the questions concerning children's emotional development are surrounded by silence. People do not want to handle, nor do they know how to handle, those kinds of questions; it might feel uncomfortable to them. "Surely, the child will be all right" – this is the typical train of thought.[5]

The prevailing emotional formation at this time led both the general public and experts (in child psychology, education, and welfare) to believe that children were highly adaptable, resilient, and able to cope with life's difficulties if left well alone. This encouraged a parental attitude of not being overly attuned to children's worries, even during wartime,[6] and consequently limited children's opportunities to share and communicate any feelings of distress with adults.

In the new history of emotions, experience is understood as a layered process involving a combination of emotions, senses, and memories; our aim is to apply this theoretical framework to the analysis of letter writing.[7] For Kivimäki, Suodenjoki and Vahtikari, the study of experience is:

> [...] a blurred mediating category, where cultural meanings, subjective identities, social relations, societal structures and the material world shape individual perceptions into experiences. Thus, experiences are not located only within individual minds, but are shared and bound to institutions, systems of meaning and power relations.[8]

[4]Karen Vallgårda, Kristine Alexander and Stephanie Olsen, "Emotions and the Global Politics of Childhood", in *Childhood, Youth and Emotions in Modern History. National, Colonial and Global Perspectives*, ed. Stephanie Olsen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 20–3.

[5]Martti Hela, "Kansakoulu luonteenkasvatuskouluna", in *Kansakoulun työtapoja 1. Yleistä ja alkuopetus*, ed. Kaarlo Saarialho, Kaarlo, et al. (Helsinki: WSOY), 36–44.

[6]Antti Malinen, Tuomas Laine-Frigren and Mervi Kaarninen, "Rebuilding Emotional Ties for Child Evacuees Returning from Abroad: Children's Literature and Informal Education in Post-Second World War Finland", *History of Education* (2022). https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760X.2021.2010814.

[7]Josephine Hoegaerts and Stephanie Olsen, "History of Experience: Afterword" in *Lived Nation as the History of Experiences and Emotions in Finland, 1800–2000*, ed. Ville Kivimäki, Sami Suodenjoki and Tanja Vahtikari (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 375–83; and Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Raisa Maria Toivo, "Introduction to Medieval and Early Modern Experiences of Gender and Faith", in *Lived Religion and Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Raisa Maria Toivo (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021), 1–24.

[8]Kivimäki, Suodenjoki and Vahtikari, "Lived Nation", 12–13, 16.

In our case, for example, letter writing was influenced by the prevailing emotional formations and templates of emotionality contained in contemporary girls' literature. This provided fictional examples of how friendships might emerge and be maintained via letter writing.[9]

As such, we are not taking children's ability to communicate for granted; our aim is rather to scrutinise it as a phenomenon that is prone to historical change. Letter writing required competence and practice; it was a way to teach both literacy and cursive handwriting – not just as part of the official curriculum, but also of a wider mission to educate children in modern citizenship and civic skills.[10] At Ritva's school in Tampere, there was a handwriting lesson every week for all first, second, and third years.[11] By secondary school, the teaching became more nuanced, and pupils were taught how to begin and end letters and the various conventions for writing them. This is certainly borne out by our sources, but the letters also reveal how Ritva and Ella had ownership and agency over their texts, and how they played with the conventions and norms they had been taught – sometimes deliberately challenging them. Ritva's and Ella's correspondence lasted three and half years, over a period in which they were experiencing formative changes related to their age. This can be seen in their handwriting too, as it goes from a rounded style to one that is more cultivated, adult-like, and in the way the earlier style of illustrated letter gives way to a more formal style later in their correspondence.

Table 1 shows how the war-related events which affected Ritva and her family also disrupted her correspondence with Ella. A considerable number of Finnish children, like Ritva, were exposed to both chronic and acute stressors – such as being evacuated, austerity, or losing someone or something very dear to them. When the Continuation War ended in 1944 there were about a million children under the age of 15, and roughly a quarter of them had already experienced one or more life changes (some of which overlapped) during the war. A total of 70,000 had been evacuated abroad, mainly to Sweden; some 125,000 had been displaced from Karelia; and 30,000 had lost their fathers in the war.

2. Methodological considerations and sources

This article is based on a particular set of letters written between 1942 and 1945 ($N = 41$) from the wartime letter collection kept in the Tampere University Folklife Archives.[12] This collection currently holds some 57,000 letters, which have all been privately donated since 1975, when the Folklife Archive' Board at Tampere University founded a public campaign to collect WWII-era letters from Finland for the purposes of preservation and

[9]Mervi Kaarninen, "'Jätimme kotimme ja astuimme junaan'. Kahden koulutytön kirjeenvaihto 1942–1945" in *Kirjeitä sodasta: kirjoittamisen tavat ja merkitykset kriisiaikoina*, ed. Marko Tikka, Ilari Taskinen and Seija-Leena Nevala-Nurmi ["'We left our home and got on the train'. Correspondence of Two Schoolgirls 1942–45" in *Letters from War: Ways and Meanings of Writing in Times of Crisis*] (Tampere: Tampereen Historiallinen Seura, 2015), 184.

[10]Toivo Salervo, *Kirjoittamisen opetus tyyppikirjaimiston pohjalta* [Teaching Writing Based on Typeface] (Helsinki: Otava, 1932), 108; see also Saara Tuomaala, *Työtätekevistä käsistä puhtaiksi ja kirjoittaviksi. Suomalaisen oppivelvollisuuskoulun ja maalaislasten kohtaaminen 1921–1939* [From Working Hands to Clean Hands for Writing. Encounters Between Compulsory Education and Rural Children in Finland, 1921–1939] (Helsinki: SKS, 2004), 178–89.

[11]Tampere Co-Educational and Preparatory School's 1941–1942 Annual Report.

[12]Tampere University. Folklife Archive.

Table 1. Timeline depicting changes in Ritva's location and different phases in her pen-pal relationship with Ella.

