

## CONTINUING THE RESEARCH INTO SMOKE SAUNAS IS AN IMPORTANT CULTURAL UNDERTAKING AND A PART OF ESTONIAN CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC POLICY <sup>342</sup>

Returning now to the subject of sauna,<sup>343</sup> I would very much like to support the initiative of the Võru Institute launched in March 2025 to start another research into smoke saunas in Estonia (see their vision on the next pages of this paper).

We can mention again here that the **experience** of the undersigned (Matti Raudjärv, M.R.) from his own **Finnish sauna started in 1973** when he built his first sauna to the basement floor of his home at Pirita and developed it further in the next years: making it somewhat bigger and more modern.

At the turn of the century (1999–2000) when I was able to reconstruct the Kaasiku Forest Farm in the Lääne-Virumaa County, a Finnish sauna was built there as well as the need to sweat in steam and wash is quite natural with work done in the rural area and forest planting and cutting firewood.

As the job at the University of Tartu required performance of academic and research work at the Pärnu College, I invested in an apartment in Pärnu due to the need to

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<sup>342</sup> **The undersigned, a sauna user with about 60 years of sauna experience in 2025, having sweated and whisked himself in more than a hundred different saunas (by type and by location, in Estonia and in other countries), including 53 years in smoke saunas and 30 years as an owner of a personal smoke sauna, supports heartily this research. Sauna user since 1955 (although the sauna experience was lighter at first, so to say, it became serious sauna experience and whisking in the course of time).**

<sup>343</sup> Papers on the subject of saunas were published in this journal in 2023 and 2024:

**Raudjärv, M.** (2023). 2023 on Eestis sauna-aasta. Saared, hiidlased ja saun / 2023 ist das Jahr der Sauna in Estland. Inseln, Insulaner von Hiiumaa und Sauna / 2023 is the Year of the Sauna in Estonia. Islands, giants and sauna. 1-2-2023, lk 54 – 75.

**Raudjärv, M.** (2023). Sauna experiences in Estonia, Baltic states and Nordic countries. 1-2-2023, p 116–125; CD: Sauna kogemustest Eestis, Balti riikides ja Põhjamaades, lk 180–238.

**Raudjärv, M.** (2024). Eestit külastas Malta Ülikooli saunauurijate delegatsioon / Eine Delegation von Sauna-Forschern der Universität Malta besucht Estland / A delegation of sauna researchers from the University of Malta visited Estonia, 1-2-2023, lk 174 – 177.

Visitors from Malta (they were three people: Professor Joseph A. Cannataci from the University of Malta with assistants. The professor is a consultant and rapporteur for many international organisations (UN, Council of Europe, etc.) and a faculty member and researcher at several universities in Paris, Belgium and other countries (also in Australia, etc.)) had read the papers by the undersigned, published in our journal on the subject of saunas, and wanted to meet the author. We met in June 2024 and the meeting became an excellent experience of exchange of information. Researchers in Malta are seriously studying the saunas and sauna culture of the Nordic and Baltic countries, and Matti Raudjärv had a good opportunity to talk about our Estonian saunas and sauna traditions with the guests, based on his experience with saunas. The guests from Malta left Estonia with the intention to come here again. MR: they have considerably more financial resources and other support funds than we have!

stay overnight quite often (I considered renting an apartment a waste of money) and considered it natural to have a Finnish sauna there for the benefit of relaxation and health.

**My first experience of smoke sauna** which became an addiction immediately in the good sense, **was in 1972** when I had my practical training in the Võru-Kubija Tourism Centre in Southeast Estonia as a student of the Chair of Service Economics of the Faculty of Economics of the Tallinn Polytechnical Institute, working according to the programme both with the business and organisational issues and going on hiking trips with tourists<sup>344</sup> in Southeast Estonia. During the practical training I had the good opportunity to enjoy the smoke sauna of a farm for many times in weekends.

**My own smoke sauna was built to the garden of my home and property, a villa at Pirita, in 1995**, by efficient craftsmen, builders from the Hiiumaa Island under the direction of my friend from the university times Riho who came from Hiiumaa (see the photo below; photo by M.R.). **Thus, the smoke sauna of the undersigned is already 30 years old by 2025.**



Photo: Smoke sauna built by craftsmen, builders from the Hiiumaa Island in 1995 and also currently used, located at the home, villa of the undersigned, the property in the Pirita District of Tallinn (this type of sauna is also included in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity). Photo by M.R.

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<sup>344</sup> Võru-Kubija Tourism Centre as many other tourism centres in Estonia (at Kauksi, At Nelijärve, in Pärnu), were managed by trade unions, and tourists arrived there from all over the Soviet Union with trade union vouchers. The undersigned had mainly contacts with people from Russia (Moscow, the city called Leningrad at that time and many other cities) and Ukraine (Harkiv, Kiev and many other cities). It was also good for me to practice my Russian language when talking with them. The groups usually included also Estonians (but not many) with whom we obviously talked in Estonian.

The Estonian smoke sauna tradition of Old Võromaa has been in the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity since 2014 but there is no good overview of the use of smoke saunas in Estonia at the present time. Now, more than ten years later, it would be appropriate to study how viable smoke sauna is in our daily life and culture. It is estimated that there are about 2000–4000 smoke saunas in Estonia.<sup>345</sup>

As of 13.02.2024, 234 smoke saunas had been entered in the Building Register,<sup>346</sup> the oldest of which was taken into use in 1805 (Truuta Village, Urvaste Parish), 59 smoke saunas were under construction;<sup>347</sup> two smoke saunas were at the planning stage and six smoke saunas had been demolished. The information in the Register is incomplete as buildings and structures of less than 20 m<sup>2</sup> have not been included there.

