

# A PINK PRINCESS FROCK AND OTHER MATERIAL MEMORIES FROM A HISTORICAL PAST

This article addressed the problematic and politics of memory in relation to a difficult stage in the history of Finland. The material considered here consists of material items of memory of German and Hungarian and their Finnish-born wives and children were interned in Finland from 1944 to 1946. The difficulty of remembering and the dimensions of oblivion at the state level are discussed through an analysis of the objects.

## Introduction

In the 1990s, a girl's frock made of pink crêpe paper was found in the attic of a cottage in the village of Västervik in Vaasa, West Finland. It had been stored there years earlier and its carefully folded pleats and small rosettes of paper had been preserved exceptionally well despite the years in the cold attic. This little girl's frock provides an opportunity to look back at the conditions in which this garment was made, helping us understand why it was preserved for posterity. It is a fact that objects, material artefacts like this paper frock, are *aide-mémoires* of a kind<sup>1</sup>, aids for considering the past, presences and absences of various kinds, and the meanings of objects both past and present. 'Memory objects' of this kind have a strong visual and emotional impact on how we remember.<sup>2</sup>

This article seeks answers to what these objects may have meant to their makers under the conditions in which they were made. It also discusses how we should understand the preservation and curation of such objects to the present day. This leads to the question of what these memory objects mean to us; how their meanings can be explicated. The objects are considered through a kind of close reading in which the material object is understood visually and aesthetically alongside its materiality.

Each of the memory objects discussed in this article is related to a single phase in the history of Finland. The artefacts were made between 1944 and 1946 in the internment camps where German and Hungarians residing in Finland and their Finnish-born wives and underage children were placed at the time.<sup>3</sup> With refer-



Fig. 1: Princess frock made of crêpe paper for Gunvor Brettschneider in internment camp. Archives of Gunvor Brettschneider. Photo: Leo Kokkonen.

ence to various artefacts, the article addresses memory and its difficulties at the level of the state, and the emotional dimensions that artefacts offer to their makers, users, viewers, and to us today. These memory objects are thus associated geoculturally with a specific situation of people in traumatic circumstances. Here, I consider the 'bio-geographic'<sup>4</sup> remembering of artefacts and images with reference to the life-mapping of the past as applied by Griselda Pollock. These objects firstly visualise the past to us, but they also underline the situation of who remembers, and how to remember. This expands the perspective from the history of families

more broadly to the conflicts of everyday life and events at the time. This article also examines the image of post-war Finland previously maintained in historical research. With regard to the politics of memory, it is always necessary to consider who and what is being remembered, how and by whom. According to Aleida Assmann, the predominant perspective of memory culture involves the past as a construction that people wish to present according to their own needs. Considering via examples memories and remembering as a kind of interpretation of a constructed image of the past, this article also notes that they could possibly influence the present and its interpretations of the past.<sup>5</sup>

In broader perspective, this is an opportunity to consider the kind of memory culture that our society is prepared for today, and the kinds of things that cause discomfort, to quote Aleida Assmann again.<sup>6</sup> The artefacts discussed here place us at a stage where it is almost too late for the testimony of personal experience. The article illustrates how a traumatic past contains undiscussed areas left in shadow, where remembrance shifts between an active and a passive attitude. Assmann emphasises the fact that memories are not a hermetic system but instead apply to, reinforce, modify and polemicise themselves to become social reality. Yet, despite all the possible discomfort, we must bear in mind that the culture of remembering difficult issues is a core element of civilised society.<sup>7</sup>

In 2000, historian Niklas Jensen-Eriksen published an article noting that until then the fate of Germans in Finland in the years 1944–1947 had mostly remained outside the bounds of all historical research. His article was the first investigation based on precise documentary sources of the situation faced by German civilians in Finland in 1944 when the terms of the interim peace treaty ending the Finnish-Soviet Continuation War of 1941–1944 came into force.<sup>8</sup> Jensen-Eriksen's brief text already mentions all the important developments concerning the German nationals, to which he and several others have provided additional information. The article from 2000 can be regarded as a moral testimony of the Finnish state's actions against its own blameless citizens.<sup>9</sup> It resulted in placing the state under an ethical obligation to finally investigate the justification and consequences of its original decisions in this matter.<sup>10</sup>

