## Mikkel Aaland

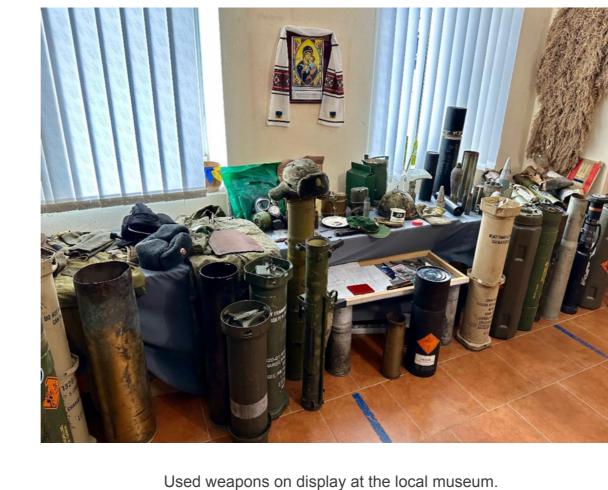


"It's All An Adventure"

## Saunaaaid

July 2023: This is an account of my third trip to Ukraine on behalf of Sauna Aid. I often take my peaceful, war-free life for granted. However, in this country, whether you are a soldier defending your country or a child selling homemade bracelets to support the troops, the struggle for freedom and peace is an everyday battle. Every time I go, I am filled with profound respect and deeply inspired by what I see.

**Staryi Sambir** is a small village on the western edge of Ukraine, nestled at the base of the majestic Carpathian mountains. So far, the town has been spared a direct hit by Russian missiles. However, during my recent visit to the town, I found harsh realities of war in a tiny, two -room museum situated near the town square. My host, Yura Kachalup, somberly displayed a collection of used Russian artillery shells and casings he collected from the front and brought back after dropping off gifts from the townspeople to the troops. He pointed out the fragments of two exploded Russian cluster bombs, deemed illegal by the International Community, and then he acknowledged that Ukraine is also using them in the ongoing conflict. As JFK once wrote, "War is dirty business."



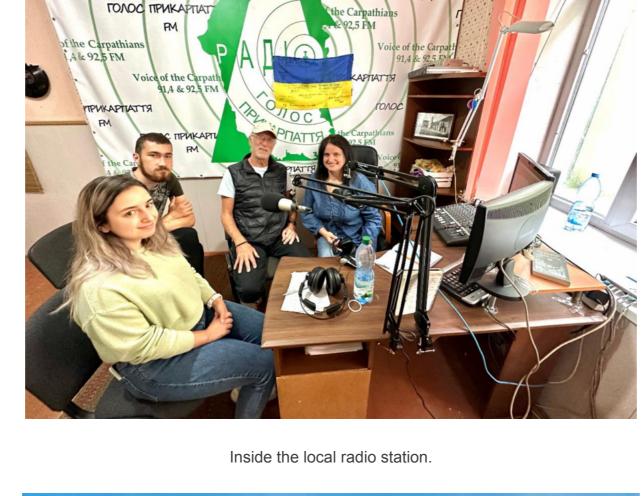
At a parking lot in front of the museum more signs of the war were evident. A group of town officials had gathered, clustered around a black Cherokee Jeep and a half dozen or so soldiers dressed in camouflage. A robed Orthodox priest prepared to bless the car and the soldiers -all local men--before they headed to the front. The atmosphere was tense, as news of today's fighting was particularly fierce, and the soldiers wore expressions of concern. As the priest stepped forward, the soldiers silently bowed their heads, while he performed the sanctifying ritual. Holding the aspegilllum, an Orthodox brush dipped in holy water, the priest circled, waved and shook it over the soldiers, evoking blessings and protection. Completing the ceremony, he extended the sanctifying ritual to the SUV, ensuring its safety on the impeding journey east, to the fighting.



Why am I here? After the troop and car blessing, a local radio reporter pulled me aside and asked

me that very question. We walked to a near-by make-shift broadcast studio and I gave my answer in English while the reporter's daughter translated my words into Ukrainian. I told her audience I was here on behalf of Sauna Aid, a multinational initiative sponsored by the International Sauna Association. Our long-term mission, I explained, is to provide movable sauna facilities and supportive services to people facing natural and man-made disasters. We are focused on Ukraine now. I said I come bearing a gift, a 14-person pod sauna skillfully crafted by Kingsauna in Lithuania with a Harvia wood burning stove. The sauna had seen duty earlier in June at the Wellbeing

Leadership Summit leadership conference in Sibiu, Romania, which I attended. After the conference the Therme Group, the summit sponsor, generously agreed to donate and ship the sauna from Romania to Ukraine on behalf of Sauna Aid. I arrived from Norway just as the sauna was unloaded from the transport truck at the local sports stadium.





