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FINNISH SAUNA DIPLOMACY AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF DIPLOMACY

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ABSTRACT

Satumaari Ventelä: Finnish Sauna Diplomacy as an Example of the Material Culture of Diplomacy
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Finnish sauna diplomacy is a well-known phenomenon in Finland and abroad. Nonetheless, the topic has garnered almost no academic attention – until now. This study takes as its point of departure the notion that material aspects have an effect on how a diplomatic meeting succeeds in its objectives and studies the Finnish sauna as a diplomatic venue in this context.

As such, the study can be situated within the emerging field of the material culture of diplomacy, in which diplomatic practices are examined through the perspective of the material culture studies. Points of interest can, for example, be the materiality of diplomatic documents, diplomatic gifts, the material equipment of diplomatic actors, and the materiality of the locations of the diplomatic encounters, as is the case in this thesis.

The main question the research aims to answer is, how can the Finnish sauna diplomacy be situated within the material culture of diplomacy? The main question is approached by first finding the answers to the questions of why Finnish diplomats have chosen the sauna as a place for a diplomatic meeting and what kind of impact has this choice of venue had on the objectives they have set for the encounter?

In order to do this, 10 Finnish diplomats were interviewed for their insights about the practice. The interviews were in-depth, semi-structured, and conversational in nature and their length varied from 30 minutes to over an hour. The data collected with this method was complemented by miscellaneous written sources such as speeches, biographies, and newspaper articles to draw out a more comprehensive image of the phenomenon. The data was then analyzed hermeneutically reading between the textual material and its context – the Finnish sauna culture, which is introduced before the analyzes section of the thesis.

The main findings of the thesis were that the Finnish diplomats had chosen the sauna as a meeting venue consciously and with special objectives in mind, which they assumed the sauna would help fulfill. As such, it was recognized that the Finnish sauna diplomacy indeed meets the main precondition of the material culture of diplomacy, which is that some material aspects or even the whole material setting of a diplomatic encounter are assumed to have an impact in terms of diplomatic objectives and chosen to be used for this reason.

However, a more surprising finding uncovered in the study was that the reputation the Finnish sauna enjoys as a venue of hard-line political negotiating and peace brokering is greatly exaggerated as none of the interviewees had used the sauna in this manner. Instead, the sauna bathing was most often mentioned as a tool for deepening bilateral relationships with work colleagues in order to advance future diplomatic goals or for networking with larger groups of people for whom the sauna space presented itself as a special attraction. Other notable reasons for arranging a diplomatic meeting in a sauna were showcasing Finnish culture and showing hospitality, which can be considered as intrinsically linked to one another in the Finnish context.

The study reveals the special impact the sauna space was both assumed to have and, also, in most cases, had in terms of diplomatic objectives. Accordingly, as the first rigorously conducted academic study concentrating on the Finnish sauna diplomacy, the thesis at hand is an original contribution of knowledge on a topic, which, until now, had been shrouded in mystery.

Keywords: Sauna diplomacy, Finnish diplomacy, sauna, material culture of diplomacy, material culture studies.

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The Finnish sauna has a reputation as an important diplomatic site, both as a venue for hard-core political negotiating and as a space for fostering dialogue between conflict parties. For example, the sauna diplomacy of the Finnish embassies abroad is well-known¹, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Martti Ahtisaari is said to have actively used the sauna for diplomatic purposes², and the former Finnish President Urho Kekkonen is legendary for his political manoeuvring in the sauna³. As such, the sauna can be recognized as having a special place in Finnish diplomatic practices. Nonetheless, so far, few academic studies on the topic exist.

The practice of using the sauna as a venue for diplomatic encounters is usually called sauna diplomacy. Studying the sauna as a site of diplomatic encounters can be situated within the study of the material culture of diplomacy – an understudied niche, drawing elements from diplomacy studies and material culture studies, respectively. The material culture of diplomacy examines the role of materiality in diplomatic encounters. Points of interest can be the materiality of diplomatic documents, diplomatic gifts, the material equipment of diplomatic actors such as clothing and accessories, food and accommodation offered to diplomatic guests, and the materiality of the locations of the diplomatic encounters, including architecture, furnishing and even the environment surrounding the site.⁴ This study concentrates on the last-mentioned. However, the material equipment of diplomatic actors, and clothing in particular are also discussed as those aspects are closely linked to the location in the context of sauna diplomacy.

It has been argued that the venue of the diplomatic meeting and the surrounding environment can indeed have a surprising impact on how the encounter, such as a dialogue between conflict parties, succeeds. According to Itonde Kakoma, the Head for Sub-Saharan Africa at the non-governmental peace mediation organization Crises Management Initiative (CMI), the right surroundings can, for example, create a more relaxed atmosphere, which enables the dialogue

¹ See e.g. Meskanen 2018; Sopher 2015; Savage 2013; Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2011.

² Torstila 2010.

³ See e.g. Seppänen 2004.

⁴ Rudolph 2016.

parties to connect better. Such was the case, according to Kakoma, in the CMI supported peace negotiations held in a remote East-African village surrounded by untouched nature. According to Kakoma:

It was the environment that freed the conflict parties from distractions and enabled them to re-encounter one another towards advancing peaceful dialogue. - - If we don't pay attention to environments in which we convene, we potentially undermine or distract from nurturing political will. This is not to say that the right kind of environment leads to the peaceful resolution of a conflict. But it plays a role.⁵

According to Kakoma, not enough attention has been paid on “how right kind of environment can nurture political will between conflict parties.”⁶ Nonetheless, some hands-on manuals on how to bring conflict parties together to have dialogue or negotiate peace mention the surroundings in which a meeting takes place as an important factor in creating a safe environment for the encounter.⁷ UNDP's *Practical Guide on Democratic Dialogue* (2014) advises that “the physical place or “venue” chosen for the dialogue - - is fundamental for creating a warm environment that will enable a sincere and thoughtful conversation. - - It is also important to consider the symbolic meaning that a selected venue might pose.”⁸ These are aspects, which very much factor in also in the context of sauna diplomacy.

