

# THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A WAR REFUGEE: THE CASE OF A FINNISH BOY

*Triinu Ojamaa*

*Senior Research Fellow*

*Estonian Cultural History Archives*

*Estonian Literary Museum, Estonia*

*triinu.ojamaa@kirmus.ee*

**Abstract:** The article observes the different stages of the gradual process by which Olev Mikiver became a refugee, following the formation and interweaving of his professional (artist's) identity, his identity as a soldier and as a refugee, based on his private letters. The study mainly focuses on four letters written by Mikiver during the Finnish Continuation War, in which he participated as a volunteer in 1943–1944; these volunteers later became known as the Finnish Boys. The analysis of the letters focuses on the topics discussed in the letters and on Mikiver's word usage. In addition to verbal means of expression, visual means have also been observed to gain additional information about the changes in identity, attitudes, and mood of the letter-writer. The analysis showed that despite Mikiver remaining a devoted artist, he adopted the soldier identity in a relatively short time and no conflict arose between the two identities. In 1944, Mikiver fled to Sweden. Based on the letters he sent to his friend Ilmar Laaban between 1948 and 1993, some observations have also been made about how he coped with refugee life in Sweden. In the post-war period, the opportunity to continue as an artist in exile, on the one hand, and the sense of solidarity with other Finnish Continuation War veterans on the other hand, helped Mikiver overcome his depression as a refugee.

**Keywords:** Finnish Boys, identity, Olev Mikiver, private letters, refugee

## INTRODUCTION

The article deals with the different stages of the process by which Olev Mikiver became a refugee. Mikiver was born in Loksa, Estonia, in 1922, and died in Malmö, Sweden, in 1994. In 1941, Mikiver graduated from Tallinn Secondary School of Science and continued his studies at Pallas Art School with the dream of becoming a professional artist. This was during World War II, with Estonia under German occupation. In 1943, many young men who came under pressure to join the *Waffen SS* Estonian Legion, but who, despite their anti-communist

beliefs, were not ready to wear a German uniform, escaped to Finland, Mikiver among them. In Helsinki, he tried to continue his studies at Ateneum, but since all Finnish male students had gone to the front, he decided to join the army as a volunteer and fight in the Continuation War against the Soviet Union. According to statistics released by the Finnish Headquarters in January 1944, about 26% of the 2,500 Estonian volunteers were students (Uustalu 1977: 41); these were men in the early stages of their ideological, ethical, and professional formation. At the end of the war, they planned to return home, thus their stay in Finland can be considered a kind of temporary stay abroad during which the volunteers didn't define themselves as refugees. They fought on the Karelian front until August 1944, when the Estonian infantry regiment was disbanded.<sup>1</sup> Some of the volunteers then fled to Sweden and sought asylum, marking the beginning of their real period of exile. Some others returned to Estonia and continued fighting under the command of the German army. Since they had come from Finland, Estonians at home started calling them the Finnish Boys (Pillak 2010: 451). In late autumn, the German troops retreated, the Red Army conquered Estonia and Mikiver fled across the sea for the second time – this time to Sweden. His temporary stay abroad came to an end and he became a refugee of war in the most conventional sense.

This article examines, firstly, the development of the balance between occupational identity and the soldier's identity of Mikiver as a young creative person and, secondly, his understanding of himself as a refugee. In addition, some observations are made about his coping with the changes in the war and in exile. The study is based on the principle according to which identity formation is a process that continues throughout life. The origins and meanings of the individuals' multiple identities usually derive from their interactions with the social groups that surround them (Ryan & Deci 2014: 225–226). Individuals create their unique identities from various components, with refugees, soldiers, and artists as social groups playing a central role in this study. Identity is inherently context-sensitive and thus, as a consequence of changes in social context, shifts can occur in one's identity process (Oyserman et al. 2014: 81). In different situations some traits, roles, social group memberships, etc. may prove more important than some others, but some identities can maintain their position in changing circumstances. A good example here is the artists' occupational identity, about which Simpson (1981: 63) writes that for artists, it is a kind of mode of consciousness or a way of being in the world, not simply a type of work.

In this study, I use Mikiver's private letters as the main research source. Previous research has shown that there are several reasons why letters could be relevant material for my research. Firstly, it is widely accepted that writing can stimulate self-reflection and thus act as a prerequisite for identity construction

(see, for example, Elliott et al. 2006: 19). As for soldiers, letter writing can also be regarded as a means by which they maintain their civilian identity in the midst of war (Hanna 2003: 1339). In the case of refugees, correspondence first and foremost helps maintain emotional ties between family members (DeHaan 2010: 107; Kurvet-Käosaar 2019: 83). Secondly, examining the letters from the reader's point of view, one can say that in these letters we can learn not only what the soldiers were doing, but also what they were thinking, feeling, and experiencing (Kohn 2010: 9), which helps us understand the shifts in their identity and their sense of belonging to a certain group. Several studies (e.g., Stanley 2004: 208) show that letters always represent the moment of their production. Taskinen et al. (2022: 579) write about the letters written in wartime, arguing that these handwritten sources, similar to diaries, "have the most immediate connection to the actual war events as experienced by ordinary people. In the case of soldiers' letters, they are usually the only written source material available directly from the trenches and from the midst of combat." Thus, these sources provide valuable information about historical events in a broader sense, as well as about each individual who happened to be in the midst of these events.

## **RESEARCH SOURCES AND APPROACH**

Olev Mikiver's letters belong to the personal collection of Ilmar Laaban, and are preserved at the Estonian Cultural History Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum.<sup>2</sup> Four letters have survived from the years 1943–1944, when Mikiver participated as a volunteer in the Finnish Continuation War; twenty-six letters are from the years 1948–1993, when he lived as a refugee in Sweden. The addressee of the first letter is unknown. At the beginning of the letter, Mikiver addresses his comrades who, like himself, escaped from Estonia to Finland, but who had not joined the Finnish army. They probably shared lodgings, wrote and read letters together, which was common practice during wartime.<sup>3</sup> Mikiver's first letter finally reached Ilmar Laaban, who kept it among his belongings until his legacy was handed over to the archives. The rest of Mikiver's letters were addressed to Laaban, his closest friend, who after World War II became a famous surrealist poet, translator, art and literary critic. A month after arriving in Helsinki, Laaban, who did not intend to become a soldier, moved illegally to Sweden. Despite the differences in their wartime decisions and choices, their friendship survived. They spent their lives in different cities in Sweden and exchanged letters until Mikiver's death.

