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Diplomatic Wives, Cultures of Dress, and Brita Kekkonen The New Study on the Cultural History of Diplomacy Has Started

Abstract

In this article, I discuss the private dress collection of Brita Kekkonen (1927–2013), a diplomatic wife, who was a very well-known figure in Finland during the period of the Cold War. Brita Kekkonen was also a very talented dress-maker and a very fashionable figure in diplomatic circles. Some eighty outfits made by Brita Kekkonen have survived to this day, in addition to her voluminous pattern collection, containing more than 1,000 patterns from several decades. The aim of my new postdoctoral research project is to identify Brita Kekkonen's dresses and examine their use, politico-cultural meanings and design in the context of the Cold War, diplomatic etiquette and Kekkonen's own personal history.

Keywords: Dress History, Brita Kekkonen, History of Diplomacy, Diplomatic Wives, Sewing, Material Culture

Introduction

In my new postdoctoral research, I explore the cultural history of diplomacy, the role of diplomatic wives and dress history in the context of the Cold War – or more precisely, between the 1950s and 1980s. The working title of the study is ‘Vallan fasadit’, which can be translated as ‘Façades of Power’. The title comes from the guidebook *Rouvasväen käsikirja* [A Manual for Diplomatic Ladies], intended for use by the wives of Finnish diplomats, published in 1971. The quotation refers to keeping up appearances in diplomacy: whatever the real situation might have been, the illusion of wealth, prosperity and authority was to be maintained, including the diplomat, his wife and the country s/he represented. The façade hid the reality: hard work, high standards and low appreciation. (*Rouvasväen käsikirja* 1971, 11).

As the historian Helen McCarthy has noted, diplomatic wives fulfilled important representative and practical functions; however, they could also experience an identity crisis due to the high demands and their need for personal autonomy (McCarthy 2014). The fact was that the role of diplomatic wives was indispensable, but they were not paid for the work they did. They were expected to give up their own professional careers, move abroad with their husbands, organise their children’s schools and other activities, run the household, ‘the gasthaus Finland’, cook, hold parties and dinners, and entertain guests. (Pekkarinen 2021; Hickman 2000). In addition to all this, they were also expected to always be stylish and elegant, with special knowledge of the etiquette and dress codes dictating the right kind of appearance. The diplomat and his wife were their home country’s visiting card, creating the first and sometimes the only impression of Finland when serving abroad.

The primary source of the study is the private dress collection of Brita Kekkonen (1927–2013), a diplomatic wife, who was a very well-known figure in Finland during the period of the Cold War. Nowadays, Brita Kekkonen is probably best remembered as the wife of Taneli Kekkonen (1928–1985), a Finnish diplomat and the son of the longest serving President of Finland, Urho Kekkonen (1900–1986). Brita Kekkonen was the eldest daughter of Judith Fagerholm (1905–1984) and Karl-August Fagerholm (1901–1984), three times Prime Minister and the longest serving Speaker of the Parliament of Finland. Brita Kekkonen grew up in a Swedish-speaking family in Helsinki.

Thus, since her childhood, Brita Kekkonen was well connected to the world of politics, politicians and foreign affairs, being a quick-witted, social and fashionable figure in twentieth-century Finnish history. Brita Kekkonen was a true cosmopolitan and fitted well into the role she occupied in diplomacy; she loved the French culture and language – in fact, she was fluent in Swedish, Finnish, French, German, English, Italian and Serbo-Croatian and



Image 1. Brita Kekkonen (1927–2013), pictured in the Finnish magazine *Me Naiset* in 1971. The red one-piece dress design is by Simonetta of Italy, c. 1969; it is an example of the dresses that have not survived. Photo: Lehtikuva.

also knew some Russian. After the Second World War, she stayed in Paris for one year to study French. There she became better acquainted with her future husband Taneli Kekkonen, who was also in the capital to learn the French language. (Montonen 2014).