Further linking the study to the field of peace and conflict research is the fact that the sauna enjoys the reputation of having successfully functioned as a venue for negotiating peace. Furthermore, other types of diplomatic encounters related to international relations and politics may also have consequences in terms of the dynamics between peace and war further justifying why this study is in the field of peace and conflict research – an interdisciplinary field drawing from international law, gender studies, journalism, psychology, political science, theology, and linguistics, among others.⁹

1.2 Aim of the Study

This study takes as its point of departure the notion that the surrounding environment or the venue of a diplomatic meeting, be it dialogue, peace negotiation, or another kind of meeting

⁵ Kakoma cited in Ämmälä 2018.

⁶ Ämmälä 2018.

⁷ See e.g. Cuentaz & Méndez, 2014; Pruitt & Thomas 2007.

⁸ Cuentaz & Méndez, 2014, 33.

⁹ Webel & Galtung 2007.

between diplomatic actors, has an impact on the diplomatic encounter. By concentrating on the Finnish sauna as a site of diplomatic encounters, the study hopes to shed light on the importance of the material aspects of diplomacy and especially the materiality of the location of diplomatic encounters.

Accordingly, the aim of the study is not to lay out a comprehensive history of sauna diplomacy or introduce all the manifestations of the practice but, rather, present it as an example of the material culture of diplomacy.

1.3 Defining Key Concepts

In this section, the key concepts of the research are defined and briefly introduced. However, the Finnish sauna institution and the disciplinary approach of the material culture of diplomacy are further drawn out in detail in the following chapters.

1.3.1 Diplomacy

As observed by Harriet Rudolph, most definitions of diplomacy are imprecise and lacking.¹⁰ Jeremy Black has recognized the same. In the book *A History of Diplomacy*, Black has collected several, partly contradictory, definitions contributed to the word *diplomacy*, from which the reader is left to choose the one best suited for her needs. Different definitions for diplomacy include, for example: 1) “The process and machinery by which - - negotiation is carried out”, 2) “the peaceful management of international relations,” and 3) “a mediation between estranged individuals, groups or entities.”¹¹ Additionally, 4) “there is a widespread use of the terms diplomats and diplomacy to include cultural or sporting activities, and indeed, even the concept that anyone, and thus everyone, abroad is a diplomat for their country.”¹²

Of these, the second and third best describe the type of diplomacy surveyed in this study. However, perhaps the most apt description is offered by Rudolph, who defines diplomacy as:

¹⁰ Rudolph 2016, 7.

¹¹ Black 2010, 12.

¹² Ibid.

All practices of negotiation in which official representatives of political entities directly and peacefully interact to pursue political objectives with regard to those regions where they were not able to claim any rights of territorial rule.¹³

According to Rudolph, this definition “rests on the notion that communication and representation are essential factors in any diplomatic activity” but does not “imply the existence of a nation state, institutionalized professional training of diplomats, or specific features such as reciprocity and permanence.”¹⁴ However, Rudolph consciously excludes the practice of cultural diplomacy, as described by Black, from the general definition of diplomacy as “diplomats do not necessarily participate” in it.¹⁵

1.3.2 Sauna Diplomacy

Pertti Torstila has defined sauna diplomacy as “solving domestic as well as international disputes in the high heat of sauna” and also more simply as “diplomatic meetings which involve the sauna.”¹⁶ In this thesis, sauna diplomacy is considered to resemble the latter rather than the former. Accordingly, sauna diplomacy, for the purpose of the research at hand, can be defined as *encounters with diplomatic objectives, which happen between two or more diplomatic actors, and which take place in the sauna*, while also keeping in mind Rudolph’s definition of diplomacy outlined above. Notably, cultural diplomacy is excluded also from the definition of sauna diplomacy for the sake of narrowing the scope of the study to a feasible length. Accordingly, initiatives which aim to spread sauna culture abroad, such as *The Travelling Sauna Tour of 2017*¹⁷, are left out of this thesis, even though they are often referred to as sauna diplomacy in other contexts.

When defining the concept of sauna diplomacy, we should also pay closer attention to what the word *sauna* entails in the context of this study. According to one commonly used definition, the word *sauna* bears the meaning of both “a Finnish steam bath in which the steam is provided by water thrown on hot stones” and the structure used for this type of bathing, such as a

¹³ Black 2010, 8.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Rudolph 2016, 8.

¹⁶ Torstila 2010.

¹⁷ For more information, see Sipilä & Sivula 2018.

bathroom or a room with special architecture.¹⁸ However, as stressed by Virtanen, “in an authentic Finnish sauna the heat emanating from the special stones feels velvety soft to the skin and it is more penetrating than the heat in a cloud of steam.”¹⁹ Moreover, according to Edelsward, “sauna refers not merely to the steamy atmosphere which causes one to sweat, but the design, technology, behaviour, and values inherent in the concept.”