In my research, I focused in more detail on letters written during the war. I analysed the topics discussed in the letters to show what were the most important problems for Mikiver at the time of writing. Since word usage can reflect the letter-writer's process of identity formation and indicate changes in the understanding of the war, I paid special attention to Mikiver's word usage in his letters. In addition to verbal means of expression, I also observed visual means. I analysed differences in signatures, through which additional information can be obtained about changes in the writer's self-identity, attitudes, and mood. I analysed each letter in its context, trying to (1) show the military and/or political situation at the time of writing,<sup>4</sup> and (2) identify the geographic location of the letter-writer in Finland at the time of writing.<sup>5</sup> In doing this, I relied on the articles of historians and activists of the Finnish Boys' movement, published after the war, as well as Mikiver's memoirs. The twenty-six letters Mikiver wrote to Laban in exile provide a kind of retrospective dimension for his development during the war. The main aim of the article is to demonstrate how a balance developed between Mikiver's artist and soldier identities in his war letters. I also present an insight to the letters written in exile striving to highlight some details that show how Mikiver's two important identities, artist and soldier, are intertwined with the refugee identity.

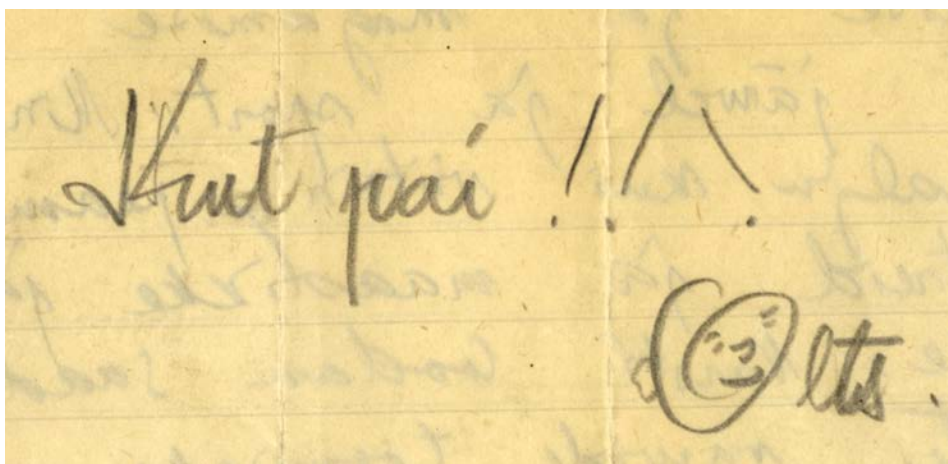
## **ANALYSIS OF OLEV MIKIVER'S LETTERS**

### **The first war letter**

The first letter<sup>6</sup> is undated and the place of writing is not indicated. Based on its content and contextual sources, the time of writing may be the summer of 1943. In his memoirs, Mikiver (2004: 66–67) writes that together with about 150 men who fled from Estonia to Finland in the early spring of 1943, he was recruited into the army in May. According to the procedural rules of the Finnish Army, all recruits were first sent to Infantry Training Centres. The Estonians who arrived in the spring were settled in Jalkala, a nice rural place more than twenty kilometres from the front line, where they stayed until the autumn (Rebas 1962: 17; Uustalu 1977: 22), which means that Mikiver probably wrote the letter in Jalkala. At the beginning of the letter, Mikiver turns to his comrades without mentioning any names. In addition to an overview of his first volunteer experiences in the Finnish army, he asks them to write about their life in Finland after fleeing their homeland and to forward his field postal address to Laaban if they were to meet him in Helsinki, which they succeeded in doing. The letter is very short and hardly touches on the topic of the

war – the emphasis is on volunteers' leisure. Mikiver writes that in addition to military training, eating, and sleeping, which are among soldiers' obligatory activities, men can often lie in the sun and go boating. Mikiver himself was mainly engaged in painting, for which he used every free moment. He painted landscapes and portraits of his Finnish comrades that they could send to their girlfriends. He was waiting for a holiday to visit Helsinki so that he and buy some oil paints and watercolours.

In the text of the first letter, Mikiver's tendency to write about serious things in a funny way emerges clearly. His sentences may or may not be ambiguous, they hide his real feelings and attitudes, and this peculiarity complicates analysis of the text of his letters. I will start analysing the first letter from its final part, which attracts attention first of all due to its visual design. At the end of the letter, Mikiver plays with the word *goodbye* (*Kut pai!!!*), distorting its spelling. He signs the letter with his nickname *Oltis* where the first letter *O* is designed as a laughing face which looks like a modern good mood emoticon (see Fig. 1) and indicates a carefree mood, which seems unconvincing in a wartime context.



**Figure 1.** Olev Mikiver's signature in the first letter (EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4, 30/45).

The word usage in the text paragraphs that describe life in the training camp can easily mislead the reader. When reading, the question of whether it is his intention to sound naïve and ignorant, or whether he is indeed naïve, arises. Irony cannot be excluded from the following paragraph:

*As you know, I am in the Finnish army. Our life here is extremely comfortable. We are currently in a training camp and will probably move*

*to the front sometime in the autumn. Some guys have already been there and, according to them, life there was quite enjoyable. (EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4, 29/45; my emphasis)*<sup>7</sup>

The words *extremely comfortable* and *quite enjoyable* do not fit with the general imagination about war; therefore, the attitude towards the war expressed by Mikiver does not seem to be serious. Reading the whole letter reveals that after about three months in the training camp, Mikiver is still thinking mainly about painting and tries to act like an artist. Since he had joined the army, his freedoms and opportunities to practice painting were limited and, in his view, this was the only negative aspect of being a soldier. The first letter shows that Mikiver respected the military order, but his sense of belonging to the army was completely formal. His perception of war and soldier's identity were very weak and his occupational, or artist's, identity dominated.