The dataset of the Old Võromaa Smoke Sauna Cooperation Council contains information on more than 300 smoke saunas located in Old Võromaa (administrator Külli Eichenbaum, Võru Institute). Researchers of smoke saunas, Epp Margna and Toomas Kalve, have taken photos and made drawings of 200 more smoke saunas at the beginning of 2000s (partly overlapping with the above-mentioned dataset).

The objective of the planned research is to acquire a more specific overview of the number, locations and frequency of use of smoke saunas and also smoke sauna traditions. Comparisons of the current data with the times two or three generations back will provide us knowledge of changes in sauna traditions in time and space. The dataset will also help us to set targets for maintenance of these traditions.

The research will be conducted by the Old Võromaa Smoke Sauna Cooperation Council<sup>348</sup>, the administrator of the dataset is the Võru Institute, and the map

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<sup>345</sup> Suitsusaunade loendus. Seletuskiri suitsusaunade loenduse kohta.

[<https://savvusann.ee/et/loendus/>] 12.04.2025.

<sup>346</sup> [[https://livekluster.ehr.ee/ui/chr/v1/detailsearch/BUILDINGS\\_SEARCH](https://livekluster.ehr.ee/ui/chr/v1/detailsearch/BUILDINGS_SEARCH)]

<sup>347</sup> Ibidem

<sup>348</sup> Members of the working group of the research:

**Külli Eichenbaum**, heritage researcher, tel 5661 1924, [kylli.eichenbaum@gmail.com](mailto:kylli.eichenbaum@gmail.com)

**Marko Puksing**, sauna enthusiast, tel 511 7446, [marko.puksing@ut.ee](mailto:marko.puksing@ut.ee)

**Eda Veeroja**, Mooska Farm owner, tel 503 2341, [eda.veeroja@gmail.com](mailto:eda.veeroja@gmail.com)

**Appeal of the working group:** notice, acknowledge, become informed of our richness, our smoke sauna culture. Talk with your children and grandchildren about smoke sauna and involve them in the collection and communication of information on this research.

**Note:** On 9 April 2025, the undersigned received a permission on the phone from Külli Eichenbaum, Head of the Research and Development Department of the Võru Institute who is responsible for the issues related to the census of saunas and the research dataset, for the use in this paper of the source „Saunade loendus. Seletuskiri suitsusaunade loenduse kohta“ (Census of saunas. Explanatory note on the census of saunas) referred to above. This source has been slightly edited.

application of the dataset will be created in cooperation with the Estonian Land and Spatial Development Board.

### **About the survey and data protection:**

The objective of the census is to obtain an overview of the number, location and frequency of use of smoke saunas, and sauna traditions in Estonia. The dataset will make it possible to assess the viability of smoke sauna traditions in our daily life and culture.

A web-based questionnaire was compiled for counting smoke saunas and studying the traditions but the questionnaire can be filled in also on paper or the responses can be sent by e-mail.

For the census, first the location, time of construction and origin or history of the smoke sauna will be asked about. The responders will decide whether they want to disclose this information in the map application of smoke saunas in the map server of the Estonian Land and Spatial Development Board or whether this information will not be visible.

Further questions will be about the sauna traditions of the family and these responses will only be used by the researchers and will not be linked with the location of the sauna on the map. In order to improve the interpretation of data, the age and gender of the responder will be asked but no other personal information will be required by the sauna census.

In the final part of the survey the responders can contribute to the sauna census and leave their contact information to enable researchers to contact them, if necessary.

The information that will be gathered with the census will be stored online at the Võru Institute and the part of the data that will be linked to the map will be copied to the map server of the Estonian Land and Spatial Development Board. The information will be stored and used proceeding from laws and regulations, contracts signed between institutions and agencies, and good practice of scientific research. The information presented in the summaries of analyses conducted on the basis of the dataset will not make it possible to identify specific saunas.

Küllli Eichenbaum, Head of the Research and Development Department of the Võru Institute, is responsible for the issues related to the census of saunas and the research dataset.

**Appeal: let us create together an overview of the smoke saunas in Estonia!**

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April 2025, at the home office at Pirita-Kose in Tallinn

Sincerely,

Matti Raudjärvi, Chief Editor

(the paper has been compiled mainly on the basis of materials of the Võru Institute and the respective working group)

P.S.: In June 2024, a delegation consisting of three members, led by professor Joseph A. Cannataci of the University of Malta, visited Estonia (they are studying the history, culture and other issues related to saunas in the Nordic and Baltic countries).

The undersigned had a meeting with them in Tallinn and we had a very matter-of-fact and substantial conversation (they had found a couple of my earlier papers on the subject of saunas and contacted me). During their stay in Estonia they also visited a few saunas in Põlvamaa and Võrumaa counties for a couple of days and met people at the Võru Institute.

As their research is planned for a long term, they promised to come to Estonia again, present their research and acquire additional information through conversations!

It seems to the undersigned that the sauna researchers of Malta and Estonia may have certain common grounds and cooperation opportunities. If necessary, the undersigned can make his modest contribution as he has obtained quite extensive sauna use experience from using saunas for more than 50 years in more than 100 saunas in Estonia and several other countries (Latvia, Finland, Türkiye, Russia, Hungary, Egypt, boat saunas and many others, visiting many saunas for many times; and owning three Finnish-type saunas and one smoke sauna), and can share the experience with interested persons, if necessary.

On the other hand, the undersigned would like to emphasize that research into sauna culture and particularly history and traditions of sauna and the related issues will be an important contribution to the development of the Estonian folk culture as this is a part of cultural policy and ultimately also of our economic policy.

(M.R.)