Regarding these conceptualizations, I define the Finnish sauna, for the purposes of this study, as *a type of sweat bathing, in which hot steam is provided by throwing water on heated stones, the architecture, and technology required for the bathing event, and the values and customs fundamental to it.*

Even though the Finnish sauna is perhaps the most well-known sweat-bathing culture internationally, it is by no means the only one. Other sauna cultures include, for example, the Native American sweat lodge *inipi*, the Russian *banya*, which closely resembles the Finnish sauna, and the Japanese *furo*.²⁰ In this thesis, however, the word *sauna* refers always to the Finnish type of steam bathing, as defined above, unless expressly stated otherwise. Accordingly, sauna diplomacy that has taken place in other types of sweat bathing facilities are mostly excluded from this study.²¹

It should also be mentioned that sometimes, in languages other than Finnish²², the word *sauna* is employed as a sexually connotated term for certain types of massage parlours, which bear no resemblance to the Finnish sauna culture.²³

¹⁸ ”Sauna”, Merriam-Webster.com.

¹⁹ Virtanen 1974, 2.

²⁰ For more information about other sauna cultures see e.g. Tsonis 2016; Pentikäinen et al. 2001.

²¹ Limiting the scope of the study to include only the sauna diplomacy taking place in a Finnish sauna is done with the recognition that sauna diplomacy, to some extent, does exist also outside the Finnish culture. Perhaps the most well-known example of this is the Russian “Diplomacy Without a Necktie”. Seppänen 2004, 439. Russian *banya*’s connection to politics is also discussed in Pollock 2010, 67. Furthermore, Finnish diplomats have been in the receiving end of sauna diplomacy in other sweat bathing cultures. See Serenius 2000 for Consul Maria Serenius’ recollections of her experience in a Native American sweat lodge ceremony.

²² *Sauna* is the only etymologically Finnish word adopted to other languages. Tsonis 2016, 49; Edelsward 1991, 20. For more information about the etymology of the terminology related to sauna bathing, see e.g. Edelsward 1991 20-27.

²³ Virtanen 1974, 141-144; Edelsward 1991, 96-98.

1.3.3 Material Culture

The material culture studies is an interdisciplinary academic field with a focus on “all kinds of human practices that are related to “man-made or man-modified artefacts”.”²⁴ The term *material culture* is understood as encompassing not only the tangible artefact itself but also how it is made, used and discarded.²⁵ Moreover, these artefacts are recognized as “powerful tokens that enable individuals to establish, confirm or challenge social orders”²⁶ through the process of “embodying and shaping the identities of their makers and users.”²⁷

In this thesis, the Finnish sauna is considered as such an artefact. Moreover, the sauna is understood as a means of communicating non-verbally as a “setting for human action” that is “neither empty nor neutral” but which “through various ways - - communicate[s] meaning(s).”²⁸ The tools introduced by Dvora Yanow in the article *How Built Spaces Mean* lend themselves to the purpose of studying the material culture of such spaces and are elaborated on in section 3.2.²⁹ Moreover, the material culture studies are applied in the context of the material culture of diplomacy, which is expounded upon in section 2.1.

1.4 Ethical Considerations

Sauna diplomacy is not a delicate or possibly traumatizing topic. Nonetheless some ethical considerations need to be applied to the research process, as with all kinds of research setting and topics.

Firstly, as in all qualitative studies, the researcher should recognize his or her possible biases on the subject matter and pay attention that these biases affect the study as little as possible. For example, I recognize that as a person who has grown in the Finnish culture, and for whom the sauna has been an important part of daily life since childhood, I might have a romanticized pre-conception of sauna diplomacy. Nonetheless, in order to produce a viable study, I need to

²⁴ Rudolph 2016, 12.

²⁵ Chilton 1990, 1.

²⁶ Rudolph 2016, 12.

²⁷ Chilton 1990, 1. Emphases in the original.

²⁸ Yanow 2006, 361.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 356-361.

take a step back from my own cultural entanglements and examine the data from an outsider's perspective as much as I can.

Moreover, as the data for this research is collected with semi-structured interviews, the interviewing process needs to uphold those same values. For example, it is essential to frame the questions in a way that does not lead the interviewee to say what the interviewer wants to hear. In fact, it is usually held as an academic standard that the interviewer does not seek impose his or her views on the research data but rather strives to maintain a neutral position.³⁰ However, this standpoint has also been challenged, for example by Steinar Kvale, who suggests that in some situations the researcher might consider assuming an empathic stance in the interview situation and, in other cases, actively confront the interviewee to get the wanted information.³¹ As a researcher, I stand between these two schools of thought: I recognize objectivity as a valuable goal, even though I believe that it can be never fully accomplished.

Furthermore, it has also been pointed out that in most research settings the interviewer “upholds a monopoly of interpretation over the interviewee’s statements,”³² which is also the case in this study. In order to express the interviewees’ points of view as truthfully as possible, the interviews used in this thesis are tape recorded with permissions from the interviewee’s and the tapes are transcribed in Finnish, the language of the interviews. In addition to recording, notes will also be taken during the interviews to store the data. When passages of the interviews are also used as direct quotes, the statements are translated in English with the attempt to preserve meaning of what was said as closely as possible. The original tapes and transcriptions will be stored by the researcher for later inspection.

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

The thesis is structurally divided into six main chapters. In the first chapter *Introduction*, the background of the thesis is presented, the aim of the study is declared, and the key concepts are defined. The ethical factors related to the study are also considered.

³⁰ Byrne 2017.

³¹ Kvale 2006.

³² Ibid., 485.

The second chapter introduces the reader to the study of the material culture of diplomacy and sauna studies, respectively, which form the theoretical background for the research at hand. Literature, that is considered consequential in the context of the thesis, is introduced. The research question and sub-questions are presented.

In chapter 3, the context of the study is discussed by introducing the Finnish sauna culture, the symbolism attached to it, and the material implications related to it.

Chapter 3, *Research Design*, introduces the research approach and the method of study and specifies the data used for the analysis. The interviewees are introduced.