## **Family memories and the Finnish culture of memory**

This article discusses the history of objects with reference to two families. The first family were German-Finnish Brettschneiders, who lived before the Second World War in Sipoo near Helsinki, where the family's German-born father, Willi (Wilhelm) Brettschneider (born 1899) was a market gardener.<sup>11</sup> He had been persuaded by his sister to come to Finland in 1920 and in 1929 he married Irene Finne (born 1891) from the village of Västervik in Vaasa.<sup>12</sup> They had three daughters, Magnhild (born 1930), Runa (1931–2014) and Gunvor (born 1934).<sup>13</sup> The



Fig.2: The lake shore at the Uotti internment camp in Lempäälä, 1944–1945, Nándor Mikola in the foreground on the left. Archives of Eeva Mikola. Photographer unknown.

pink princess frock had been made from war-time ersatz material for Gunvor, the youngest of the siblings. The whole family was interned according to the terms of Article 2 of the interim peace treaty between Finland and the Soviet Union and Great Britain, whereby Finland agreed to intern citizens of Germany and Hungary who were in Finnish territory.<sup>14</sup> Although the article did not stipulate procedures for their children and Finnish-born wives who had dual citizenship through marriage, the Finnish state decided also to intern them.<sup>15</sup> When father of the Brettschneider family was sent to an internment camp immediately in September 1944, the mother still remained in Sipoo and managed the market garden. The three daughters of the family had already been sent in August to attend school in Vaasa. The foreign affairs committee of the Finnish Council of State, however, decided in October that internment would also apply to persons with dual citizenship. Irene Brettschneider was collected from Sipoo and the girls from Västervik under military guard. The whole family was then placed in a former rest home

called Tyynelä at Oitti in Hausjärvi, now converted into internment camp no. 4. The family stayed at Oitti until November 1945 when they were sent to the large internment camp at Knipnäs in Tammisaari.<sup>16</sup>

The other artefacts, an artist's drawings from internment camp, belonged to Nándor Mikola (born 1911, originally Mikolajcsik), a Hungarian citizen at the time. He had graduated as an artist in Hungary in 1932 and had been persuaded to come to Finland in 1936 by his friend and colleague Josef Miklós, who needed help with a painting commission in Helsinki. They jointly painted the murals of the Hungaria Restaurant in the centre of Helsinki, after which Mikola remained in Finland and studied at the Central School of Industrial Art. After graduating, he was hired as a commercial artist by the Lassila & Tikanoja company in Vaasa.<sup>17</sup> Of the 304 German and Hungarian citizens in Finland that were to be originally interned, only 19 were Hungarian, including Mikola.<sup>18</sup> Later, in October 1944, also the Finnish spouses of the Hungarians and their children were interned. Nándor Mikola and his young boy were first placed in 1944 in internment camp no. 1 at the Uotti sanatorium in Lempäälä, from where they were sent in autumn 1945 to the large internment camp at the Knipnäs mental asylum at Tammisaari.<sup>19</sup> The interned German and Hungarian citizens were not released until March 1946.<sup>20</sup> In practice, almost all the internees were apolitical persons.<sup>21</sup>

What did the released German, Hungarian and Finnish citizens think of their fate? The mood is well reflected by a comment from Gunvor Brettschneider: 'One became an enemy in one's own country'.<sup>22</sup> Being released from internment was not followed by a return to any normal state of affairs. The confiscation of the property of German citizens applied to all the members of their families, which meant that life had to begin anew.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, attitudes to Germans had changed. Finland had cooperated with Germany in the Second World War, but one of the terms of the interim peace treaty of 1944 was that the Finns had to drive German troops out of Lapland. During the ensuing Lapland War of 1944–1945, the retreating Germans applied scorched earth tactics.<sup>24</sup> The burning of Lapland sharply changed the previously positive view of Germans held by the Finns. For the internees, the shame of being put in the camps led to silence. The culture of maintaining silence has been strong in Finland. For example, the Finnish civil war of 1918 spelt anguish for thousands of families, but for the losing side it also meant a silence that lasted for decades.<sup>25</sup>

Folklorist Ulla Savolainen has studied the silence of the internees and the related culture of memory with interviews of almost thirty persons who had been in the internment camps as children or in their youth.<sup>26</sup> According to her, the internments were not spoken of in Finland, because there was no public framework for such discourse, although the internees spoke about it among themselves. I would claim, however, that for the internees, life after the period spent in the camps was extremely challenging, in addition to which the feeling of shame prevented them making the matter public. Finland's attitude to its own decisions during the Sec-