### **The second war letter**

The second letter<sup>8</sup> was written four months later, on 12 October 1943, and addressed personally to Laaban in Stockholm. At the time of writing, Mikiver was serving as a private in the Vallila Battalion (III/IR 47), which was located in Ollila, approximately three kilometres behind the front line. There was no intensive military activity in this area. The soldiers were busy digging trenches, but at the same time preparations were made to move closer to the front line (Mikiver 2004: 69–70). At the beginning of October, the unit was transferred to Rajajoki, where the volunteers gained their first experience of the front (Laar 2010a: 442), thus Mikiver moved to the front line right after writing his second letter. The second letter was written in response to the one sent by Laaban from Stockholm and, as in the first letter, various cultural topics dominate. Mikiver writes that he misses the training-camp days, where soldiers had much more time for cultural activities, which were similar to those they had both participated in in Estonia before the war. Mikiver discusses Finnish wartime art life and says that during the next holiday he will visit an art exhibition in Helsinki. He is also interested in the latest trends in Swedish fine art and asks Laaban to send him the catalogue of an exhibition in Stockholm. The letter reveals that Mikiver still paints as often as possible, despite the situation at the front, where shooting, which, admittedly, is not intense, happens every day. Nevertheless, he feels that he is becoming a bit amateurish and supposes that this is caused by certain changes that are guiding his current life – his use of time is becoming more and more affected by daily military duties. In his first letter, Mikiver uses

the phrases *extremely comfortable* and *quite enjoyable* to describe military life; in the second letter, he characterises his life as entirely soldierly hustle and bustle (EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4, 1/1–1/2). The carefree mood that was characteristic of his first letter has faded and his attitude toward being a soldier seems to be moving rapidly in a negative direction. However, in the same letter, he also expresses an opposite view, which is summarised in the following sentence:

*Despite our continuous cursing, sometimes brighter thoughts still burst out, as does pride in our current mission. (EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4, 1/1; my emphasis)*

Based on the works of historians, I will point out some reasons that may have triggered Mikiver's pride in the mission. In 1943, at the time of writing the letter, the secret Men to Finland! campaign was running in Estonia, launched within the framework of the resistance movement directed against the German occupation. According to the principles of the movement, the main goal of the Estonians' struggle in Finland was to support the restoration of independence in their homeland. The volunteers' sense of mission was expressed in a patriotic slogan, The Freedom of Finland and the Honour of Estonia, which supported their pride of mission (Laantee 1975: 17; Laar 2010a: 443). In parallel with pride, the Finnish Boys' sense of togetherness and group identity developed. Mikiver's second letter contains several details that point to his identity formation process, including changes in word usage. At the beginning of the service, the volunteers' Finnish language skills were poor, which caused misunderstandings between Finnish instructors and Estonian trainees. Language courses were organised to teach Estonians Finnish military commands (Uustalu 1977: 41). Together with acquiring military vocabulary, the Finnish Boys' mixed language or slang also began to develop, in which the military terms as well as some Estonian ordinary words were replaced with Finnish words (for example, *sotamies* (soldier), *korsu* (trench), *rippuli* (stomach flu), *loma* (holiday), etc.). The mixed language, used first and foremost for volunteers' in-group communication, became an important identity marker.<sup>9</sup> To some extent, it also spread outside the group, perhaps with the aim of demonstrating their soldier identity. For instance, in the first letter, Mikiver used the Estonian word *puhkus* (holiday) (EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4, 29/45), but in the second, despite the fact that he knew that his addressee did not speak Finnish, we can find its Finnish equivalent *loma* (holiday) (EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4, 1/1). Two conclusions can be drawn from Mikiver's word usage. Firstly, these two letters reflect Mikiver's gradual adoption of the soldier identity. Secondly, using the slang-like mixed language of his new in-group, Mikiver hints at the fact that in addition to their sense of

belonging together as school friends, sharing common interests, values, etc., they now, in this situation of war, belong to different groups: Mikiver to soldiers and Laaban to war refugees.

By the time of writing the second letter, Mikiver had served in the army for about half a year. During this time, his naïve imagination almost disappeared. His attitude towards war, shaped by both pessimism and optimism, can be considered more realistic. According to the letter, the main source of Mikiver's pessimism is the endless military routine. His optimism reflects best in the signature *Olts*, where *O* depicts an eager soldier going to fulfil his mission with a gun on his shoulder (see Fig. 2).



**Figure 2.** Olev Mikiver's signature in the second letter (EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4, 1/3).

Mikiver's second letter reveals several important details about his being an artist and a soldier, but in addition it reveals something inherent about the role of correspondence in soldiers' lives. He writes to Laaban:

*Your letter was in every sense an uplifting phenomenon in our present stage of life; it brought a kind of peace and the vibe of ordinary life to our entirely soldierly hustle and bustle.* (EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4, 1/1)



Several researchers have pointed out that letter writing has a therapeutic role for people who are isolated from normal life, be they soldiers or prisoners (see, for example, Maybin 2000; Laanes 2020; Hollo 2023). Mikiver's letter shows that both writing a letter and receiving one have an important effect when coping with the stresses of war.

### **The third war letter**

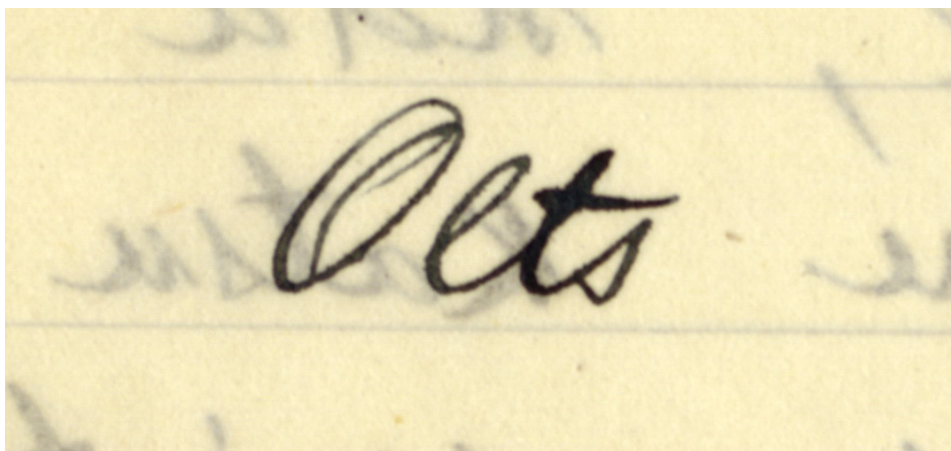
The third letter<sup>10</sup> was written on 10 February 1944, four months after the second one. At the beginning of 1944, an officers' school and liaison courses for Estonian volunteers were established in Finland (Talpak 1962: 13). Mikiver was interested in an officer's career, but due to others' perception of him as an artist, he was considered too bohemian to become an officer and was sent to liaison courses. Mikiver wrote the third letter right after returning from these courses to his unit, where his life continued in a bunker and in the trenches. At the same time, Marshal Mannerheim signed an order to form Infantry Regiment 200, which consisted of only Estonian volunteers, whose number had increased to 2,400 men. On the one hand, this event influenced the volunteers' self-esteem in a positive direction (Laar 2010b: 35), although on the other hand, for some soldiers this reorganisation seemed a sign that tough battles were to be expected. These speculations affected the volunteers' mood and attitude to the war in a negative way.