In chapter 5, *Sauna as a Site of Diplomacy*, the main findings of the study are presented.

The last chapter concludes the research by bringing together and discussing the main points of the thesis and presenting implications for future research.

2 Positioning the Research

In this chapter, the research at hand is situated within the research traditions of the material culture of diplomacy and sauna studies, respectively, and previous studies relevant to the current research are introduced. Furthermore, the research gap justifying the current research is identified and the research question and sub-questions are presented.

2.1 The Material Culture of Diplomacy

The study of the Finnish sauna as a site of diplomatic encounters can be situated within the study of the material culture of diplomacy. As established in the previous chapter, material culture studies examine objects and artefacts vis-à-vis identities and social orders.³³ In the study of the material culture of diplomacy, the mindset and methods of the material culture studies are applied to the study of diplomacy. Ergo, the material aspects of diplomatic meetings are regarded as having an important role in how the encounter progresses and how it succeeds in its goals.

In the article *Entangled Objects and Hybrid Practices? Material Culture as a New Approach to Diplomatic History*, Harriet Rudolph conceptualizes material culture of diplomacy as follows:

The material culture of diplomacy includes all practices in foreign policy communication in which single artefacts, samples of artefacts, or else the whole material setting of diplomatic interaction is supposed to be constitutive for creating an intended effect in terms of diplomatic objectives – regardless of whether this effect was accomplished in the end or not. Investigating the material culture of diplomacy means studying a complex web of relations between material objects, human beings, and indoor as well as outdoor spaces to uncover the political, social, and legal significance of ways in which political actors brought artefacts into play during negotiations.³⁴

Rudolph lists diplomatic documents, equipment used by diplomatic actors, and diplomatic gifts as having such value, but also notes that surroundings in which the diplomatic encounter takes place are as noteworthy. Worth studying, according to Rudolph, are “the architecture and

³³ Rudolph 2016, 12; Chilton 1990, 1.

³⁴ Rudolph 2016, 13.

furnishing of the sites used for diplomatic negotiations” and “the arrangement of accommodations” offered to diplomatic quests.³⁵ Why these sites were chosen and how they were furnished and decorated are questions that the researcher should pose, according to Rudolph.³⁶ Equally important can be the landscape and the natural surroundings of the diplomatic encounter, especially if the location is “deliberately chosen to convey a specific political message.”³⁷

According to Rudolph, the importance of material practices has been underestimated in many studies of contemporary diplomacy, and the material culture of diplomacy remains a sorely understudied field.³⁸ What studies exist, are mostly focused on handleable objects and especially the exchange of diplomatic gifts. These include Gregor M. Metzger’s study *Corals, Brass and Firearms. Material Commodities in Cultural Interactions between Edo and Portuguese in Benin around 1500* and Michael Talbot’s research paper *Gifts of Time: Watches and Clocks in Ottoman-British Diplomacy, 1693–1803*, both published in the *European History Yearbook* in 2016. Diplomatic gifts are also studied, for example, in Doris Behrens-Abouseif’s book *Practising Diplomacy in the Mamluk Sultanate: Gifts and Material Culture in the Medieval Islamic World* published in 2014 and in Anthony Cutler’s research article *Significant Gifts: Patterns of Exchange in Late Antique, Byzantine, and Early Islamic Diplomacy* (2008). Some notable studies focusing on diplomatic gifts can also be found in *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia*, edited by Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen, and Giorgio Riello. However, it is worth noting that all the studies mentioned above focus temporally on the pre-Victorian era and research on more contemporary diplomatic practices with a material culture focus are difficult to come by.

When it comes to the study of the environment and surroundings in diplomatic encounters, even less research can be found. One of the only such studies is Jane C. Loeffler’s book *The Architecture of Diplomacy: Building America’s Embassies* (1998), in which Loeffler argues that embassies are more than just brick and mortar having an important role to “serve as showcases for the art, culture, and political philosophy” of the countries they represent.³⁹ Interestingly, Loeffler mentions Finland’s new embassy building in Washington, D.C., which was opened a

³⁵ Rudolph 2016, 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁹ Loeffler 1998, vii.

few years before the book's publishing in 1998, as such an accomplishment. According to Loeffler:

Washingtonians have vied for invitations to visit the unusual new building - - and to peek into its well-publicized sauna. - - Everything about the architecture of the new embassy is high-tech and calls attention to the quality of Finnish workmanship and the excellence of Finnish design – accomplishing at a glance what a multitude of pamphlets, books, films, travel posters, and formal exchange programs might only hope to do.⁴⁰

As the citation illustrates, Loeffler's book focuses mainly on the cultural exchange aspect of diplomacy.

2.2 Sauna Studies

Sauna studies can hardly be considered its own academic field, even though there have been calls for such a distinction. The most fervent spokesperson for the fledgling field is Jack Tsonis, whose article *Sauna Studies as an Academic Field: A New Agenda For International Research*, published in 2016, seeks to establish sauna studies as its own discipline. In the article, Tsonis argues that the Finnish sauna culture, as well as sweat bathing culture in general, have been overlooked by the academic world “despite its importance to human culture”.⁴¹ In fact, according to Tsonis: “It is rare in academic life to find an area on which little work has been done. But sauna fits this description.”⁴²

Tsonis refers primarily to research published in the English language, as – even though scattered under a variety of academic fields⁴³ – quite a lot of research on the topic of sauna does exist in Finnish. That said, most published works on sauna culture remain in the realm of popular non-fiction rather than academic studies. Typical to many sauna books is the author's

⁴⁰ Loeffler 1998, vii.