Fig 3. Women's work duty at the Oitti internment camp at Hausjärvi, 1944–1945. Irene Brettschneider on the left with her daughter Magnhild in front of her. Archives of Gunvor Brettschneider. Photographer unknown.

ond World War shows that the country was not politically ready to face discussion or debate of this kind. The now famous explanations of war-time developments comparing Finland to a log floating in a stream with no effect on the course of events are an example of self-victimisation and shifting responsibility for actions and guilt.<sup>27</sup> For this reason and although internees have addressed their experiences in public, as already done by Nándor Mikola in 1980 when speaking of the internment and deprivation of freedom of himself and his young boy, and his feelings of uncertainty about their fate, society was not yet ready to respond to them.<sup>28</sup>

### The presence of artefacts of multiple chronology

The artefacts discussed here, the little girl's pink crêpe paper frock and the artist's drawings of life in internment camp, speak to us from the past while having a presence here and now. Objects surviving from history to the present, material evidence, have their own life spans and biographies.<sup>29</sup> Although we assign meanings to artefacts, the trajectories of their life spans are what illustrate their human and social contexts. Their physical presence offers concrete connections with the life span, which is never of lesser importance. But to understand their unvoiced testimony it is necessary to return to the respective historical contexts of these objects.

Gunvor Brettschneider's pink princess frock was made at the Oitti internment camp in late 1944 or early 1945. In the camps Christmas and other celebrations



Fig.4. Rear view of the princess frock made of crêpe paper for Gunvor Brettschneider in internment camp. Archives of Gunvor Brettschneider. Photo: Leo Kokkonen.

with plays and dance performances were held.<sup>30</sup> The frock was sewn by Irene Brettschneider, who could have acquired the pink and white crêpe paper for it from the canteen of the camp.<sup>31</sup> She was a skilled seamstress, and paper frock for the youngest daughter was a costume for her leading role in the play “Sleeping Beauty”. The neck opening is still lined with paper rosettes and the hem with frills of white crêpe paper. After March 1946, the frock moved on to a stage of several decades in its life span, stored in cutter swarf in the attic of a small cottage in Os-

trobothnia. It was not until the 1990s, when the cottage was sold and emptied, that the frock went on to a new stage as a well-preserved memory object of the distant years in the internment camp.<sup>32</sup>

Viewing an object like this from the past is a kind of appropriation at a distance. We are faced with a child's frock, appropriating something sad and fragile, yet also moving and endearing. What and how we are seeking before this artefact are part of the process that the child's garment produces for us. Although it can still be experienced as an object, it must be reassembled in a way to liberate the meanings entrapped in it to make them understandable for us. The princess frock challenges the present-day viewer, forcing her or him to consider what its preserved existence requires from our thinking. As a memory object, the contemporary presence of a trace from the past like this points to a background of which we ultimately always lack knowledge and experience.

As a physical object, the princess frock opens the past world of 1944–1946 as it was encountered by a fragile child aged 11. Embedded in it are not only the plays of a girl but also the skilled hands of another person, her mother. We can think of it in terms of the Finnish mother's skills of the hand transporting the worlds of the child and the adult alike from their dismal setting at the time somewhere else, to the happy endings of fairy tales. The maker's movements are marked on the pleats of the frock as if on a map of sorts, telling us about the self of the maker, the mother, and of past love in concrete terms. But we must nonetheless observe that although the paper frock still exists as an artefact, it is at the same time somewhere else. As an object, it cannot be explained without that which makes its specific materiality understandable. Despite its existing materiality, it cannot completely sever its ties with its own past.

Documentation of conditions in the camps have survived in various visual forms, such as photographs of interned families<sup>33</sup>, but there are also a few works of art that can help in understanding that difficult time. Hungarian citizen Nándor Mikola was interned in 1944 together with his four-year-old son Jouko in the Uotti camp at Lempäälä.<sup>34</sup> Mikola continued his work as an artist even there. His heirs have at least 19 works by him from the camps, sixteen of which were made at Lempäälä and three in the camp in Tammisaari. They are all on paper and almost all of them were drawn with ink and partly with pencil or charcoal. Only one of the works is a colourful watercolour painting.<sup>35</sup> A positive factor for Mikola's work was perhaps the fact that one of the guards at Lempäälä was the artist Tapio Tapiovaara, who made a drawn portrait of his colleague.<sup>36</sup>

At Lempäälä, Mikola depicted scenes from the camp, the shore of Lake Kirkkojärvi near the yard, the jetty and a small bathing hut, which was no doubt used in the summer by the internees. The lake, the trees by the shore and the jetty are drawn from different angles of view. Nothing in these images as such suggests the restricted and supervised conditions of the camp, its armed guards and barbed wire. Only the dates marked by the artist and the place-names tell the viewer about



the origins of these works. Mikola mostly portrayed his small and fragile son, Jouko, of whom there are at least nine depictions in the collection. The vulnerability of the sleeping child is shown in a sensitive manner, bearing stark witness to the father's deep concern for his sick child in the conditions prevailing in the camp. The works also point to the continuous uncertainty of dozens of other parents in the camps about the fate of their children.