In the third letter, Mikiver alludes to his contemplations about a possible escape from Finland to Sweden for the first time – he knew that several volunteers had already left the army and fled there. Mikiver writes how happy he was when he received the art exhibition catalogue sent by Laaban from Stockholm: he would have liked to be there and live a normal life. In order to analyse Mikiver's attitude to the war at the beginning of 1944, I would highlight the following sentence:

*We live under anxiety specific to our current times and feel, so to say, a certain restlessness in our blood. (EKM EKLA, F 351, M 20: 4, 2/5, my emphasis)*

This sentence, especially the word *anxiety*, indicates fading optimism and an increasingly depressed mood, thus perfectly reflecting Mikiver's changed attitude to the war in comparison with the previous letter. In addition, the third letter shows that Mikiver critically monitors his own and his fellow soldiers' behaviour. He writes that before the soldiers do something, for example, go to the sentry post, "they tell everyone and everything to fuck off just in case" (EKM

EKLA, F 351, M 20: 4, 2/5), because they may never be back and they feel hopeless about the nearest future. Over time, the volunteers' language has become more vulgar and rude; however, this can be considered a common phenomenon in war.<sup>11</sup> Why do people, including soldiers, use the so-called F-word? Bad or rude language can be characterised as social action used to mark and strengthen identification with a group (Tysdahl 2008: 69). In addition to that, swear words can have a cathartic role in a situation in which people experience strong negative emotions, thus helping them cope with anger (Popuşoi et al. 2018: 215). In the case of the Finnish Boys, swear words probably helped to suppress their anxiety for a moment, but in the context of Mikiver's letter, his sentence containing the F-words can also be regarded as a symbolic act of ending relations with life. By the time of writing the third letter, being a soldier had gained at least as much weight in Mikiver's life as being an artist. He writes that it is impossible to work on an oil painting in a bunker as it requires long preparation, but that he can occasionally only use watercolours. He feels that his cultural fanaticism is beginning to recede, and he is worried about his mental decay. The signature of the third letter (see Fig. 3) seems to be simply a neutral name which, unlike the previous two signatures, has no connotations. Based on the signature, it can be concluded that there is nothing left of the cheerful



**Figure 3.** Olev Mikiver's signature in the third letter (EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4, 2/5).

artist or soldier with an optimistic sense of mission. The signature could show a developing identity crisis between being a soldier and an artist, although this is just one possible interpretation.

### **The fourth war letter**

The fourth letter<sup>12</sup> was written half a year later, on 7 August 1944. In the meantime, the most dramatic events took place on the Karelian Isthmus. On 9 June, a well-prepared Soviet attack began using their superiority in armament and manpower. In those battles, the volunteers who found themselves in the midst of retreating Finns, had to go through a real baptism of fire (Uustalu 1977: 44–45; Laar 2010a: 442–443). The events of summer 1944 changed the course of the war radically. Finland began to move towards a peace treaty with the Soviet Union, a political step that influenced Finnish soldiers' and civilians' expectations (Kivimäki & Hyvärinen 2022: 94) as well as the Estonian volunteers' future possibilities to stay in Finland. After the surrender of Vyborg, the situation in the region stabilised, and the Finnish Boys were reassigned to the River Vuoksi line, where military action was modest (Laar 2010a: 443). Mikiver's fourth letter originates from this period.

In the letter, Mikiver informs Laaban about the fate of their mutual friends. He also talks about the most important things that had happened in his own life over the past six months, such as getting stomach flu, staying in hospital, and returning to the front in early June – just on the eve of the Red Army offensive. He describes some military activities in which he took part, as well as the tasks he had to perform as a liaison officer. In his letters to Laaban, Mikiver does not write much about the war. Several researchers have made similar observations about letters written on a front line; for example, Hämmerle (2014: 2/4) writes that the war functioned as a catalyst for letter writing, but also that the subject of the war remained marginal in letters. One reason may have been censorship, which prohibited the description of military details, especially if they showed the failure of the army. Another possible reason is the letter writer's desire to escape from reality: exchanging letters with someone living in the normal world allowed them to go back in time in their mind's eye to their pre-war self (see, for example, Laanes 2020: 12–13). In the fourth letter, Mikiver writes more about events in the war than in his previous letters. This can be explained by the fact that the volunteers' service in the Finnish Army was coming to an end, and the censor's interest in the content of their letters decreased.

The fourth letter shows that the vague feeling expressed in the third letter – that something bad was about to happen – had become a reality. The letter also reflects a new shift in Mikiver's personal relationship with the war, which is clearly summarised in the following passage:

*So hello, Labunn.<sup>13</sup> I felt deep happiness that you could not resist the temptation to write to me. Since I, too, am a mere weak mortal being, I answer you almost immediately. (EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4, 3/7)*

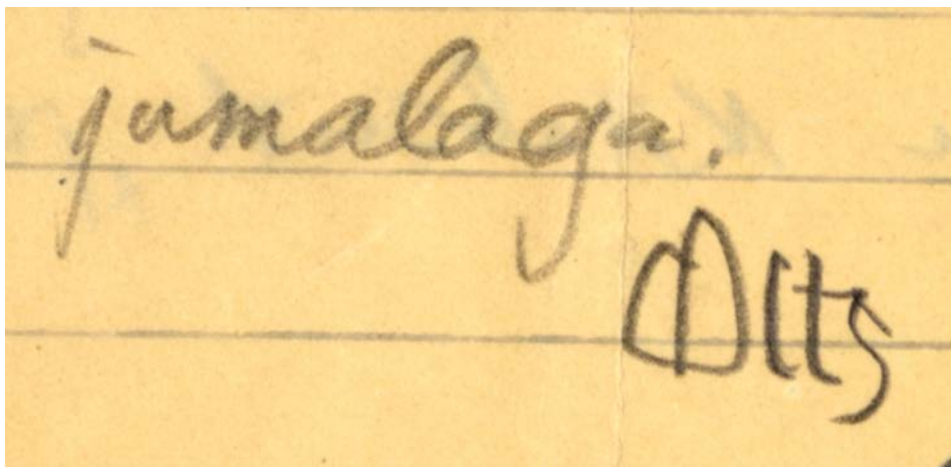
According to my interpretation, Mikiver here comes to understand his own mortality, admitting that when planning activities in a war, one has to take into account that any moment can turn out to be one's last. First and foremost, this realisation could have been influenced by the death of their close schoolmate Sergei Veskimets, who was killed in the battle near Jäppilä on 10 June 1944 (Leemets 1997: 382). Using a euphemistic expression, Mikiver informs Laaban about what had happened. He writes that things with Sergei are really bad because all the signs indicate that "he was pushing up the daisies" (EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4, 3/7). In the same letter, Mikiver also talks about some other schoolmates who were wounded or killed in action. He always finds or invents a variant instead of the word *death*. In his unusual idioms, one can see Mikiver striving for a unique expression, and there is no doubt that the incidents he writes about made him face his own possible death.