⁴¹ Tsonis 2016, 42.

⁴² Ibid., 44.

⁴³ These include, but are not limited to, ethnology, folkloristics, theology, history, anthropology, landscape research, architecture, psychology, and medical research. See e.g. Leimu 1983 for ethnology; Johnson 1951 for folkloristics; Pentikäinen 2001 for theology; Kuusikari 2017 for history; Edelsward 1991 for anthropology; Seesmeri 2018 for landscape research; Scheinin-Garpelin 2014 for architecture, Tähkä et al. 1971, 70 for psychology; Laukkanen et al. 2015 and Hannuksela & Ellaham 2001 for medical research.

subjective stance with a matching narrating style, which usually endorses sauna bathing as a pleasurable and recommendable activity.

The existing academic research on the Finnish sauna can be divided into three distinct categories: 1) health studies, 2) history and culture, and 3) technology and design.⁴⁴ The research at hand aligns itself with the second category. Accordingly, some notable literature concerning the history and culture of the sauna relevant to the topic of the thesis are presented below.

Perhaps the most important study on the Finnish sauna regarding this thesis is Lisa Edelsward's *Sauna as Symbol: Society and Culture in Finland*, which is also one of the few academic contributions to the field in English.⁴⁵ In *Sauna as Symbol*, Edelsward examines sauna not as a custom but as a ritual.⁴⁶ According to her: "To conceptualize the sauna as simply a Finnish style of bathing is to misunderstand the institution. The sauna is a ritual, in which a person may participate in various social transformations, cleansing being just one aspect of its total meaning."⁴⁷ Moreover, Edelsward recognizes the use of sauna in the context of business and politics as "a very clever and subtle manipulation of the Finnish sauna culture." According to her, "within the private space of the sauna, moral obligations of honesty and good faith weight more heavily on the participants than during formal negotiations. Furthermore, it is a good opportunity to really get to know the other person - - and so facilitate better rapport and communication."⁴⁸

Sauna as a venue of politics is also touched upon in Pertti Alasuutari's cultural studies article on the connections between corporality, rituals, and power relations, of which the Finnish sauna is used as an example.⁴⁹ According to Alasuutari, when society is studied through rituals and ritualistic customs, corporality can be recognized to be closely connected to power and politics.⁵⁰ Moreover, sauna is connected to power and politics also directly as a place of decision

⁴⁴ Tsonis 2016, 53-54.

⁴⁵ Edelsward 1991.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 165.

⁴⁹ Alasuutari 2006.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 98.

making among the power elite, which Alasuutari recognizes as accentuating the patriarchal nature of the society.⁵¹

In her Doctoral Thesis, in which the Finnish sauna is studied as a part of space and landscape, Laura Seesmeri makes the argument that sauna bathing is a “multisensory bodily experience - - which is a part of one’s personal and cultural experience and part of the past and the present.”⁵² In other words, Seesmeri sees sauna as a time-machine of sorts in which the different perceptions – smells, sounds, sensations on the skin, etc. – remind the bathers of their past sauna experiences and make them part of the present experience. Moreover, the corporeal experience of the bather is seen as a cultural event, in which the person’s corporeality and past are tied to the culturally shared experiences of the sauna space.⁵³ This, according to Seesmeri, explains why sauna bathing is considered especially meaningful by those who have grown into the sauna culture and less so by others.⁵⁴ This bears important implications also regarding sauna diplomacy, as the sauna guests in a diplomatic setting might often be less knowledgeable and accustomed to the sauna culture than their Finnish hosts.

Seesmeri’s thesis is also relevant methodologically as it approaches its topic hermeneutically as does the research at hand. Seesmeri uses sauna-themed written reminiscences as data bearing resemblance to textual material collected via interviews. Accordingly, the research approach applied in this thesis is related to the methodological approach adopted by Seesmeri.⁵⁵

2.2.1 *Studies on Sauna Diplomacy*

Jack Tsonis writes in the article *Sauna Studies as an Academic Field: A New Agenda for International Research*, a pervasive literature review of sauna related studies, that “the definitive account of Finnish sauna diplomacy - - is the speech delivered by Finnish Secretary of State Pertti Torstila at the XV International Sauna Congress 2010.”⁵⁶ This statement vividly brings into focus the lack of academic literature on sauna diplomacy, which has only garnered some

⁵¹ Alasuutari 2006, 98.

⁵² Seesmeri 2018, 290.

⁵³ Ibid., 237.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 257.

⁵⁵ Seesmeri 2018.

⁵⁶ Tsonis 2016, 78.

passing mentions here and there. In fact, no previous, rigorously conducted studies on the subject exists, even though the need for such was expressed already in 1972 by Harald Teir. According to Teir, knowledge gathering about the sauna usage by professionals for socialization purposes should be conducted as sauna had already started to gain fame as a location for important negotiations and decision making at the time.⁵⁷

Nonetheless, sauna diplomacy remained as unstudied 44 years later when Tsonis wrote that there is a need for “better sociological histories of sauna as a technology of international diplomacy: Finnish President Urho Kekkonen famously held major Cold War negotiations in his private sauna, and there are many other Finnish examples,”⁵⁸ Indeed, when sauna diplomacy is mentioned in the academic literature, it is most often presented in connection to Finland’s long-serving leader Kekkonen – the grand old man and presumed initiator of the practice, whose tactics to ease the tensions between Finland and the Soviet Union during the Cold War by inviting high-standing diplomats and even the Soviet Premiere Nikita Khrushchev to bathe in the sauna of his Tamminiemi residence are quite well-known. A detailed, investigative account of the famous sauna night between Kekkonen and Khrushchev can be found in Finnish in Esa Seppänen’s book *Miekkalija vastaan tulivuori* [The Fencer Against the Volcano], an analysis on the relationship of the two leaders.⁵⁹