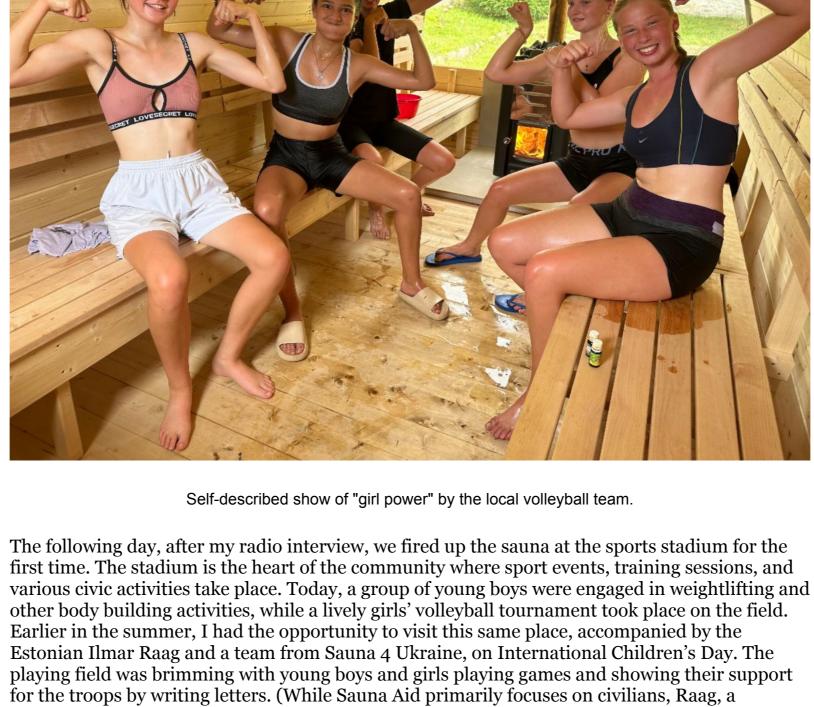
imagine their thoughts: "There is a war going on and they send saunas? Why don't they just send flowers?" However, here in Ukraine, no one questions the logic of what we are doing, including the local radio woman who freely expresses her thanks and appreciation for our efforts. In Ukraine, the centuries old tradition of the banya, or laznia, a type sweat bath similar in form and

function to the Finnish sauna, is not considered a luxury but rather a way to bring people

brought a Sauna Aid/Pixxla container sauna into Ukraine via Slovakia, we were escorted by an official government car with flashing lights to our destination inside Ukraine. Talk about appreciation! One thing is clear to everyone: There is no war in sauna.

together in healthy and community-affirming manner. Last November, when Lukas Kubica and I

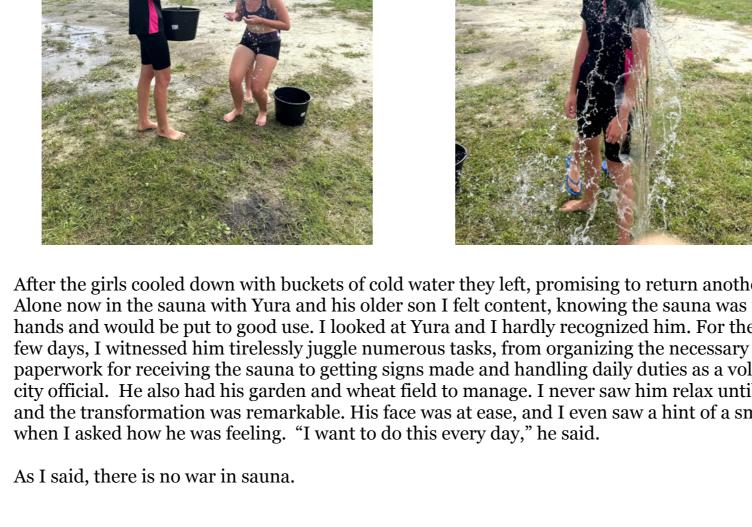


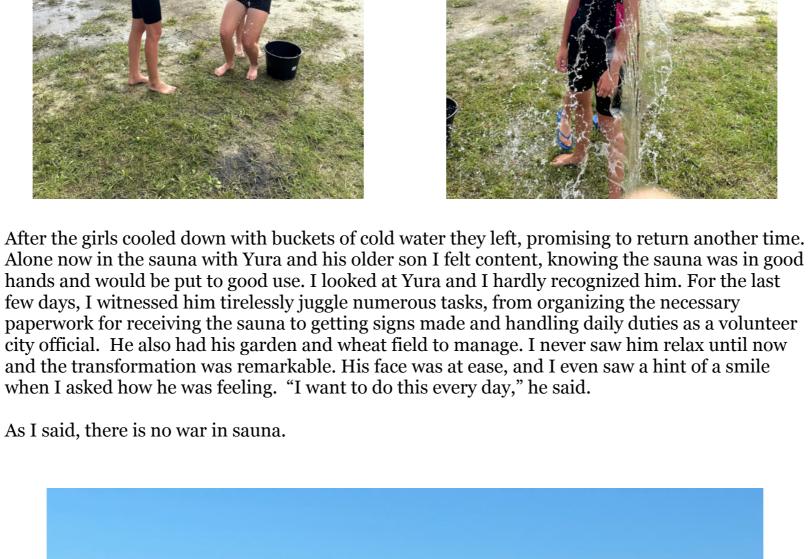


saunas for the Ukrainian military.) The first to enjoy the sauna were the boys. Inside the sauna they seemed shy and subdued, but they obviously enjoyed the relaxing heat. Outside they came alive, playfully pouring buckets of cold water over each other. Once the girls' volleyball tournament concluded, a local team of young girls took their turn in the sauna. They waved towels, sang folk songs, and posed playfully for my camera. When I asked about their age —they ranged from 12-15—one of them curiously asked my age. I replied, "71", expecting some reaction, but there was only silence. In that moment, the image of the young men I saw the day before, gearing up to drive to the front flashed in my mind. Maybe one of them was one of the girl's brother or even father. Would any of these men reach the age of 30 or 40 let alone reach my age? To quote from a Pete Seeger song:

renowned filmmaker and a military officer, along with his group, concentrates more on providing

Oh, when will we ever learn? Oh, when will we ever learn?







two hectors of agriculture land. I have never seen such rich farmland. There is a reason Ukraine is called the bread-basket of the world.