30.9.1939–13.3.1940	Winter War (105 days): USSR invades Finnish Karelia.
Nov/Dec 1939	Ritva's family is evacuated from Viipuri to Tampere.
21.3.1940	Moscow Peace Treaty, in which, as part of Finland's conditional surrender, most of Finnish Karelia is ceded to the USSR. As a result 410,000 people (12% of the population) are displaced westwards to other parts of Finland).
25.6.1941	Continuation War begins between USSR and Finland.
24.1.1942	Ritva replies to Ella after receiving a letter from Turku at school. Ritva is living in Tampere with her parents and sister.
1.4.1941	Ritva mentions her Karelian origins, and that her parents have now returned to Viipuri. Ritva recounts this first evacuation.
4.5.1942	Ritva's first letter sent from Viipuri, where she has rejoined her parents.
26.10.1942	Ritva's last letter from Viipuri, as she and her family move to Säiniö, a small village outside Viipuri, where her father has got a new job at the village railway station. Ritva goes to school in Viipuri and travels to school by train.
Most of 1943	Ritva's letters to Ella are all sent from her home in Säiniö.
Autumn 1943	Correspondence wanes after September 1943; letters between Rita and Ella do not resume until the end of December (28.12.1943).
10.6.1944	USSR launches its so-called Great Offensive in the summer of 1944.
18.6.1944	Ritva and family are forced to leave Säiniö on 18.6.1944.
5.8.1944	Break in the correspondence. Ritva writes about her journey as an evacuee.
13.9.1944	Ritva's letter from her temporary residence in Mikkeli (Vuolinko).
19.9.1944	Finland signs the Moscow Armistice, restoring the 1940 Moscow Peace Treaty and agreeing to expel all German troops from Finland. This leads to the brief Lapland War (ending in April 1945).
4.7.1945	Ritva's last letter to Ella and a plan to meet in Turku.

scientific research.[13] So far, over 500 people have donated their letters (or those of a family member), and Ritva's correspondence with Ella is one such private donation. The wartime letter collection offers a unique opportunity to study social relationships of the period, including those between young people; however, most of the letters in the collection are between adults.

The letters used in this article were donated in November 1975. The donor, Ella S., described herself as a "school pen-pal" of Ritva. In the letter accompanying the donation, Ella explained that she was answering an advert she had seen in the newspaper asking for donations of private letters from the war, and she felt those in her possession could prove useful for future research.[14] Ilari Taskinen, who is an expert on the wartime letter collection, has noted how donors often make a number of decisions and selections before making their donation. Some letters may be deemed by a donor to be too private and sensitive for the archive, while others – like Ella – might donate sets of letters because they believe they will have a wider societal value.[15] It should be noticed at this point that not all their communication exclusively took the form of writing – among the correspondence Ella donated were four postcards, for instance – but they also shared drawings, photos of themselves and their class, signatures collected from other friends at school (though none of these have survived), and other cultural products they had made. These material aspects of their letters are clearly important to Ritva and Ella as they are

[13]Ilari Taskinen, Social Lives in Letters. Finnish soldiers' epistolary relationships, intimate practices, and emotionality in World War II (Tampere: Tampere University 2021), 63.
[14]Ella suggests that letters are especially interesting as they give an insight on how Ritva experienced evacuation and losing her home. Ella even went so far as to indicate the letters in which these experiences are specifically dealt with – letters 32, 37 and 38 (accompanying letter from Ella, Folklife Archive at Tampere University).
[15]Taskinen, *Social Lives in Letters*, 63.

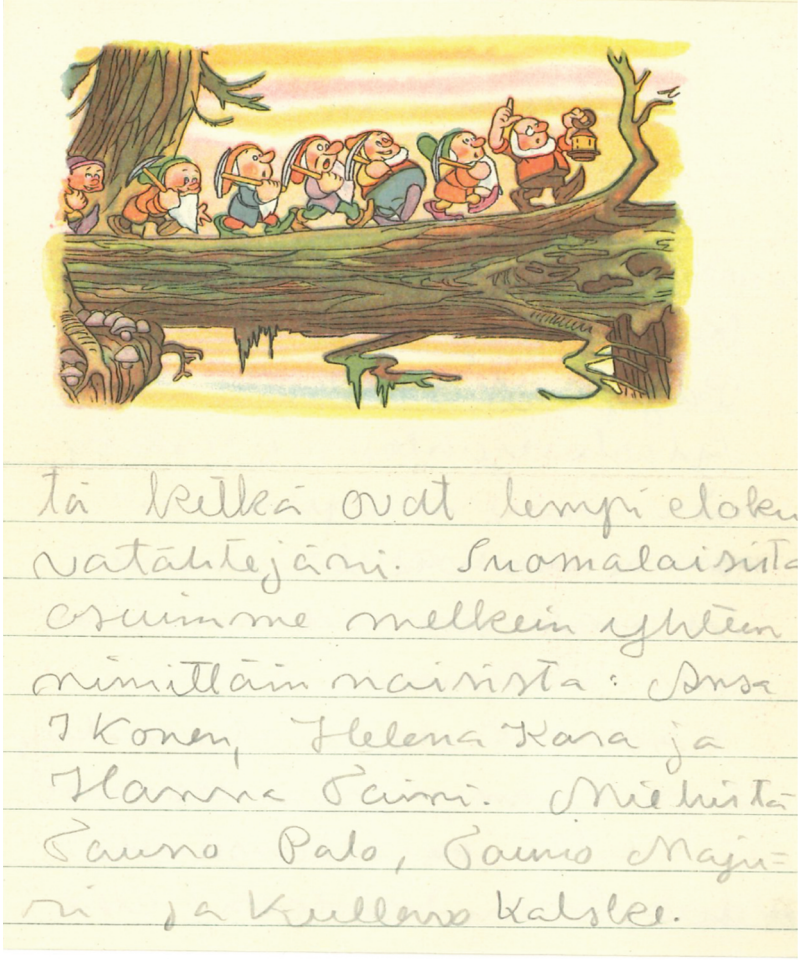

Figure 1. The form of letter sent by Ritva changed over the years. Paper headed with illustrations of children's characters, like the Seven Dwarves pictured above (letter sent 4.3.1942), was replaced by more formal writing paper. In this letter, Ritva also tells Ella who her favourite Finnish movie stars are.

often mentioned in the correspondence – they regularly comment on how letters looked and were composed as artefacts, or apologise for flaws, such as poor handwriting (see Figure 1).