Sauna diplomacy also garners a passing mention from Martin Gannon and Rajnandini Pillai in the book *Understanding Global Cultures*, which has a chapter dedicated to the Finnish sauna. The authors mention the sauna as a gathering place “to discuss the local gossip and politics.”⁶⁰ Moreover, according to Gannon and Pillai, during the Cold War Finland “moved toward the West by emphasizing cautious “sauna diplomacy,” sometimes even using the sauna as a place

⁵⁷ Cited in Särkikoski 2012, 223. Särkikoski speculates that Teir is referring to the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, which were commenced in Helsinki in 1969, and allegedly included sauna bathing in the Finnish Sauna Society’s facilities in Vaskiniemi.

⁵⁸ Tsonis 2016, 78. Tsonis also makes a connection between the practice of sauna diplomacy and the usage of sauna in the context of global politics in occasions that cannot be considered diplomacy as such but which, according to Tsonis, illustrate how “sauna can (and should) be studied” also more broadly in connection with political life and “especially as a site of informal communication.”⁵⁸ These include Angela Merkel having her usual Tuesday night sauna as the Berlin Wall came down and Vladimir Putin bathing in the banya while waiting for the results of his first presidential election. Tsonis 2016, 78.

⁵⁹ Seppänen 2004, 136-147; 434-440.

⁶⁰ Gannon & Pillai 2010, 154.

for relaxation, goodwill, and some degree of equality between Soviet and Finnish diplomatic negotiators.”⁶¹ Once again, president Kekkonen’s sauna bathing tactics are mentioned as a prime example of the practice.⁶²

Lastly, sauna diplomacy is also briefly mentioned in Katariina Helaniemi’s Master’s Thesis *Icons Becoming Brands, How can brands emerge as the result of culture*, in which sauna is studied as an iconic Finnish brand. Helaniemi presents sauna diplomacy as being part of the process in which sauna evolved from a mundane space for social hygiene to a defining aspect of being a Finn.⁶³ According to Helaniemi, sauna has lost its usefulness as a political arena due to issues related to gender equality but still serves as a place “to discuss important deep matters.”⁶⁴

2.3 Identifying the Research Gap

As demonstrated in the previous sections, both the study on the Finnish sauna and the study about the material culture of diplomacy are niche branches that have garnered little academic attention. Moreover, sauna as a place of diplomatic encounters is mostly neglected in both fields. Even though sauna diplomacy can be considered a popular topic – numerous newspaper and magazine articles can be found with a simple Google search with the word pairing⁶⁵ – the absence of academic research perhaps should not have come as such a surprise.

Firstly, both the material culture of diplomacy and sauna studies are unestablished, transdisciplinary fields with no own scholarships or journals as of now. Jack Tsonis made a bid to establish sauna studies as its own field in the article *Sauna studies as an academic field: a new agenda for international research* in 2017; Harriett Rudolph can be considered having done the same in 2016 with *Entangled Objects and Hybrid Practices? Material Culture as a New Approach to Diplomatic History*. However, both niche fields are yet to find a firm status as their own disciplines within academia. As such, the scope of the research within the fields, and especially at their intersection, remains limited.

⁶¹ Gannon & Pillai 2010, 158.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Helaniemi 2016, 40-42.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 42.

⁶⁵ See e.g. Chaffin 2011, Henley 2012, Horowitz 2012, Savage 2013, and Sopher 2015.

Secondly, sauna diplomacy is a difficult concept to define. In order to limit the scope of this research, I have had to accept a rather narrow definition of the concept, as laid out in section 1.1. However, even narrower or much wider definitions would have sufficed but led to perhaps considerably different results. The difficulty to find a satisfactory definition for the concept might make the topic unappealing for closer study.

Thirdly, the study of sauna diplomacy poses methodological challenges as the data, excluding some passing mentions in biographies and speeches, is not publicly available. Hence, the collection of the data is time-consuming and difficult.

Lastly, it is also possible that, due to sauna diplomacy's popular appeal, researchers might have jumped to the hasty conclusion that the field is already well-studied, or perhaps not serious enough for scholarly attention.

Even with these obstacles, sauna diplomacy is a subject worthy of academic attention not only because it offers a variety of unstudied entry points but also because, as phrased by Rudolph, "material practices play a role, which many, though not all politicians – and, significantly, many scholars studying contemporary diplomacy – tend to underestimate."⁶⁶

2.4 Research Questions

As I have laid out in the previous section, a research gap on sauna diplomacy as an example of the material culture of diplomacy indeed exists. Accordingly, the main research question of the thesis is:

- How can the sauna as a site of diplomatic encounters be situated within the material culture of diplomacy?

The main question is broken down to two sub-questions:

- Why have Finnish diplomats chosen to use the sauna as a venue for diplomatic encounters?
- What kind of impact, if any, has the sauna as a site of diplomatic encounters had in terms of diplomatic objectives, according to Finnish diplomats?

⁶⁶ Rudolph 2016, 4.