The fourth letter is unusual for its thematic structure as Mikiver writes alternately about tragic and funny things. The section talking about death is followed by a sudden turn in the mood of the letter: Mikiver begins to tell stories about his absurd war experiences.

*I did not take part in the clashes in June, which were really the most terrible and where Sergei got lost. At that time, I was returning from my holiday and was looking for my unit, following all the rules of military arts to the letter. I once found myself near a village that, as some soldiers swore by all saints, was full of Russians. We were placed on the edge of the village, we had to lie on our stomachs, with guns in hands, and the point was that the Russians could get out of the village only at the price of our lives. After a day-long wait, a right-minded Finnish soldier came to us from the village, hauling a sick cow, saying there were no more living souls there. Thus, the words from the hymnal songbook, "All our labour is in vain", came true. I experienced something similar also under Vyborg, when with a group of ten men I went to conquer a small island, which, in that case, turned out to be inhabited by sheep. (EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4, 3/7–3/8)*

When writing his letters, Mikiver knew that Laaban, a young surrealist poet, did not value the humorous style, which was completely different from the erudite and sophisticated manner of expression used by Laaban himself. Commenting

on his humorous stories, Mikiver wrote self-ironically that his texts could merely be considered experiments that tried to shock the reader with vulgarity (EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4, 3/7). According to Kaugver (2020: 43), who also participated in the Continuation War, humour was still a good companion for the soldiers in this “damned war”. Humour never disappears in times of conflict but continues to function in different ways and plays different roles; for example, it releases tension and helps people survive in spiritually difficult situations (Holman & Kelly 2001: 247). Mikiver was aware of the fact that Laaban was not interested in the subject of war at all, regardless of whether the stories were funny or dramatic. Nevertheless, he wrote these stories and sent them to Laaban; an important reason may be his need to write as a creative activity. In one of his post-war letters, Mikiver sent the verses in which he characterises himself as a person who is used to scratching paper with a pen devotedly, because writing has a therapeutic effect on him (EKM EKLA f. 352: 20: 4, 18/32). These verses are dated 5 May 1982, when Mikiver was living in Malmö, Sweden, and refer to the therapy he then needed to overcome his problems as a refugee. In the days of the Continuation War, Mikiver tried to maintain his mental balance primarily as an artist, with literary activity of secondary importance. In the summer of 1944, however, it was easier to engage in writing than painting. In the course of retreating, Mikiver could only make a few drawings in pastel because their unit was constantly on the move and often came under fire, as he wrote to Laaban in the fourth letter.



**Figure 4.** Olev Mikiver’s signature in the fourth letter (EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4, 3/8).

The signature in the fourth letter (Fig. 4) offers various possibilities for interpretation; for example, the *O* bisected by a vertical line gives the impression of Mikiver's spiritual split. This interpretation is strongly influenced by the content of the letter. It is also possible that the signature just consists of stylised letters that do not carry any special meaning.

The fourth letter was also the last sent by Mikiver to Laaban from the front line. On 19 August 1944 Mikiver, like the majority of the volunteer group,<sup>14</sup> was repatriated to his homeland to continue fighting for a free Estonia, and together with this, his temporary stay abroad, or the pre-exile period, came to an end.

I will summarise the changes in Mikiver's identity formation process, which are revealed in his war letters. In the first letter, Mikiver expresses attitudes that are appropriate for a civilian and an artist. Despite the fact that he already wears a soldier's uniform, the war touches him as part of a background that is inevitable, but not particularly important. The two months of training camp life that preceded the writing of the letter have not shaped him into a soldier, in fact his soldier identity is almost non-existent. The second letter shows that Mikiver has developed a stronger sense of belonging and camaraderie towards other soldiers. His artist identity has not receded, but the soldier identity has begun to form alongside it. This change in Mikiver's identity structure has taken place over the four months that separate the second letter from the first. The interval between the second and third letters is four months. During this time, Mikiver's identity as a soldier has stabilised and he seems to be concerned about maintaining his artist skills and identity during wartime. In the third letter, Mikiver hints for the first time in correspondence with Laaban that he is considering his opportunities for exile in Sweden. But he does not develop this topic, nor does he use the word, perhaps because of censorship. In the last war letter, Mikiver's soldier identity dominates; however, the reason is probably not the weakening of his artist identity, but rather the complicated situation at the front.

### **Some observations on letters written in exile**

In November 1944, the Soviet Army occupied Estonia for the second time. One-hundred-and-sixty-two Finnish Boys who had fought for Estonia's freedom had to escape the homeland again; many others were sent to forced labour camps in Siberia (Laar 2010a: 445). Mikiver managed to flee to Sweden and after he settled in Malmö, his correspondence with Laaban, who lived in Stockholm, continued. They shared a common ethno-cultural background and participated in the activities of the exile community; however, unlike Laaban, Mikiver belonged

to the veterans of the Finnish Continuation War. Several studies examining the war veterans or ex-soldiers show that the impact of war can last a lifetime, causing ongoing depression. Hunt (2007), who interviewed World War II veterans about their distress, noticed that in addition to the issues caused by the war, their problems could also be related to some recent event that had nothing to do with the war. Thus, the war was not the interviewees' only or most important stressor. Similarly to Hunt's interviewees, the Finnish Boys also had different stressors. In addition to the memories of the horrors of war that they had to deal with in their minds, they had lost their homeland and family and had to overcome stigmatisation as refugees, finding a way to survive in a new cultural environment. Mikiver's letters to Laaban after the second half of the forties do not contain allusions to traumatic war experiences, but rather the depression of the refugee is clearly expressed. In 1948 – Mikiver's fourth year in Sweden – he writes that he is suffering bouts of depression (F 352: 20: 4, 6/12). In an undated letter, scribbled with a watercolour brush, Mikiver tries to explain his inner cultural conflict, which seems to be caused by his inability to be an Estonian and a Swede at the same time (EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4, 30/50–30/52).