The drawings in pencil by Nándor Mikola from the internment camp in Tammisaari are also of a private nature. A drawing apparently of the room occupied by Mikola is signed 'Interned at Dragsvik 1946, N.J.M'. It shows the interior of the room in detail and the viewer's gaze is first drawn to a stool in the middle of the picture, on which there is a saucepan on a cooking plate. It was necessary in the camps to improvise to obtain extra food and to cook it. The power for the cooking plate is taken from a lamp in the ceiling. The other items of the interior include a wooden chair with a backrest, a table in front of the window and a bookcase next to the wall. Placed on the table with its tablecloth, are a book, a bottle and a mug, and there appears to be a vase full of the artist's brushes in the bookcase. The small-paned window of the old mental hospital of Tammisaari occupies the background almost completely, but there is no view of anything through the window.

Mikola went on to make two other drawings at Tammisaari, both of which are portraits of the same man and dated 1946. One of them is also marked 'Tammisaari'. The subject's identity is not known, but he is shown in almost a full portrait in profile, seated on a stool and leaning heavily on his knees with his elbows and his chin masked by his clenched fists. The man's clothing is only suggested in the drawing, but at the lower edge there is the leg of a boot and the subject is wearing a pair of trousers with back pockets and a shirt with a collar. There also appears to be a knife in a sheath hanging from his belt. The man's face is not shown in any recognisable way, but the mood in both drawings is pensive and melancholy. This would



Fig. 5: Nándor Mikola, *Jouko*, (pencil and charcoal, 21x32 cm). Mikola's young son at the Uotti internment camp in Lempäälä, 1945. Eeva Mikola Collection. Photo: Hanna Kempfi.

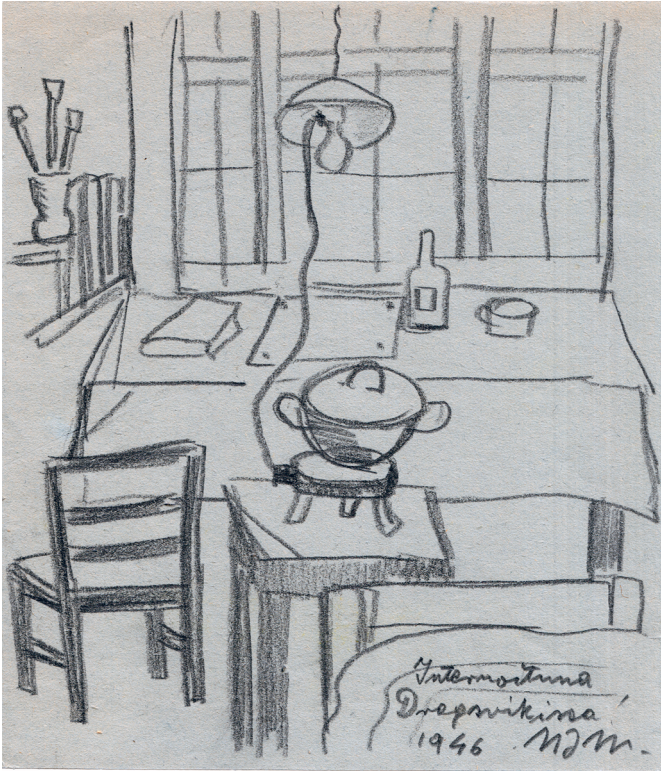


Fig. 6: Nándor Mikola, *Interned at Dragsvik* (charcoal, 24x21 cm). Interior scene from the Knipnäs internment camp at Tammisaari, 1946. Eeva Mikola Collection. Photo: Hanna Kempfi.