3 The Context of the Study

3.1 The Finnish Sauna Culture

Virtanen calls the Finnish sauna bathing “a national “institution” which has been continuously cultivated through two thousand years of experience and practice.”⁶⁷ Indeed, there is archeological evidence confirming that a sauna bathing culture in a primitive form existed in the Finnish peninsula already during the stone-age.⁶⁸ Since those times, the sauna bathing tradition has continued and developed unabated⁶⁹ to these days as “part of Finnish culture, customs and social pattern, passed inevitably from one generation to the next.”⁷⁰

In earlier times, the sauna was the first building to be erected. This way, the family could comfortably live in the sauna before the main house was finished.⁷¹ As such, the sauna has always been regarded as a basic necessity in Finland rather than a luxury item available only to the prosperous. In fact, nearly all of Finland’s 5.5 million inhabitants have access to one of the country’s over 2 million saunas.⁷² According to Edelsward: “The sauna is pervasive in Finland, a part of family life, community life and spiritual life, of business, entertainment and sport.”⁷³

Moreover, as observed by the American scholar and writer Hudson Strode in the travel book *Finland Forever*, which describes his experiences in Finland before the Second World War: “The Finnish *sauna* is a place not only for family bathing - - but for entertaining one’s friends. It has a special social value - - The offer of a *sauna* bath is the height of the Finnish hospitality.”⁷⁴

⁶⁷ Virtanen 1974, 3.

⁶⁸ Edelsward 1991, 28.

⁶⁹ In Finland, laws restricting sauna bathing have never existed, contrary to some other countries, such as Norway, which have also had an active sauna culture in the past. According to Virtanen, in many countries the sauna culture was squandered with “laws and ordinances prohibiting all public and private sauna operations because of the fear of spreading venereal diseases due to the clustering of prostitutes at sauna facilities,” Virtanen 1974.

⁷⁰ Virtanen 1974, 21.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁷² Tsonis 2016, 50.

⁷³ Edelsward 1991, 11.

⁷⁴ Strode 1941, 88. Emphasis on the original.

Physically, the Finnish sauna is either a separate building, usually, a small wooden cabin, situated within an easy walking distance from the main house or the summer cottage in rural areas, or a room adjacent to the shower room in a house or an apartment. Apartment buildings also often have a communal sauna and shower facilities for the inhabitants. Separate sauna buildings may consist of only the steam room that also serves as the washing room or have a separate washing room. Large sauna buildings usually also have a room or rooms for changing clothes and cooling off.⁷⁵

According to Virtanen, “the main requirement of the Finnish sauna is that it create bathing conditions which cause the bather to perspire freely.”⁷⁶ The architecture, furnishing, and the ventilation of the space are important factors.⁷⁷ However, the main element for creating desired sauna conditions is the sauna stove (*kiuas*) that can either be wood burning or electrically heated. When the stove is heated, the rocks, which are stacked adjacent to the heat source, become hot. Sauna is ready for bathing when the temperature inside has reached over 60-80 Celsius degrees, depending on the bather’s personal preference.⁷⁸

An important sub-type of the wood-burning Finnish sauna is *savusauna* i.e. smoke sauna, which has no chimney. During the heating, which goes on for several hours, the smoke circulates in the steam room blackening the interior with soot and giving it a smoky scent before going out through a ventilation shaft. The bathing starts only after the fire has been extinguished and carbon monoxide cleared from the space. As smoke saunas have a very large stove with rocks stacked all around the firebox, the steam room remains hot hours, or even days, after the heating has ended.⁷⁹ As the heating of the sauna is a full day’s work, the smoke sauna has become less common in modern times.

After the sauna has been heated to the desired temperature, the bathing may begin. Edelsward describes the bathing procedure as follows:

⁷⁵ For more information see e.g. Edelsward 1991, 13-14. Virtanen 1974.

⁷⁶ Virtanen 1974, 205.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Edelsward 1991, 14.

⁷⁹ Vuolle-Apiala 2009.

The bathers, leaving their clothes on the pegs outside, enter naked and sit calmly on the benches, higher for more heat and steam, lower for less. Periodically, the bathers toss water onto the hot rocks to produce steam which brings on profuse sweating while also raising the humidity of the air. - - Switches of young birch branches, called *vasta* or *vihta* in Finnish, may be used to gently whisk the skin to stimulate more sweating and to massage the skin. The sweating phase may be punctuated by short cooling-off periods outside the steam room or by refreshing swims in the lake. Finally, the bathers wash thoroughly, either in the same room by pouring water over themselves with buckets, or in an adjacent room equipped with a shower etc., according to the style and modernity of the sauna.⁸⁰

After the bathing and washing, the sauna goers usually gather together to eat, drink and socialize. The sauna bathing procedure can last from a quick 15-minute sweat-and-wash to hours-long marathon during which the different stages are repeated several times.⁸¹

Separate turns for sauna bathing are usually assigned for men and women as the typical dress code for the sauna is nude. However, the separate bathing is a rather new custom and did not become the norm until the 20th century as Finland moved from an agrarian society to an industrialized one.⁸² According to Leimu: “In Finnish peasant society of earlier times it was - - usual for both sexes to take saunas together” and that the practice contained no pornographic associations due to the darkness of the space and the birch-twig switches that could be used to cover the body.⁸³ However, the joint sauna bathing was not without problems and was considered uncomfortable by some of the participants as is portrayed by Sanna Kivimäki in the tellingly named article *Pisteliäät silmät ruumiissani*, which loosely translates to *The Piercing Eyes on My Body*.⁸⁴ Nowadays, the joint sauna bathing is still common among the members of the same family and sometimes even close friends, and also exist within some other distinct social groups, such as some Finnish college students’ associations. Some public saunas also have mixed bathing facilities, where wearing a swimsuit is mandatory.

Nonetheless, there are no generally applied formal codes of conduct to sauna bathing, contrary to the expectations of many foreigners, even though some unspoken rules do exist.⁸⁵ The foremost of these is regarding sauna bathing as a “non-suggestive and non-erotic” activity even

⁸⁰ Edelsward 1991, 15-16.

⁸¹ Ibid., 16.