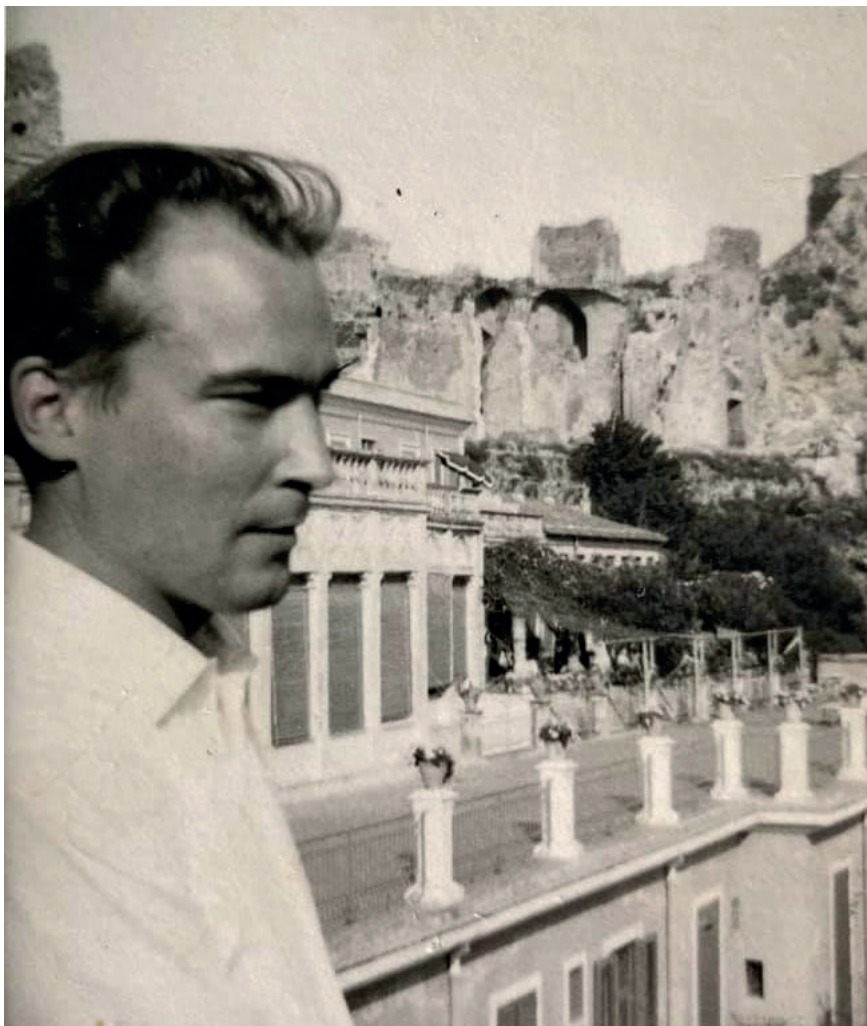


Image 2. Taneli Kekkonen (1928–1985) in Rome in the early 1960s. Photo: Private Collection.

A Life in Diplomatic Service

Brita Fagerholm and Taneli Kekkonen – sometimes referred to as the *Romeo and Juliet of Finland* – married in July 1952. Brita Kekkonen's father K.-A. Fagerholm and Taneli Kekkonen's father Urho Kekkonen had been political rivals for decades; Kekkonen was the member of the Agrarian League (later Centre Party), whereas Swedish-speaking Fagerholm was a Social Democrat, oriented to Nordic cooperation. Kekkonen and Fagerholm's relationship culminated in the 1956 Presidential Election; as a result, Urho Kekkonen became the eighth President of Finland only by one vote. Kekkonen's presidency lasted twenty-six

years until 1982 when former Prime Minister Mauno Koivisto was selected as the new president after Kekkonen's official resignation in October 1981. During the years of the Cold War, Urho Kekkonen dominated Finnish politics, balancing between the Western world and the Soviet Union.

In 1952, Taneli Kekkonen started working at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. His first post was in Moscow, where he worked as an attaché at the Embassy of Finland. One year later in 1954, his wife Brita Kekkonen followed him to Moscow after finishing her own studies at the University of Helsinki. Thus, their first home together was in the capital of the Soviet Union. From Moscow, the Kekkonens moved to Stockholm (1956–1957), then to Rome (1959–1961) and to New York (1961–1963), where Taneli Kekkonen worked at the Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations. Later in the 1960s, Taneli Kekkonen was appointed as an ambassador for the first time, at the age of thirty-six. His first post was in Belgrade and Athens. Later he served as Ambassador in Rome (1975–1980) and in Warsaw (1980–1984). The last diplomatic post was in Tel Aviv, Israel. In 1984, Taneli Kekkonen was caught on drunk driving and was invited back to Finland. He was placed in the status of *disponibilité*, which meant that he was shelved to wait for a new assignment that never came. Suffering from depression, Taneli Kekkonen committed suicide one year later, in July 1985. (Seppinen 2004). Brita Kekkonen spent her final years in Helsinki; she had a large circle of family and friends, and she was active in organising cultural trips to France and Italy. (Montonen 2014). Brita Kekkonen died in 2013, at the age of eighty-five.