The analysis of letters, in itself, poses interesting methodological questions, and the study of letter writing has developed into a rich research field. However, especially in its early stages, it focused on analysing correspondence almost exclusively from the upper classes and earlier time periods.[16] When it comes to the epistolary culture of children and the young, however, specialists in that field have drawn attention to the way culturally

[16]Willemijn Ruben, *Conventional Correspondence. Epistolary Culture of the Dutch Elite, 1770–1850*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Willemijn Ruberg, "Children's Correspondence as a Pedagogical Tool in the Netherlands (1770–1750)", *Paedagogica Historica* 41, no. 3 (2005): 295–312.

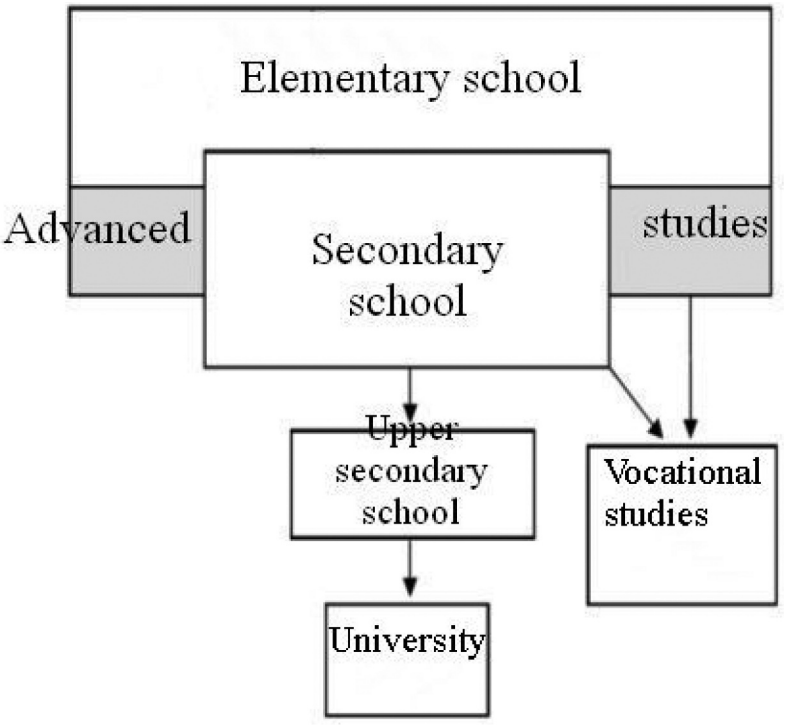

Figure 2. Finnish school system in the 1940s.

specific literary and rhetorical conventions will affect narration – often children were keen to express themselves in a sophisticated manner, so these conventions were important. The Finnish primary school institution was established late (1866) and, compared with many European nations, became compulsory even later (1921).[17] Figure 2 gives a general overview of the Finnish school system in the 1940s, which emphasised the importance of handwriting skill at both primary and secondary levels as it was also seen as a means for improving children's modern citizenship and civic skills.

Good handwriting was, according to the textbook used to teach it in schools, a matter of honour for young Finns.[18] According to prevailing gendered social conventions of the time, children were expected to control their feelings – girls were, for example, taught the manners deemed essential to become a polite young woman[19] – and part of this was, for

[17]For more on the Finnish school system: Otso Kortekangas, Merja Paksuniemi and Heikki Ervast, "Milestones of Basic Education in Finland. Pedagogy and Structure and Language", in *Introduction to the Finnish Educational System*, ed. Merja Paksuniemi and Pigga Keskitalo (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 1–13.

[18]The same textbook was used for handwriting in both primary and secondary schools. Toivo Salervo, *Kirjoittamisen opetus tyyppikirjaimiston pohjalta* (Helsinki: Otava, 1932), 108; see also Tuomaala, *Työtätekevistä käsistä puhtaiksi ja kirjoittaviksi*, 178–89.

[19]For more on the narrative analysis of correspondence, cf. Kaisa Vehkalahti, "The Urge to See Inside and Cure: Letter-Writing as an Educational Tool in Finnish Reform School Education, 1915–1928", *Paedagogica Historica* 44, no. 1–2 (2008): 193–205, DOI: 10.1080/00309230701865595; Kaisa Vehkalahti, *Constructing Reformatory Identity: Girls' reform school education in Finland, 1893–1923* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009); and on correspondence between schoolgirls: *50-luvun tyttöjen ystävät. Ystävyyskirjeet 1952–1960* [*Friendship Letters Between Girls in the 1950s*]; and Lucille M. Schultz, "Letter-Writing instructions in 19th Century Schools in the United States", in *Letter-Writing as a Social Practice*, ed. David Barton and Nigel Hall (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1999).

girls of Ritva and Ella's age, learning how to write proper letters. In one letter, for instance, Ritva warns Ella that in the next handwriting lesson, they will have to write a postcard exactly as instructed and send it to someone, so to not be surprised if the next piece of correspondence from her takes the form of a very formal-looking postcard.[20] This was because, as part of the curriculum, teachers organised letter exchanges between classes in the same year-group across Finland. In fact, this was how Ritva's and Ella's correspondence started. In the same way, having a pen pal abroad was recommended and organised for language studies.

