

# Mikkel Aaland



*"It's All An Adventure"*

## Saunaaid

*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."



Used weapons on display at the local museum.

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 aspegillum, 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 impending journey east, to the fighting.



Blessing the car and soldiers before heading to the front.

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.



Inside the local radio station.



The pod sauna in Sibiu, Romania before it was shipped to Ukraine by the Therme Group.

When I tell people outside Ukraine, we are taking saunas to Ukraine I often get a puzzled look. I 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 laznya, 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 together in healthy and community-affirming manner. Last November, when Lukas Kubica and I brought a Sauna Aid/Pixlla 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.



Self-described show of "girl power" by the local volleyball team.

The following day, after my radio interview, we fired up the sauna at the sports stadium for the first time. The stadium is the heart of the community where sport events, training sessions, and various civic activities take place. Today, a group of young boys were engaged in weightlifting and other body building activities, while a lively girls' volleyball tournament took place on the field. Earlier in the summer, I had the opportunity to visit this same place, accompanied by the Estonian Ilmar Raag and a team from Sauna 4 Ukraine, on International Children's Day. The playing field was brimming with young boys and girls playing games and showing their support for the troops by writing letters. (While Sauna Aid primarily focuses on civilians, Raag, a renowned filmmaker and a military officer, along with his group, concentrates more on providing 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 fished in my mind. Maybe one of them was one of the girl's brother or even father. What any of these men reach the age of 30 or 40 let alone reach my age?

To quote from a Pete Seeger song:

*Oh, when will we ever learn?*

*Oh, when will we ever learn?*



After the girls cooled down with buckets of cold water they left, promising to return another time. Alone now in the sauna with Yura and his older son I felt content, knowing the sauna was in good hands and would be put to good use. I looked at Yura and I hardly recognized him. For the last few days, I witnessed him tirelessly juggle numerous tasks, from organizing the necessary paperwork for receiving the sauna to getting signs made and handling daily duties as a volunteer city official. He also had his garden and wheat field to manage. I never saw him relax until now and the transformation was remarkable. His face was at ease, and I even saw a hint of a smile when I asked how he was feeling. "I want to do this every day," he said.

As I said, there is no war in sauna.



This is Yura, my host's ten-year old son, standing in front of the family wheat field. Every Ukraine is entitled to two hectares of agriculture land. I have never seen such rich farmland. There is a reason Ukraine is called the bread-basket of the world.

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For more information on Ilmar Raag's organization: <https://saunas4ukraine.org>