Fig. 7: Nándor Mikola, *Tammisaari* (21x18 cm). Portrait from the internment camp at Tammisaari, 1946. Eeva Mikola Collection. Photo: Hanna Kempfi.

be understandable as such, because none of the internees had any idea of their future even at the beginning of 1946. Their transfer to near the port of Hanko was a source of concern and there were many who believed that the internees would be deported to the Soviet Union. The thoughtful appearance of the male subject can thus be understood, for the future did not appear to hold anything good in store for the internees.<sup>37</sup> Although Mikola's drawings of the man may have been intended as a memento of a fellow internee, they along with his other drawings from the internment camps, reflect the melancholy and gnawing and disturbing uncertainty of life in the camps.

## The traces of memory of images and objects

Considering now artefacts like these, the origins of which are unknown to the majority of Finns, one could regard an analysis of the problematic of memory culture in Finland to be almost a necessity. The post-war generation did not want to analyse these difficult and uncomfortable issues nor consider the ethically and judicially suspect choices and decisions made by the Finnish government. Aleida Assmann has underlined how many societies set aside events that they experience as uncomfortable on the grounds that they have already been remembered and argued for, and since there is no doubt about things, there is no need to take them up again. Like Assmann, however, we can maintain that remembering should be renewed and actualised.<sup>38</sup>

For their makers, the memory objects considered in the article contained a major emotional investment and their preservation and keeping under various conditions can be considered as completely deliberate acts. Artist Nándor Mikola kept visual mementoes of his and his young son's life in the camp for years in his archives. The Brettschneiders' small house at Västervik was vacated, but at some stage the mother of the family stored the princess frock that she had skilfully sewn in the attic of the house to be found by posterity. These objects have had a strong emotional hold on their makers. What the makers experienced in their own day, and what we experience now, is an interesting and difficult question. Following Paul Ricoeur, we can consider what we remember with these memory objects and whether they themselves arouse emotional reactions in us or are they aroused by the things with which these objects can be associated. At any rate, it is obvious that memory aids of this kind give the means to combat forgetting.<sup>39</sup>

Remembrance via the memory objects considered here can be linked to the ideas addressed by Assmann. She considered the expanded use of the notion of trauma, maintaining that it generally reflects the sensitisation of society to addressing suffering, incidences of violence and guilt.<sup>40</sup> The little girl's paper frock is not just an item owned by someone, but something of the person herself. By following the biographies of artefacts with this kind of presence, routes are offered to

us to what can be a painful and absent past. Places are also important for memories and remembering. The internment camps in Finland also have their own topography of remembrance, which has remained unconsidered perhaps deliberately or unwittingly. An example of this is the main building of the old Knipnäs psychiatric hospital at Tammisaari, where most of the internees spent their last months in camp in 1946. Since 2017, the City of Raasepori, to which Tammisaari belongs, has renovated the hospital building, designed by architect Axel Mörne, to serve as new premises for municipal administration. Discussion about the renovation project has not taken up the varied history of the building in any way.<sup>41</sup>

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Gunvor Brettschneider, Magnhild Nyqvist and Runa Reimavuo interviewed by Ninni Huhta Hasselberg and Tiiu Kokkonen, 2 April 2006. Author's collection.  
Eeva Mikola interviewed by Renja Suominen-Kokkonen, 21 April 2018.

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## Vaaleanpunainen prinsessamekko ja muita aineellisia muistoja historiallisesta menneisyydestä

### TIIVISTELMÄ

Artikkeli paneutuu muistamisen problematiikkaan ja muistin politiikkaan koskien vaikeaa vaihetta Suomen historiassa. Aineisto, jonka avulla tähän pureudutaan, käsittää vuosien 1944–1946 aikana Suomessa olleiden Saksan ja Unkarin kansalaisten ja heidän suomalaissyntyisten vaimojensa ja lastensa internointiaikaisia esineellisiä muistoja. Artikkelin pyrkii esineiden analyysin avulla pohtimaan muistamisen vaikeutta ja valtiollisen unohtamisen ulottuvuuksia.