3. "A thousand thanks for your letter and photo": the materiality of letter writing

In January 1942, Ritva's class at Tampere Secondary School (*Tampereen yhteiskoulu*)[21] received an invitation to begin corresponding by letter with pupils of Turku Secondary School. In the first archived letter (24.1.1942), Ritva thanks Ella for writing, and then goes on to say how the letters from Turku caused a sense of competitive excitement among her classmates about who would be getting a new pen pal. Although it was part of the school curriculum, letter writing was also seen as a leisure activity, and it became a particularly important means of communication for all Finns when families became dispersed by the war. Finns nurtured their social relationships in letters, and this boom in letter writing affected children and young people too. This was facilitated not only by what was being taught in schools across the country,[22] but also by an efficient postal service which remained functional in spite of the challenges of war. At first the girls wrote to each other once or twice a week, but gradually this slowed to once a month. The only time it stopped was for a long break in the summer of 1944, when the USSR launched a massive offensive against Finland. At this point there were large-scale evacuations, which affected Ritva's family life and interrupted her schooling.

Most of Ritva's letters to Ella follow a similar pattern, reflecting the letter-writing conventions she was studying at school: letters begin with an initial greeting, followed by an introduction where Ritva comments on the letter-writing situation – for example, apologising for delays in writing or the poor quality of the paper. Both girls then highlight how important their correspondence is, and their joy at receiving a new letter. For example, in May 1942, Ritva explains how she wants to reply immediately, even though she received Ella's letter only hours earlier.[23]

> We were all just sitting down to lunch (no sorry, just me and my sister, as mum and dad were still at work – mum has a lunch break from 2–3pm, and dad too). Well, anyway, we were sitting round the dinner table when suddenly my sister rushed into the hallway to bring me a moment later a letter from, guess who Ella, yes . . . you! I really couldn't have thought of any better dessert.[24]

[20]Ritva to Ella 14.2.1942.
[21]In the Finnish school system, after four or five years of primary, some of the pupils aged 10–12 move on to secondary school and a matriculation examination, while the rest continue in primary until the end of compulsory education. Ritva had started secondary school, which could be either an all-boys, all-girls, or co-ed school. Ritva's was co-ed.
[22]Taskinen, *Social Lives in Letters*, 23.
[23]Ritva to Ella 4.3.1942.
[24]Ritva to Ella 10.5.1942.

Ritva would usually be free on Saturday evenings to concentrate on her correspondence. In the letters she often mentions where her elder sister and parents are,[25] and describes her literary hobbies. She kept a diary, took part in writing competitions, wrote poems and stories, and was even editing a magazine read by her family and a few friends. Ritva was also trying to write fiction and get it published in the local newspaper.[26] Ritva seems to enjoy writing letters, and the cultural importance of correspondence among girls at this time is underlined both by the fact that she initially had as many as eight pen pals and because she frequently comments on the cultural conventions of having pen pals.[27] The scale of this correspondence also indicates that Ritva comes from a relatively well-off middle-class family. Like everything else during the war, postal rates had risen in price and sending a letter would have cost almost the same as a litre of milk.[28] Ritva and Ella also seem to be aware of how several popular novels at this time took the form of correspondence – epistolary novels were in vogue.[29] As their correspondence progresses, she stops mentioning her other pen pals, and we can presume that these other relationships faded over time. Both Ritva and Ella acknowledge how long their correspondence has endured by mentioning its anniversaries, and Ritva also describes how she has kept Ella's letters tied in a blue silk ribbon, as a way to cherish and preserve them.[30]

At the start of their pen-pal correspondence, Ella and Ritva wrote about their lives in quite general terms, sharing details about hobbies, school life, and family. Both girls were also curious to know what the other looked like and soon their letters were accompanied by photographs. Whenever a new portrait had been taken they would enclose a copy, and they would share and discuss details about their appearance, complimenting each other. "You look just like an angel", Ritva comments in one letter. "Your hair is awfully cute. Is your hair naturally curly or permed? I have a perm."[31]

The materiality of letters plays a major role in Ella and Ritva's correspondence. At the start of their friendship, for instance, Ritva likes to point out how many pages she has already written, and asks whether she might have written too many or should start another.[32] The letter-writing paper at this stage is also carefully chosen, often with pictures of films stars or cartoon characters. And if the letter is written in pencil, or on paper considered to be sub-standard, Ritva might for example apologise – citing the unavailability of ink. Other times the reason she gives for writing in pencil is because she is writing in bed and is afraid of spilling ink; also it is easier to hide quickly if her father comes in to check if she is still doing her homework or has gone to sleep.[33]

The sociologist William Corsaro (2014) has argued that children do not simply internalise cultural and societal demands and expectations, but interpretively reproduce

[25]Ritva to Ella 1.2.1942.
[26]Ritva to Ella 10.3.1942.
[27]Ritva to Ella 9.2.1942; Ritva to Ella 4.3.1942; and Ritva to Ella 7.9.1943.
[28]Jukka-Pekka Pietiäinen, *Suomen postin historia 2* (Helsinki: Posti- ja telelaitos, 1988), 562.
[29]Katarina Eskola and Satu Koskimies, "Ystävyyskirjeiden toimittamisesta", in *50-luvun tyttöjen ystävät. Ystävyyskirjeet 1952–1960* ["Editing Friendship Letters", in *Friendship Letters Between Girls in the 1950s*] (Helsinki: Kirjayhtymä, 1998), 652–8; e.g. Ritva to Ella 1.4.1942; Ritva to Ella 7.4.1942. For examples of epistolary girls' fiction, see Eila Kaukovalta, *Tuntematon Marianna* (Helsinki: Otava, 1938); Eila Kaukovalta, *Me tapaamme taas, Marianna!* (Helsinki: Otava, 1941); Eila Kaukovalta, *Viitosparakin Sole* (Helsinki: Otava, 1943); and Salme Setälä, *Hiihtolomien hiihtoloma* (Helsinki: Otava, 1947).
[30]Ritva to Ella 8.1.1943; Ritva to Ella 10.5.1942; and Ritva to Ella 26.10.1942.
[31]Ritva to Ella 24.1.1942; Ritva to Ella 1.2.1942; Ritva to Ella 10.7.1942; and Ritva to Ella 4.5.1942.
[32]Ritva to Ella 1.4.1942; Ritva to Ella 7.4.1942; and Ritva to Ella 4.3.1942.
[33]Ritva to Ella 4.3.1942; and Ritva to Ella 1.4.1942.