All the Finnish Boys tried to adapt to the new society. They looked for (professional) work or continued studies in universities, and in parallel with adaptation tried to maintain contact with their brothers-in-arms. In the 1950s, they established Finnish Boys' organisations in Toronto, Stockholm, and Gothenburg. They had meetings in which they recalled the war, but they also held parties like all young people. They launched some publications, including *Pöhjala Tähistel* (Beacons of the North), in which Mikiver, who continued his studies in arts, was active as an illustrator (Rebas 2010; Pillak 2010). Later, Mikiver worked as a professional theatre decorator and artist in Malmö; he also contributed memoir-based stories to the Swedish Estonian newspaper *Teataja* (Gazette). Themes of war and life at the front persisted in his creative works until his late years, but there were no indications of the deeply painful consequences of war – his paintings and stories were rather nostalgic and full of simple human warmth and humour. Some references to serving in the army can also be found in his letters to Laaban. For example, in December 1981, he writes that when painting, he behaves as if he were still a soldier. His painting supplies are arranged in a specific order so that he can follow the principle of “take it from here and put it there”, which originates from the volunteers' training camp where they practised disassembling and assembling a gun until they could do it with their eyes closed (EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4, 17/29). Previous studies have shown that the transfer of wartime habits to peacetime life is not an unusual phenomenon, in addition to which the creation of veterans' organisations in exile,

which provide social support to their members, can be considered a widespread practice. For example, in the article ““Once a Soldier, a Soldier Forever”: Exiled Zimbabwean Soldiers in South Africa” Maringira and Carrasco (2015) analyse the stories of soldiers who went into exile in South Africa as deserters and formed the Association of Military Men of Zimbabwe. One of the members recalls how the instructor of the training camp moulded him into a “soldier forever”, which means that he became a soldier both in the physical and mental sense; he also explains how the skills and habits acquired in the war help him make a better career in exile (op. cit.: 321–325). Thus, it is possible to find universal features in the attitudes, ways of coping, and sense of belonging to brothers-in-arms of all ex-soldiers, no matter in which war they have fought and in which country they have established a new home after the war.

## **CONCLUSION**

The article deals with Olev Mikiver’s process of becoming a refugee, which was triggered by his escape from Estonia to Finland. Today, Mikiver is known in Estonia as an exile artist. In 1943, during the German occupation, many young men left Estonia for Finland. There were several art, music, and philology students among them who hoped to continue their studies abroad. In Finland, it turned out that their only legal opportunity to stay there was to join the Finnish Army and fight as volunteers in the Continuation War against the Red Army. Thus, the students became soldiers, and Mikiver was one of them. Like other volunteers, Mikiver did not define himself as a refugee. He came to Finland for a short period and intended to return to his homeland as soon as it was liberated from occupation. In the autumn of 1944, after a peace treaty was concluded between Finland and the Soviet Union, he left Finland for Estonia and continued to fight against the Red Army as it conquered Estonia. In the late autumn of 1944, when Soviet troops occupied Estonia, Mikiver fled for a second time, to Sweden. He sought asylum and became a war refugee in the most conventional sense of the term.

The research on the gradual process of becoming a refugee was based on the war letters that Mikiver wrote to his friend Ilmar Laaban at the Karelian front in 1943–1944. In addition, his private letters written in exile between 1948 and 1993 have been examined. The article demonstrates how the relationship between Mikiver’s artist and soldier identities change. It also highlights some details that show how Mikiver’s two important identities are intertwined with his new, refugee identity. The analysis of the letters shows the process of his identity formation very clearly as they express the author’s immediate feelings



and thoughts in chronological order. During the war years, being an artist and a soldier were the two most important components of his identity. Since identity is a situation-sensitive phenomenon, the balance between Mikiver's professional (artist) identity and his soldier identity changed remarkably over time. In the first letter, his artist identity dominated and the sense of belonging among soldiers was completely formal. Each subsequent letter showed that the importance of being a soldier shifted to achieve a more significant position. In spite of his remaining a devoted artist, Mikiver began to feel a stronger sense of belonging among his fellow soldiers, now known as the Finnish Boys. Mikiver's letters to Laaban sent during exile reflect his feelings, attitudes and mood as a refugee. In Sweden, Mikiver worked as an artist, but his post-war letters show that, in addition to his artist identity, he also retained his soldier identity. Based on the letters, we can say that the soldier identity supported Mikiver in coping with depression as a refugee. Former volunteers founded their own organisations, which continued to generate the Finnish Boys' sense of pride and also helped them avoid the feeling of being stigmatised as refugees. When reading the memories of the Finnish Boys, one gets the impression that some of them became even "more Finnish Boys" afterwards than during the war. Based on Mikiver's letters, we can conclude that the opportunity to preserve his artist identity supported his ability to cope during the war and helped avoid the internal tension that could accompany the acquisition of a new, soldier, identity. In exile, in turn, the soldier identity and Finnish Boys' camaraderie helped him overcome depression as a refugee.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The article was supported by Estonian Literary Museum research grant EKM 8-2/22/1 and by the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies (TK 145) through the European Regional Development Fund, as well as R&D project EKKD65.

## **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> For political reasons, Estonian volunteers were not a topic in Finland. Several decades after World War II, in 1991, Finland began to recognise officially the participation of the Estonians in the war between Finland and the Soviet Union, and in 1992 Finland awarded commemorative medals to the volunteers. Due to that, the signs of a struggle for their recognition are totally missing from the life stories collected in the 1990s. In the stories of those who fought in German uniforms, the authors, on the contrary, feel the necessity to justify their status and activities in the war (see, e.g., Kõresaar 2011: 9).

- <sup>2</sup> EKM EKLA, F 352.
- <sup>3</sup> Often, soldiers' letters were not intimate documents, but addressed to a wider circle (see, for example, Kalkun 2015: 143), be it family or friends.
- <sup>4</sup> The letters were subject to censorship. The censors were primarily interested in the transmission of information about the course of battles, soldiers' criticism of military life and their attitudes towards war (Junila 2012; Demm 2017).
- <sup>5</sup> Date, place, and signature are among common letter parameters (Bossis 1986: 63). The letters written at the front line corresponded to the listed formal features only partially, for example, instead of place the field postal address was used, which consists of numbers and letters.
- <sup>6</sup> EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4, 29/45.
- <sup>7</sup> All quotes from Mikiver's letters have been translated into English by the author of the article.
- <sup>8</sup> EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4, 1/1–1/3.
- <sup>9</sup> About the role of language in the formation of the sense of commonality in war as well as other factors that contribute to the creation of camaraderie, see also Rahi-Tamm & Esse 2022: 255.
- <sup>10</sup> EKM EKLA, F 351, M 20: 4, 2/4–2/5.
- <sup>11</sup> In connection with the use of swear words, a certain parallel can be drawn with the case of Snake Island in the Russo-Ukrainian War. On 24 February 2022, the Russian Navy attacked this small island in the Black Sea, the Russian officers demanding its surrender; the Ukrainian soldier answering the demand used swear words in his response. An audio clip with the conversation was leaked to the public and as a result, the international media became flooded with titles containing the phrase "Russian warship, go f\*\*\* yourself" (see, for example, Howard & Wright 2022). This episode came to symbolise the soldiers' contempt for death.
- <sup>12</sup> EKM EKLA, F 351, M 20: 4, 3/7–3/8.
- <sup>13</sup> Labunn was Ilmar Laaban's nickname, used by his schoolmates and friends until his later years.
- <sup>14</sup> Among the Finnish Boys who decided to return to their homeland on board the German ship *Waterland* were 168 officers, 162 non-commissioned officers and 1,422 soldiers. Some of the volunteers stayed in Finland and some moved illegally to Sweden (Laantee 1975: 18–19; Uustalu 1977: 73).