During their marriage, the Kekkonens had two children: Timo Kekkonen was born in 1957, five years after his parents got married, and their daughter Tea Kekkonen in 1963. Both children were born in Finland, where the Kekkonens stayed between the diplomatic posts. During the first years of her marriage, Brita Kekkonen suffered from multiple miscarriages; later in her life, she spoke openly about her difficulties in her early married life and the strained relationship with her mother-in-law, First Lady of Finland Sylvi Kekkonen (1900–1974). It was not until the first grandchild Timo Kekkonen was born that Brita Kekkonen became accepted by her mother-in-law. Later they became very close. (Montonen 2014).

'As for Sewing, Everything Must be Perfekt'

Nowadays, it is not perhaps very well known that Brita Kekkonen was also a very talented dressmaker and a very fashionable figure in diplomatic circles. Like many of her female contemporaries, she had learned to sew, knit and embroider already in her childhood home. Her mother Judith Fagerholm was skilful in handicrafts, but her clothes were made by home ateliers and seamstresses in Helsinki. Crafts were a collective, social and gendered activity shared

by women within the family and other female relations. However, crafts have often been considered a less valuable, non-artistic activity and a self-evident everyday practice, dictated by necessity and routine rather than the original ideas of creativity and individual design (see Rauhala 2019).

However, it was not until the mid-1950s that Brita Kekkonen became interested in sewing and dressmaking. A starting point was her stay in Stockholm. For a short period, she studied at the famous *Märthaskolan*, a fashion institute and school specialised in *couture* fashion and high-quality dressmaking, founded in 1927 (Montonen 2014, 97, 251; Strömquist 2021). It was during this period that Brita Kekkonen bought a green Husqvarna sewing machine, which she used for the rest of her life. As a dressmaker, her aim was to achieve the standards of a professional. For Brita Kekkonen, sewing was indeed a combination of skill, high quality and pleasure – in her biography, she stated that in dressmaking, everything must be ‘perfekt’, a Swedish word for perfect (Montonen 2014, 250).

Some eighty outfits made by Brita Kekkonen have survived to this day, in addition to her voluminous pattern collection, containing more than 1,000 patterns from several decades. Brita Kekkonen ordered all the patterns directly from Paris, from the *Vogue Designers*. She preferred two design collections. The first, *Vogue Paris Original*, published patterns by famous Parisian designers, such as Jacques Heim, Pierre Balmain and Molyneux. These patterns were more expensive than the usual *Vogue patterns*; some of the designers and fashion houses were entitled to the *haute couture* title under its strictest criteria (Emery 2020, 166). Brita Kekkonen’s second favourite pattern series was *Vogue Couturier Design*, which presented fashion outside Paris and France, including Gucci, Valentino and Galitzine. After the Second World War, especially the Italian fashion design industry was growing fast, and Italian designers became well known worldwide (see White 2000).

The aim of my research project is to identify Brita Kekkonen’s dresses and examine their use, politico-cultural meanings and design in the context of the Cold War, diplomatic etiquette and Kekkonen’s own personal history. As the results have shown so far, identifying her dresses and finding information about their origin is relatively easy because the patterns used and existing clothes are often identical, the only exception being the fabrics chosen and used by Kekkonen. According to Tea Kekkonen, Brita Kekkonen’s daughter, her mother did not improvise or add her own details to the dresses that she made. Thus, Brita Kekkonen followed the instructions that came with the patterns, with the tagline ‘easy to follow’. However, some of the oldest original patterns have disappeared; the paper material of the patterns is extremely frail and fragile, and thus they can be easily destroyed in the making process. The original *Vogue Designers* catalogues can be found in libraries; consequently, they are examined in my research.



Image 3. Brita Kekkonen in 1958, pictured in the Presidential Palace, Finland. She is wearing the evening dress designed by Jacques Heim (c. 1957). The black silk dress was made by Brita Kekkonen herself. Photo: Wikipedia.

Interestingly, Brita Kekkonen's interest in dressmaking, sewing and high fashion was well known both publicly and privately. In many interviews she gave during her life, she mentioned the fact that she made her own garments using the *Vogue* patterns she ordered directly from Paris. For example, in 2007, Brita Kekkonen gave a TV interview, recalling her own memories of the annual Independence Day Receptions at the Presidential Palace of Finland. As a member of President Kekkonen's family, she had a permanent invitation to the Reception

although due to their position and work in diplomacy, Brita and Taneli Kekkonen could not attend every year. Some of the evening dresses used at the Receptions have survived – among them is a black dress Brita Kekkonen herself called ‘exceedingly magnificent’. She used the dress at the 1958 Reception and again in 1964. She also lent the dress to her personal friends. (*TV-arkisto: Brita Kekkonen* 2007).