Figure 3. Ritva describes what she has cut out and stuck in as "Chug from the future. No need for wood gas".

them by actively borrowing, recycling, and challenging contemporary cultural representations, ideas and norms in a creative matter. Ritva's letters confirm this, as they contain not only her writing, but also items cut out of magazines and newspapers, or funny cartoons drawn in the margins, related to wartime austerity, for instance (see Figures 3 and 6).[34]

As well as photos of themselves, both girls also attach pictures of film stars (with their autographs) to the letters, stamps they have collected, and old letters – evidence of a steadily growing youth culture, in which young people were inventing, initiating, and developing their own distinct voice and identity, and applying it to their social and material experience.[35] Previous research has emphasised how the classroom – but especially school trips and breaktime – became important venues for the development of peer communities and culture, as they offered opportunities for idling, gossiping, and playing together.[36] We would also add children's epistolary culture to this list as representing an equally important venue for self-expression.

In her first eight letters, Ritva mentions nothing about the ongoing war, her family's background, or being evacuated from Karelia to Southern Finland, but later on more personal themes emerge indicating the gradual formation of a more intimate friendship. After just a couple of months, the girls are sharing more sensitive details about their lives and bringing up issues which they find difficult to discuss with family or other peers. Gradually Ella learns that Ritva comes from a middle-class family, with a father who works for the Finnish State Railway and a mother who is a pharmacist. For Ritva, the pen-pal correspondence must have had special meaning – as an evacuee, she was a newcomer who would be trying to find her place in peer communities that were already well

[34]William A. Corsaro, "Interpretive Reproduction in Children's Peer Culture", *Social Psychology Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (1992): 160–77.
[35]Oded Heilbronner, "From a Culture for Youth to a Culture of Youth: Recent Trends in the Historiography of Western Youth Cultures", *Contemporary European History* 17, no. 4 (2008): 575–91.
[36]Antti Malinen and Tuomo Tamminen, *Leikitäänkö? Lasten kaverisuhteet 1900-luvun Suomessa* [Shall We Play? Children's Peer Relationships in Twentieth-Century Finland] (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2022); and Howard P. Chudacoff, *Children at Play. An American History* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007).

established. With Ella she could establish their relationship on a more equal footing, as they were both strangers eager to learn more about one another.

4. "Now there's something I need to tell you": the social sharing of experiences by letter

Historical research on the experiences of Karelian child evacuees has pointed out that many of them faced bullying in their new schools and communities, and this was probably something which Ritva had to contend with too in Tampere – at least to some extent.[37] Relationships and power dynamics between pupils in the classroom could be complicated and clearly affected her well-being, and this is made clear in her letters – Ritva's descriptions of her social life in Tampere concentrate on school and her classroom peers, there is no mention of any other major social contacts. Ritva explains the basic structure of her school day in the second letter from the archive.

> I'm in class 3A – there are only A and B classes in our school, and we have 44 pupils in our class. The journey to school is awfully long. I live by the station, but the school is on the other side of town – that's two and a half kilometres away and it takes 20 minutes to get there. [...] I've never been to Turku, but I'd love to see what kind of town it is.[38]

In the next letter she writes excitedly and in a hurry to Ella, about how six girls were on the point of having a meeting to decide whether Ritva and couple of other girls would be accepted as new members of their "Secret Society". The girls had got the idea from Salma Setälä's recent novel, the *Secret Society for Good Deeds*.[39] Ritva was eagerly hoping to be accepted,[40] only to be turned down in the end.

Not getting accepted to the Secret Society was evidently a deep disappointment for Ritva, and likely reinforced feelings of being an outsider, but by having a pen pal she could express and explore her feelings, shape her thoughts, and receive sympathy and understanding from Ella. Letter writing allowed children – in our case Ritva and Ella – to make sense of their daily lives and transform these into socially shared experiences.[41]

Some aspects of this pen-pal correspondence can be explained by the prevailing historical and cultural context. Ritva is at first hesitant to tell Ella about her Karelian background and evacuee status because she is perhaps scared of being negatively labelled. In her letters, too, we can see that she is careful to avoid using Karelian dialect when expressing herself. However, eventually Ritva feels compelled to tell Ella about her background, as her family are moving back to their former Karelian home in Viipuri and she wants to keep up the pen-pal relationship they have.

> Now I must tell you something which might make you angry and not want to write to me anymore. The thing is, I'm not from Häme as you might have thought, but Karelia. Does

[37] Ulla Savolainen, "Muisteltu ja kirjoitettu evakkomatka. Tutkimus evakkolapsuuden muistelukerronnan poetiikasta" [A Remembered and Written Evacuee Journey: A Study of the Poetics of Evacuee Childhood Remembrance Storytelling] (PhD diss., University of Helsinki, 2015), 118, 188, 209, 330.
[38] Ritva to Ella 1.2.1942.
[39] Salme Setälä, *Salaseura S.H.T.S.* [The Secret Society for Good Deeds SSGD] (Helsinki: Otava 1941).
[40] Ritva to Ella 27.2.1942.
[41] For more on the meaning and development of peer relations and communities in general, see Malinen and Tamminen, *Leikitäänkö?* [Shall We Play?] (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2022).

Figure 4. Part of the girls' correspondence involved making up new names for each other. Ritva was 'Pörri', and Ella was 'Kati'. In her Easter greetings for 1943 Ritva signs her letter to 'Kati' with her new name – 'Pörri'.

> that make you angry? We shall see. You are lovely if it doesn't. My mother and father moved back to Viipuri last month.[42]

To Ritva's relief, Ella reassures her that this knowledge will not harm their friendship. In fact, it seems Ella was more concerned that Ritva would be the one to break off their correspondence once back home in Viipuri.[43] As a sign of growing trust, Ritva even uses Karelian dialect in some of the later letters, introducing Ella to her background and way of speaking.[44] Interestingly, Ella's own family belonged to the relatively small Jewish population in Finland, but her background does not directly come up as a subject in the letters. Nevertheless, in one of her letters, Ritva addresses Ella as "Dear Ella Kati, Jacob Adam's daughter", reflecting a game they are developing of using new names to express friendship (see Figure 4).[45] This deepening friendship is also apparent when Ritva asks Ella to send a larger photo of herself to fit the photo frame she has.[46]

As their friendship became more established, Ritva began to share other sensitive issues in her life, such as her relationships with boys. At first, Ritva was unsure about how Ella would react.