## End notes

- 1 Kirkham & Attfield, 3.
- 2 Ash, 219.
- 3 Jensen-Eriksen 2000, 333–354; Sotatapahtumia, internointeja 2010.
- 4 Pollock applied this in her analysis of the childhood life-mapping in Walter Benjamin's Berlin chronicle. Also discussed in her article is a collection of works by the artist Charlotte Salomon, who was sent to a concentration camp. Pollock 2007, 63–88; Pollock 2018, 78, 109, 225.
- 5 Assmann 2006, 16; see Heimo 2010, 31.
- 6 Assmann 2013: 11–13.
- 7 Ibid, 15; Assmann 2006, 17; see also Assmann 2010, 98.
- 8 Jensen-Eriksen 2000, 333–354.
- 9 On moral testimony, see Assmann 2006, 88–91.
- 10 A documentary on the internments (*Vankileirien Suomi*) by Mikko Määttäälä was broadcast on Finnish YLE television in 2003. The film and active public debate in various media led to investigations by the state and finally to an act in 2014 that awarded compensation to interned Finnish citizens who were still alive. See *Laki korvauksesta eräille internoiduille siviilihenkilöille 2014*.
- 11 Määttäälä, 75–76.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Gunvor Brettschneider interviewed by Renja Suominen-Kokkonen, 10 January 2018. Gunvor Brettschneider is the author's mother-in-law.
- 14 Määttäälä, 19.
- 15 Jensen-Eriksen 2000, 339–340.
- 16 Gunvor Brettschneider interviewed by Renja Suominen-Kokkonen, 10 January 2018; Määttäälä, 73–74, Jensen-Eriksen 2000, 340.
- 17 Isolehto, 6–7; Saarikivi & Jäkärä, 9.
- 18 Määttäälä, 40, 150–151; The number of internees was at its largest in March 1946, totalling 470. Jensen-Eriksen 2000, 340.
- 19 Mikola's Finnish-born wife had died shortly before this, Saarikivi & Jäkärä, 11; Jensen-Eriksen 2010, 108.
- 20 A small number of Germans, however, were deported in 1947 to the eastern occupation zone in Germany. Jensen-Eriksen 2000, 352–353.
- 21 Jensen-Eriksen 2010, 127–128.
- 22 Gunvor Brettschneider, Magnhild Nyqvist and Runa Reimavuo interviewed by Ninni Huhta Hasselberg and Tiiu Kokkonen, 2 April 2006.
- 23 German-owned property in Finland had to be handed over to the Soviet Union as partial payment of Finland's war reparations. The Finnish Parliament passed the act concerning the confiscation of German-owned property in May 1946. Jensen-Eriksen 2000, 348–349.
- 24 The Finnish army fought against the Germans from October 1944 until April 1945 in Finnish Lapland, see Elfvingren, 1124–1149.
- 25 Torsti, 114–123.
- 26 Savolainen 2017, 24–46.
- 27 E. G. Ahtiainen & Tervonen, 120–122.
- 28 Saarikivi & Jäkärä, 11.
- 29 See Immonen, 70–80; on the notion of object biographies, see Appadurai, 3–63 and Kopytoff, 64–91.
- 30 Gunvor Brettschneider interviewed by Renja Suominen-Kokkonen, 10 January 2018; Uhlenius, 412.
- 31 Ibid, 408.
- 32 Gunvor Brettschneider interviewed by Renja Suominen-Kokkonen, 10 January 2018.

- 33 The existence of the photographs is explained by the pictures having been taken by guards. Gunvor Brettschneider interviewed by Renja Suominen-Kokkonen, 10 January 2018.
- 34 Jouko Jorma Nándor Mikola was born on 16 February 1940 and was disabled. Eeva Mikola interviewed by Renja Suominen-Kokkonen, 21 April 2018.
- 35 The watercolour painting was published in Ulla Savolainen's article which is also illustrated with a photograph of an oil painting by Mikola, but without information on the location of the latter work, Savolainen 2018, 58, 63.
- 36 Nándor Mikola's works mostly are untitled, but some of them are marked Lempäälä or Dragsvik as their location. Most of them, however, are marked only with the year and the artist's initials. On the other hand, Mikola also signed these works later, marking some of them with the date 1947, which suggests that he no longer remembered exactly when he had been interned. According to his daughter, Mikola would sometimes sign his own works later in other contexts. Eeva Mikola interviewed by Renja Suominen-Kokkonen, 21 April 2018. It is also known that Mikola gave some of his works to fellow internees, see Määttä, 151. 'Fanki' (Prisoner) by Tapio Tapiovaara was signed and dated in October 1944, in the very first months of internment. See Saarikivi & Jäkärä, 12.
- 37 According to Professor Niklas Jensen-Eriksen, there was due cause for concern among the internees. No one had any information on whether they would be released and the fate of the internees was completely undecided from the very beginning. Jensen-Eriksen 2010, 113–114.
- 38 Assmann 2013, 71.
- 39 Ricœur 2004, 16, 38.
- 40 Assmann 2006, 15.
- 41 Tiainen 2017.