In the interview, Brita Kekkonen described the evening dress designed by the French fashion designer Jacques Heim in 1957. The dress is made of black silk, which Brita Kekkonen got from Minister for Foreign Affairs Olavi J. Mattila. Mattila had brought the vintage fabric from China (*TV-arkisto: Brita Kekkonen* 2007). This kind of unofficial import of fabrics was typical for the time; after the Second World War, trips abroad were rare, and hence materials were often brought from exotic places such as China. The dress itself has a long full skirt and a low front neckline, shoulder straps and a deep V-shaped back. At the 1958 Reception, Brita Kekkonen accessorised the dress with a large silk rose in the back. She also wore a silver necklace on her forehead. The original pattern (*Vogue Paris Original*, no. 1343) has since disappeared, but the dress has survived; it is one of the highlights of the whole collection.

Brita Kekkonen’s friends and family members also remembered her fashion sense and sewing skills. For example, Brita Kekkonen’s former sister-in-law, Marja Linnankivi (former Kekkonen, née Linnala, 1932–2015) described in her memoirs how elegantly Brita Kekkonen was always dressed and how skilled she had become when Marja Kekkonen and her then husband, Taneli Kekkonen’s twin brother Matti, visited Stockholm in 1956 (Linnankivi & Levonon 2010, 102). Brita Kekkonen also discussed her dressmaking with the press; she emphasised the high quality of design she preferred and her interest in sewing, fabrics and colours (see, for example, Joki & Järveläinen 1989; N. Ö. & M. R. 1956). One aim of my study is to track down these interviews and analyse how the topics of sewing, fashion and Brita Kekkonen’s own duties as a diplomatic wife were discussed with journalists and reporters.

Material Culture and the Dress Collection

Cultures of dress and clothing have played a crucial role through which various groups can ‘signify membership and practice inclusion and exclusion’ (Green 2003, 98; see also Entwistle 2001). Social status, power, identity, gender and nationality are presented through appearances and dress. Clothes and accessories are both immaterial concentrations of various cultural and social meanings and concrete, tangible material objects. As the historian Serena Dyer has noted, material culture ‘centres on objects and their meanings’ – specifying that ‘it encompasses a body of source material made up of the objects and spaces through which people have constructed and defined their cultural



Image 3. A detail of a jacket designed by Yves Saint Laurent, c. 1967. The label 'Vogue Paris Original' is sewed in the lining. Photo: Anna Niiranen.

practices and identities' (Dyer 2021). The relationships between objects, their users, the past and the present can be affective, social, cultural and economic. On the whole, the slippery term incorporates the material properties, use, consumption, production and exchange of objects. Meanings can be personal and individual, as well as public and collective. (Gerritsen & Riello 2015).

In the case of Brita Kekkonen's dress collection, I am interested in the production process, meaning how and why the dresses were made, and how they represented the sartorial ideals and demands of dress in diplomacy. Who designed the patterns, and how did the whole process of ordering the paper patterns from Paris really work? The paper pattern industry is one particularly interesting aspect in the history of dress and fashion (see Emery 2020). I also discuss the occasions on which Brita Kekkonen wore the dresses, and why she chose those particular garments for certain events. On the other hand, I am keen to examine the dresses as physical objects; what kinds of physical marks, stains and wear and tears there are on the clothes, and how the body of the wearer can still be seen – after sixty years since they were last worn by Brita Kekkonen (on the body and dress, see Entwistle 2001). Serena Dyer has spoken about objects as time travellers, moving through time and space, bringing their experiences and interactions with them (Dyer 2021).

In Brita Kekkonen's case, a great number of documents have survived – including photographs, letters, film material and interviews – revealing when and how the dresses were made, used and discussed. Brita Kekkonen's sewing materials still exist, such as buttons, threads, ribbons, fabrics and small textile cutting pieces. Currently, the private dress collection is held in the archive of Urho Kekkonen in Orimattila.

It is by no means certain or self-evident that these kinds of dress collections have survived and remained intact over the years. In Britain and Sweden, for example, these kinds of collections exist in museums and archives – they usually consist of exquisite and often unique sartorial objects that belonged to royalty and nobility, representing power, wealth and dynastic alliances, *inter alia*. In the context of Finnish history, such collections are rare. It can be said that the dresses carried many meanings for both Brita Kekkonen and her family members, and thus the dresses were kept and saved even if they had gone out of fashion and there no longer was any practical need for them. On the whole, the dress collection can tell us a lot about life in diplomacy, Brita Kekkonen and her peers, and the culture of sewing and fashion, in the context of the Cold War.

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