> Now I'm quite sure you'll be angry if I ask you something. It's so silly, but I thought that since we're such good friends, it would be nice to know a bit more about each other. It's the kind of thing that – well – I don't – know – how to put it exactly, but I mean – do you know a boy that you have a crush on? There, I said it – the question. And if it's too bold, then don't answer, but if it's not then I'm impatiently waiting for your answer. I just have to say that I do, and his name is Matti, and that I won't say any more about these "affairs of the heart" if they upset you.[47]

Ritva seems to have carefully thought over whether she should be the first to talk about "affairs of the heart" and only puts the question at the end of her long letter, but after this,

[42]Ritva to Ella 1.4.1942.
[43]Ritva to Ella 7.4.1942.
[44]Ritva to Ella 7.11.1942.
[45]Eventually Ritva learned that Ella was from a Jewish family and that her family owned a textile and clothing store in Turku. Ritva to Ella 26.10.1942.
[46]Ritva to Ella 29.12.1942.
[47]Ritva to Ella 19.8.1943.

Matti does indeed become a regular feature in her letters, and Ella seems to mention boys in her letters too. Ritva, for instance, writes about where she first met Matti and what he told her about being evacuated from Viipuri at the start of the Winter War. This also gives Ritva the chance to talk about her own experience of being forced to leave Karelia too, but Ritva again seems unsure about how Ella will react. It seems that as her letter has already taken on a confessional tone about having a crush on Matti, the floodgates are now open, and she can talk about other uncomfortable experiences such as the evacuation. Indeed, in the letters after this, Ritva confesses she had several crushes on boys when she was in Tampere,[48] and in the summer of 1943 she tells Ella how she has been missing Matti during the long holidays and is impatient to get back at school and see him again. In the last sentence she even admits how difficult it is to stop these "floodgates", once she starts unburdening herself like this.[49] When they mention boys, they also give each other advice.

> Listen my dear Kati! You have really been too shy with Jussi. It's clear for all to see that he had a crush on you. I'm sure that if you were to send Jussi a Christmas card or any other card for that matter, he would be grateful and answer you. Please just do as I ask.[50]

It seems to have been easier to disclose this kind of information to a pen pal living elsewhere than to someone at home, because Ritva could be sure the information would not spread so easily to others and get misinterpreted (see Figure 5).

5. "You will always be my best friend" – finding emotional refuge in a pen pal

As Vallgårda, Alexander and Olsen have pointed out, when a child's life moves from one place to another, they are crossing emotional frontiers too. Homes, schools, child welfare institutions, and peer cultures all form specific emotional environments in which children are expected (and indeed trained) to behave in certain ways, expressing and enacting their emotions and experiences according to prevailing rules and norms.[51] Between 1939 and 1945, Ritva was constantly crossing such emotional frontiers; she had to change schools at least four times, and had to get to know a different set of teachers and classmates at least six or seven times, being forced to redo the same year of school several times.

At several points in WWII, Finnish schools were forced to close – in the Winter War this lasted from November 1939 to October 1940, and in the Continuation War it was for shorter periods of time and varied with locality. In general the National Board of Education (NBE) tried to keep schools running wherever possible, though sometimes school buildings had been either destroyed or requisitioned by the army.[52] Authorities also shortened school terms and extended

[48] Ritva to Ella 30.8.1943.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ritva to Ella 7.9.1943.
[51] Malinen, Laine-Frigren and Kaarninen, "Rebuilding Emotional Ties", 11; Karen Vallgårda, Kristine Alexander and Stephanie Olsen, "Emotions and the Global Politics of Childhood", in *Childhood, Youth and Emotions in Modern History. National, Colonial and Global Perspective*.
[52] In the autumn of 1939, Finnish schools started the academic year in an atmosphere of uncertainty. After only a couple of weeks in September, all children were given instructions on what to do during an air raid, in a pamphlet edited by the NBE. When reservist military manoeuvres began, many secondary schools were forced to close and school buildings were used by the army. The NBE sent other instructions to schools. One of these was to organise education about how the general population should protect themselves. That first autumn term of the war only a few secondary schools were running, and Karelia was the area most affected as it was the evacuated area nearest the Soviet border.

Figure 5. As the girls got to know each other better, they talked more about boys. Ritva had met Matti before the war in Viipuri, and in one letter commented on the status of their relationship by drawing a cartoon of herself as a "failed girl" (friidu) and Matti as a "country boy" (*maalaismatti*).

holiday periods on the grounds that school children might need to do volunteer work.[53] The NBE also gave schools permission to shorten a pupil's day if they volunteered,[54] although the NBE's director acknowledged that the cumulative effect of these irregularities was having a negative impact on children's schoolwork[55] – Ritva's case was certainly no exception.[56]

After returning to Viipuri in May 1942, for example, she started at another new school that autumn. However, instead of missing Tampere, Ritva's reaction in the first letter from Karelia is one of excitement about the new school and classmates.

> Back at school again. Our class has 47 pupils!!! And it's the nicest I've ever been in. One of my friends there is called Kaarina N. She's really great, but she only comes in second after you – you're still my best friend. Out of all the teachers we have, the one who teaches Finnish is the best!!! That's saying something as Finnish teachers are usually so boring.[57]

Soon after this, however, Ritva seems to be facing the realities of exams coming up and the familiar concern about getting low grades. At this point, she lists upcoming exams and reports the grades she gets in nearly every letter to Ella.[58] At home it seems Ritva was constantly being

[53] *Kouluhallituksen kiertokirjeet* [NBE Circulars] 15 June 1940, 29 August 1941. *Kouluhallitus* [NBE]. *KA, Kansallisarkisto* [National Archives, NA]; and Veli-Matti Autio, Opetusministeriön historia 4 [History of the Ministry of Education 4] (Helsinki: Opetusministeriö, 1986), 286–8.
[54] NBE Circular 30.10.1940. NBE, NA.
[55] NBE Circulars from autumn 1939, 15.6.1940, and 29.8.1941.
[56] Ritva to Ella 7.11.1942.
[57] Ritva to Ella 26.10.1942.
[58] Ritva to Ella 7.11.1942, 29.12.1942, 20.3.1943, and 4.4.1943.