## ARCHIVAL SOURCES

EKM EKLA, F 352, M 20: 4 = Olev Mikiver, kolmkümmend kirja Ilmar Laabanile. 12.X.1943–26.VII 1993, dat.-ta. [Olev Mikiver, thirty letters to Ilmar Laaban. 12.X.1943–26.VII 1993, undated].

## REFERENCES

- Bossis, Mireille 1986. Methodological Journeys Through Correspondences. *Men / Women of Letters*. *Yale French Studies*, No. 71, pp. 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930022>.
- DeHaan, Kathleen A. 2010. Negotiating the Transnational Moment: Immigrant Letters as Performance of a Diasporic Identity. *National Identities*, Vol.12, No. 2, pp. 107–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14608940902929789>.
- Demm, Eberhard 2017. Censorship. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War. 1914–1918*. Online, pp. 1–25. Available at <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/censorship>, last accessed on 14 November 2022.
- Elliott, Bruce S. & Gerber, David A. & Sinke, Suzanne M. 2006. Introduction. In: Bruce S. Elliott & David A. Gerber & Suzanne M. Sinke (eds.) *Letters Across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–25.
- Hanna, Martha 2003. A Republic of Letters: The Epistolary Tradition in France During World War I. *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 108, Issue 5, pp. 1338–1361. <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/108.5.1338>.
- Hämmerle, Christa 2014. “Waiting longingly...” Love Letters in the First World War I. A Plea for a Broader Genre Concept. In: *History of Emotions. Insights into Research*, March 2014, pp. 1/4–4/7. <https://doi.org/10.14280/08241.24>. Available at <https://www.history-of-emotions.mpg.de/texts/love-letters-in-world-war-one>, last accessed on 14 November 2022.
- Hollo, Maarja 2023. “I Am Like Green Firewood – Not Going Out, Not Catching Fire!” A Prisoner’s Self-Portrait in Letters. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 89, pp 63–80. <https://doi.org/10.7592/FEJF2023.89.hollo>.
- Holman, Valerie & Kelly, Debra 2001. Introduction. War in the Twentieth Century: The Functioning of Humour in Cultural Representation. *Journal of European Studies*, Vol. 31, Issue 123, pp. 247–263. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004724410103112301>.
- Howard, Harry & Wright, Jack 2022. “Russian Warship, Go F\*\*\* Yourself”: Final Words of Ukrainian Border Guards Protecting Snake Island – just 40 Miles from Romanian Border in the Black Sea – before Kremlin navy Opened Fire Killing all 13 of Them when They Refused to Surrender. *Daily Mail*, 25 February. Available at <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10549683/Russian-warship-f-Final-words-Ukrainian-border-guards-Snake-Island.html>, last accessed on 14 November 2022.
- Hunt, Nigel. 2007. The Long-Term Effects of War Experience. *Aging & Mental Health*, Vol. 11, Issue 2, pp. 156–158. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13607860601124602>.
- Junila, Marianne 2012. Wars on the Home Front: Mobilization, Economy and Everyday Experiences. In: Tiina Kinnunen & Ville Kivimäki (eds.) *Finland in World War II: History, Memory, Interpretations*. Leiden, Boston: Brill, pp. 189–232. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004214330\\_006](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004214330_006).
- Kalkun, Andreas 2015. “Rohgem ei tiija mina teile kirjuda”. Kirjavormelid ning pere-suhete kajastused Jakob Ploomi sõjakirjades. [“I Don’t Know What Else to Write to You”. Letter Formulas and the Coverage of family Relations in Jakob Ploom’s War Letters]. In: Mirjam Hirnikus & Ave Mattheus (eds.) *Esimene maailmasõda eesti kultuuris*. Tallinna Ülikooli eesti keele ja kultuuri instituudi toimetised 17.

- [The First World War in Estonian Culture. Proceedings of the Tallinn University Institute of Estonian Language and Culture 17]. Tallinn: Tallinna Ülikool, Eesti TA Underi ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus, pp. 116–144.
- Kaugver, Raimond 2020. *Kirjad Sigridile. Sõjatandrilt ja vangilaagrist 1944–1949*. [Letters to Sigrid. From the Continuation War and the Gulag 1944–1949.] Ed. by Eneken Laanes. Tallinn: Underi ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus.
- Kivimäki, Ville & Hyvärinen, Matti 2022. Forging a Master Narrative for a Nation: Finnish History as a Script During the Second World War. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, Vol. 47, Issue 1, pp. 83–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03468755.2021.2015430>.
- Kohn, Richard H. 2010. Foreword. In: Jarausch H. Konrad (ed.) *Reluctant Accomplice: A Wehrmacht Soldier's Letters from the Eastern Front. An Ordinary German Soldier's Letters Home from Poland and Russia During World War II*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 9–12.
- Kõresaar, Ene 2011. Introduction. Remembrance Cultures of World War II and the Politics of Recognition in Post-Soviet Estonia: Biographical Perspectives. In: Ene Kõresaar (ed.) *Soldiers of Memory: World War II and Its Aftermath in Estonian Post-Soviet Life Stories*. New York: Rodopi, pp 1–34.
- Kurvet-Käosaar, Leena 2019. Tracing Emotional Bonds in Family Letters: A Pursuit of an Epistolary Melody. In: Kate Douglas & Ashley Barnwell (eds.) *Research Methodologies for Auto/biography Studies*. New York: Routledge, pp. 83–89.
- Laanes, Eneken 2020. Raimond Kaugveri kirjad Sigridile sõjatandrilt ja vangilaagrist. Saateks. [Raimond Kaugver's Letters to Sigrid from the Continuation War and the Gulag 1944–1949. Foreword.] In: Eneken Laanes (ed.) *Kirjad Sigridile. Sõjatandrilt ja vangilaagrist 1944–1949*. [Letters to Sigrid. From the Continuation War and the Gulag 1944–1949.] Tallinn: Underi ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus, pp. 5–28.
- Laantee, Karl 1975. *Estonian Volunteers in the Finnish Armed Forces 1939–1944*. Reprint from Yearbook of The Estonian Learned Society in America. Annales Societatis Litterarum Estonicae in America V.
- Laar, Mart 2010a. The Finnish Boys Movement and its Battles During World War II (Chapter I). The Fight Continues – the Finnish Boys 1944–1956 (Chapter II). Summary. In: Mart Laar & Peep Pillak & Hain Rebas & Meelis Saueauk (eds.) *Soomepoisid. Võitlus jätkub. II maailmasõjas Soome armees võidelnud Eesti vabatahtlike ajalugu 1939–2010*. [Finnish Boys – the Fight Continues (Estonian Volunteers in the Finnish Army During World War II, Their History 1939–2010).] Tallinn: Grenader, pp. 441–448.
- Laar, Mart 2010b. Soomepoiste liikumine ja nende võitlus II maailmasõjas. [The Finnish Boys Movement and its Battles During World War II.] In: Mart Laar & Peep Pillak & Hain Rebas & Meelis Saueauk (eds.) *Soomepoisid. Võitlus jätkub. II maailmasõjas Soome armees võidelnud Eesti vabatahtlike ajalugu 1939–2010*. [Finnish Boys – the Fight Continues (Estonian Volunteers in the Finnish Army During World War II, Their History 1939–2010)]. Tallinn: Grenader, pp. 27–87.
- Leemets, Margus (ed.) 1997. *Vabaduse eest: soomepoiste lühielulood*. [For Freedom: Short Life Stories of Finnish Boys.] Tallinn: Soome Sõjaveteranide Eesti Ühendus.