Figure 6. "It's boiling – but only substitute". In a letter from September 1943, Ritva recounts a birthday party in great detail. Wartime austerity meant ration cards were needed to get sweets, and that substitute coffee was used instead of the real thing – a detail which Ritva decides to portray in her picture here.

criticised for doing badly at school and not working hard enough, and in her letters she describes how she fears she may never meet her parents' expectations.[59] One recurring theme emerging from recent studies and oral histories of childhood in the 1940s and '50s is the memory of being left alone to cope with feeling upset and difficult family situations. The prevailing style of parenting was that parental authority was to be respected, and so children were often not given the opportunity to express their point of view, leaving many things unsaid which proved problematic later. In many ways, Ritva's epistolary accounts support these research findings.[60]

Ritva's parents tried to supervise her schoolwork, but the emphasis was on social control, such as limiting her free time. Sometimes Ritva wanted to stay up late at night and write a letter, but she was not allowed. Homework obligations meant Ritva was not allowed to listen to the radio on weekday evenings – only on Saturdays and Sundays;[61] and when one time Ritva forgot to tell her mother in time about an upcoming Swedish test, her mother lost her temper and pulled Ritva's hair – which Ritva felt for a long time after.[62] Perhaps the lowest point in Ritva's school career was in the spring of 1945 when she had to redo her 4t^{h} year for the third time – an event which led to her parents subjecting her to further restrictions.

> This is the third year I've stayed in the 4th year, hence my great depression. When mum and dad found out – 3 years! In the same class! – they were so angry that they told me how it was going to be (oh no). I was banned from going to any dances, movies, walks, etc. for the whole summer. And that's why I was so angry – I thought I wouldn't bother writing to anyone ever again.[63]

[59]Ritva to Ella 15.5.1942.
[60]Ritva to Ella, letters from Tampere, spring 1942; Kyösti Kiuasmaa, *Oppikoulu 1880–1980* (Oulu: Pohjoinen, 1982), 320–9.
[61]Ritva to Ella 10.3.1942.
[62]Ritva to Ella 4.3.1942; Ritva to Ella 1.4.1942; and Ritva to Ella 4.7.1945.
[63]Ritva to Ella 4.7.1945.

Although Ritva is clearly feeling a sense of despair, to the point of even giving up writing pen-pal letters completely, she is still nevertheless working through her emotions with Ella. Recent historical studies have emphasised the variety of ways that children have found, throughout history, to work through their experiences and emotions so that they can find solace and restoration – ranging from spending time with peers, to enjoying nature and the outdoors.[64] In Ritva's case, having a pen pal gave her the chance to vent feelings of anxiety and stress and find a connection. As Ritva and Ella lived in different cities, there was no direct peer pressure or need to engage in any unwanted social comparisons – instead Ritva expressed her happiness when Ella shared stories of her good grades and successes. She also told openly of her own grades:

> What kind of Christmas report did you get? I got a terrible one. It was a bit better than what I got in the spring, but there was still a 4 in there. In the spring that was in maths, but this time the problem was Swedish where I averaged just over a 1. For maths though I actually got a 7! Wasn't that an amazing achievement? German dropped to a 5 but otherwise my report was the same, with an average of 6.92. The best average in our class was 8.99. Wasn't that good? Do you know what the average was for your class?[65]

After three years of repeating the same class, Ella's role as a source of social support seems to have become increasingly important as Ritva's classmates began to be considerably younger. When Ritva did manage to move up with her year group to another class, she expresses great joy at being able to meet the expectations of parents and the school. "School's out and I'm moving up a class next year! I went straight to seventh heaven and now I'm back on earth again!! The world is truly an amazing place". However, she then admits to Ella that her grades in the report were low,[66] and guesses the teachers were showing her mercy.[67] Like many other Finns, Ritva seems to have internalised the prevailing cultural norms of resilience and self-restraint, and the idea that all children should be able to adapt to changing environments. Ritva tended to take her poor school performance personally, and yet she was under a lot of everyday stress which must have had a great impact on her well-being and ability to do schoolwork.

6. Conclusion

Correspondence between Ritva and Ella began to wane in the autumn of 1943. By January 1944, Ritva was writing about how utterly exhausted she was now with school exams and homework. There is now a degree of sarcasm that was not there before.

> Thank you for both the letter I received a long time ago, and your card.
> I haven't had time to write because I've got such an awful lot of homework.
> I've had two German exams and one Swedish. I got great marks – two ones[68]
> and a minus.[69]

[64] Jouhki and Vehkalahti, "Reconstructed Landscapes of Northern Youth", 131–49; Kuusisto-Arponen, and Ulla Savolainen, "The Interplay on Memory and Matter", 59–68; Merja Paksuniemi, "Finnish Refugee Children's Experiences of Swedish Refugee Camps during the Second World War", *Migration Letters* 12, no. 1 (2015): 28–37. For more on the memories of war children, see Sue Saffle, *To the Bomb and Back: Finnish War Children Tell Their World War II Stories* (New York: Berghahn, 2015).
[65] Ritva to Ella 29.12.1942. The highest mark is/was 10, and anything lower than 5 is a fail.
[66] Ritva to Ella 24.5.1943.
[67] Ritva to Ella 15.5.1942; Ritva to Ella 20.3.1943; and Ritva to Ella 24.5.1943.
[68] In the Finnish school evaluation system, the highest grade is 10 and any numbers lower than 5 are a fail.
[69] Ritva to Ella 5.1.1944.

The next letter in the archive is dated August 1944, when Ritva makes multiple apologies for not answering her friend's letters and postcards sooner ("can you forgive everything – absolutely everything"). She also mentions that she forgot another friend's birthday, and that the last time she wrote to Ella was in April.[70] But there are good reasons as Ritva is on the move again for the fourth time (and it is her second evacuation). Ritva goes on to recount this second evacuation from Säiniö in June 1944. After this, Ella would not have been able to write either as she did not have an address for where Ritva was going.

Ritva's account of the evacuation from Säiniö, near Viipuri, triggered by the Soviet advance on Karelia, is quite detailed.[71] She wrote it about two months after the events described, and the tone is highly emotional, involving the description of dramatic situations which were clearly fraught with danger. This is a very different letter from previous ones, both in content and style, reflecting Ritva's attempt to convey something more serious.

> June 18th, it's 8 o'clock in the morning. I'm asleep. My mum comes in to wake me. "OK, we're leaving now Ritva, the Russians are close" she said, so I jumped out of bed and quickly got some clothes on. Then I leapt on my bike and sped off as fast as I could to a building called L. I was to be evacuated – for a second time. I told them we would go, and we decided to meet at a crossroads. I rode home, slung a rucksack on my back and satchel over my shoulders, and mum pushed a wheelbarrow loaded with crates containing our sheep, pig, and chickens. At the crossroads we moved the pig crate to the top, took the sheep out of its crate, and I began to lead it. So that's how we left. I took one last look at home, and then we were off on the next leg of our journey.[72]

Judging from previous research on social remembering and sharing of emotions, Ritva seems to be one of those individuals who needs to recount what has befallen her as a means of processing it.[73] Ella's role as her pen pal is clearly crucial for this as, despite the long delay in their correspondence, Ritva still believes Ella will be willing to listen and support her as she had done previously.

Although we cannot analyse Ella's letters and perspective in the same way, it seems that having a pen pal also meant something to her too – it was a relationship they both wanted to maintain and possibly even strengthen by meeting up in person.

> It would be so exciting to see you. The best would probably be for me to take the train that gets in to Turku at 18:41. Would that work for you? If it doesn't at all, then I can come on that earlier one, though it means you have to pick me up ridiculously early.
> Just write to me if I can't come.[74]

These were the last sentences of a letter dated 4 July 1945 (see also Figure 7). We have no record of whether the planned meeting actually happened or not, or if they continued being pen pals after the autumn of 1945, but it seems that the friendship they created through their correspondence left long-lasting memories. When Ella decided to donate her letters to the

[70]There are evidently gaps in the archived correspondence here, as Ritva's previous letter is dated January 1944, but Ritva states she had not written for a month and a half.
[71]Ritva to Ella 5.8.1944; Savolainen, Ulla, *Muisteltu ja kirjoitettu evakkomatka. Tutkimus evakkolapsuuden muistelukerronnan poetiikasta* (Helsinki 2015), 118, 188, 209, 330.
[72]Ritva to Ella 5.8.1944.
[73]Barbara A. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003), 15; and Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions. Towards a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
[74]Ritva to Ella 4.7.1945.

Figure 7. In the summer of 1945, Ritva was still being punished for her poor performance at school. Her parents continued to prevent her going out, but she was given permission plan a trip to Turku. Wondering how Ella looked at the time, Ritva decided to draw how she would look when coming to Turku.

archive in November 1975, her accompanying letter expressed the hope that the collection "might prove useful", as they shed light on the "feelings of a child" and a child's perspective of evacuation. Ella could also actively share her life and experiences too.

Material traces in the letters, such as drawings or photos of movie stars, illustrate how the girls were still finding ways to share interests in spite of the crisis, but, like other adolescents, they were also still dependent on their parents and felt a responsibility and need to live up to their parents' expectations – for Ritva, this was very much tied up with her schoolwork.

In this article we have suggested that pen-pal writing formed an arena of communication which allowed the two girls to share experiences, nurture mutual feelings, and give each other support – elements which might have been lacking in their relationships with both adults and peers locally. During the period 1939–1945, Ritva changed class six times, requiring her to constantly adapt to new class environments and peer relationships, but with Ella she could enjoy a sense of continuity in a friendship that was free from the peer-group pressure and power dynamics at play elsewhere in her life. Our interpretation is that the pen-pal correspondence provided a safe place where both girls could feel emotionally open and confide in each other.[75]

Through writing each other letters, Ella and Ritva were able to transcend the otherwise quite strict emotional boundaries in their family relationships, and to a lesser extent peer relationships – especially in Ritva's case. Friendships in the immediate neighbourhood were an important everyday source of peer support, but as our case study has shown, a pen pal could sometimes provide a more consistent source of friendship during the upheavals of war.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

[75]William R. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling. A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Taskinen, *Social Lives in Letters*, 350.

Funding

This work was supported by the Research Council of Finland Centre of Excellence in the History of Experiences (HEX), Tampere University (Antti Malinen) and Faculty of Social Sciences (SOC), Tampere University (Mervi Kaarninen).

Notes on contributors

Antti Malinen, Senior research fellow, Academy of Finland Centre of Excellence in the History of Experience (HEX), specialises in the History of Childhood and Family, and his main research focus is on how families and children are coping and influenced by political and social crises, including military conflicts. Currently Malinen is leading a 4-year project, *Rejected, Unheard, and Gaining a Voice: Children's Experiences of Abuse in Foster Care. What Inhibited and What Enabled Them to Share These Experiences 1950–2025*, funded by the Kone Foundation. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1967-5871.

Mervi Kaarninen is Senior Lecturer in History at Tampere University and a Research Fellow at the Academy of Finland Centre of Excellence in the History of Experience (HEX). She has published a number of books and articles on her research interests which include the history of childhood, youth and youth culture, gender history, and the history of education and universities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1810-2913.

ORCID

Antti Malinen http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1967-5871
Mervi Kaarninen http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1810-2913