- Maringira, Godfrey & Carrasco, Lorena Núñez 2015. "Once a Soldier, a Soldier Forever": Exiled Zimbabwean Soldiers in South Africa. *Medical Anthropology*, Vol. 34, Issue 4, pp. 319–335, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2015.1038344>.
- Maybin, Janet 2000. Death Row Penfriends. Some Effects of Letter Writing on Identity and Relationships. In: David Barton & Nigel Hall (eds.) *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 151–177.
- Mikiver, Olev 2004. Heites pilku tagasi. Vesteid ajalehest "Teataja". [Gazing Back in Time. Feuilletons from the Newspaper "Teataja".] Hele Lüüs (ed.) *Loomingu Raamatukogu*, Vol. 29/30. Tallinn: Periodika.
- Oyserman, Daphna & Elmore, Kristen & Smith, George 2014. Self, Self-Concept, and Identity. In: Mark R. Leary & June Price Tangney (eds.) *Handbook of Self and Identity. Second Edition*. New York, London: The Guilford Press, pp. 69–104.
- Pillak, Peep 2010. The Historical Background of the Finnish Boys Movement (Foreword). Summary. In: Mart Laar & Peep Pillak & Hain Rebas & Meelis Saueauk (eds.) *Soomepoisid. Võitlus jätkub. II maailmasõjas Soome armees võidelnud Eesti vabatahtlike ajalugu 1939–2010*. [Finnish Boys – the Fight Continues (Estonian Volunteers in the Finnish Army During World War II, Their History 1939–2010).] Tallinn: Grenader, pp. 451–458.
- Popușoi, Simona A. & Havârneanu, Grigore M. & Havârneanu, Corneliu E. 2018. "Get the F#k out of My Way!". Exploring the Cathartic Effect of Swear Words in Coping With Driving Anger. *Transportation Research, Part F: Traffic Psychology and Behaviour*, Vol. 56, pp. 215–226. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trf.2018.04.013>.
- Rahi-Tamm, Aigi & Esse, Liisi 2022. 'In Spite of Everything, Life is Still Beautiful!' War and Postwar Experiences in Estonia on the Example of Oskar Nõmmela's Life Story (1893–1969). *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 2, pp. 249–269. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2022.2052916>.
- Rebas, Hain 2010. The Finnish Boys in Sweden and Their Organization in Gothenburg (Chapter IV/2, 4, 6). Summary. In: Mart Laar & Peep Pillak & Hain Rebas & Meelis Saueauk (eds.) *Soomepoisid. Võitlus jätkub. II maailmasõjas Soome armees võidelnud Eesti vabatahtlike ajalugu 1939–2010*. [Finnish Boys – the Fight Continues (Estonian Volunteers in the Finnish Army During World War II, Their History 1939–2010).] Tallinn: Grenader, pp. 450–451.
- Rebas, Robert 1962. JR 200 võitlusteel. [Fighting of the JR 200 regiment.] In: *Eesti riik ja rahvas II maailmasõjas*. [Estonian State and People in the World War II.] X. Stockholm: EMP, pp. 15–40.
- Ryan, Richard M. & Deci, Edward L. 2014. Multiple Identities Within a Single Self. A Self-Determination Theory Perspective on Internalization Within Context and Cultures. In: Mark R. Leary & June Price Tangney (eds.) *Handbook of Self and Identity. Second Edition*. New York, London: The Guilford Press, pp. 225–246.
- Simpson, Charles R. 1981. *Soho: The Artist in the City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stanley, Liz 2004. The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences. *Auto/Biography*, Vol. 12, Issue 3, pp 201– 235.

- Talpak, Karl 1962. Võitlused Soomes ja Eestis. Mälestusi eesti rügemendi asutamisest. [Fights in Finland and Estonia. Memories of the Foundation of the Estonian Regiment.] In: Richard Maasing & Richard Blumfeldt & Hans Kauri & Madis Üürike (eds.) *Eesti riik ja rahvas II maailmasõjas*. [Estonian State and People in the World War II.] X. Stockholm: EMP, pp. 7–14.
- Taskinen, Ilari & Turunen, Risto & Uusitalo, Lauri & Kivimäki, Ville 2022. Religion, Patriotism and War Experience in Digitized Wartime Letters in Finland, 1939–44. *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 57, Issue 3, pp. 577–596. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220094211066006>.
- Tysdahl, Bjørn 2008. Ibsen: The Significance of Swear-Words. *Ibsen Studies*, Vol. 8, Issue 1, pp. 69–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15021860701717852>.
- Uustalu, Evald 1977. *For Freedom Only: The Story of Estonian Volunteers in the Finnish Wars of 1940–1944*. Toronto: Northern Publications.

**Triinu Ojamaa** is senior research fellow (PhD) at the Estonian Literary Museum, Estonia, and the leader of the research group on migration and diaspora studies of the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies. Her main research areas are diasporic identity, adaptation strategy, and inter-ethnic relations in diaspora communities.

triinu.ojamaa@kirmus.ee