⁸² Leimu 1983, 79.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Kivimäki 1995.

⁸⁵ Alasuutari 2006, 108.

though the participants are naked or scantily clad.⁸⁶ According to Edelsward: “In the sauna, bathers lose their sexuality: there is a strong taboo against sexual behaviour or references.”⁸⁷ The purpose of this “is to protect the sanctity of the sauna.”⁸⁸

Moreover, all kinds of noisy and discordant behaviour, including excessive drinking of alcohol, are discouraged to maintain the peaceful and relaxed atmosphere that is considered essential to the sauna experience and is also important in terms of being safe near hot objects.⁸⁹ Accordingly, one should not argue or fight in the sauna. However, according to Gannon and Pillai: “Discussing the matter as equals in a nonemotional manner, either after sauna or during it, is acceptable and frequently leads to successful resolutions.”⁹⁰

3.2 How the Sauna as a Built Space Creates Meanings

In the article *How Built Spaces Mean – A Semiotics of Space* (2006), Yanow argues that “settings for human action are neither empty nor neutral. Through various ways they communicate meaning(s)”.⁹¹ The meaning of a certain space is communicated non-verbally through four different spatial elements: 1) design vocabularies, 2) design gestures, 3) proxemics, and 4) decor.⁹²

Design vocabularies correspond to the physical characteristics of the space, such as shape and measurements of the construction, used materials and their colour and texture, landscaping, lighting conditions, etc.⁹³ *Design gestures* re-examine the same characteristics as design vocabularies, but in the context of communicating relationships. As Yanow explains: “Contrasts of height, mass, quality of materials, and the like may be read as status and/or authority gestures.”⁹⁴

⁸⁶ Edelsward 1991, 93.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 95.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 96.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 90.

⁹⁰ Gannon & Pillai 2010, 160.

⁹¹ Yanow 2006, 361.

⁹² Ibid., 357-358.

⁹³ Ibid., 358-359.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 359-360.

Proxemics refers to the spatial proximity and distance, “the social and personal spaces between people, and perceptions of those spaces, that implicitly and tacitly shape human behaviour and interaction.”⁹⁵ *Decor* includes not only the furnishing and other objects in display and being used, but also the general dress code of a certain space.⁹⁶ The sauna decor includes, for example, the washing equipment such as water bowls and pieces of soap, the stove and the sitting platform, which, according to Seesmeri, can all arouse emotions in the bather.⁹⁷ However, in the context of the sauna, the most important piece of decor is the dress code – nudity – which has both affective implications and a major impact on the proxemics of the sauna space.

In this chapter, the Finnish sauna building is considered through these spatial elements, while acknowledging that spatial designs and spaces do not necessarily carry the same meanings for different users of the space⁹⁸. In the context of the sauna, Virtanen has described the individual perception the bather has as “a highly personal, frequently variable and often indescribable experience. - - the inner feelings of the bathers are genuinely personal experiences.”⁹⁹

However, the enjoyment of the sauna has been argued to be very much culturally related: Sauna bathing is a pleasurable experience to many Finns because in the Finnish culture sauna represents relaxation and gratification. In other words, the enjoyment of the sauna bathing is, at least to some extent, the result of its symbolic meanings,¹⁰⁰ which are not recognized by non-Finns. Furthermore, as argued by Seesmeri, the bathers’ memories of their past sauna experiences add to the present sauna experience through mental images and nostalgia, which, even though personal, are also often culturally shared.¹⁰¹ As such, some of the spatial elements presented below are likely to be meaningful only to those who are familiar with the Finnish sauna culture.

When considering the design vocabulary and design gestures of the sauna, the sauna bathing event must be regarded not only as a heat treatment for the body but as a condition, which stimulates all the senses. In other words, the sauna bathing experience is a combination of

⁹⁵ Yanow 2006, 361.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Seesmeri 2018, 247.

⁹⁸ Yanow 2006, 353.

⁹⁹ Virtanen 1974, 1-2.

¹⁰⁰ Alasuutari 2006, 97.

¹⁰¹ Seesmeri 2018, 257.

visual perceptions, smells, body postures, and sensations. Moreover, as Alasuutari points out, it is the architecture, which serves the conventions and adheres to the traditions of sauna bathing that creates the setting and sets the preconditions for the whole sauna bathing event.¹⁰² In other words, the sauna as an architectural artefact would not exist without the institution of sauna bathing and the conventions it entails, and, correspondingly, the sauna space and other arrangements impose preconditions and shape the sauna bathing experience. Accordingly, Alasuutari argues that sauna bathing as an institution offers an excellent example of how activity within a social sphere and its external, spatial setting affect one another.¹⁰³

For example, the placement of the sitting platforms (*lauteet*) have an influence on how much the spatial design encourages social interaction among the bathers: Sitting platforms that are situated on the opposing sites of the sauna room or which circle around it make holding a conversation easier than benches that are situated along one wall, and thus, force the sauna bathers to sit side-by-side without natural eye-contact.¹⁰⁴

The temperature and moisture of the sauna are also important factors regarding communication as people even within the Finnish culture have a great variance in opinion on how hot the sauna should be and what is the proper amount of steam. Too hot, cold, humid or dry sauna might expel some and affect how a social group is formed.¹⁰⁵

The space reserved for cooling off after the sauna also bears importance regarding social interaction. As Edesward argues: “The period of resting and socializing afterwards is an integral part of the sauna experience, especially important when the participants do not bathe together.”¹⁰⁶ As the typical dress code for the sauna is going nude this is usually the case, especially when the sauna bathing takes place in a political or business setting. Accordingly, the dress code of nudity poses important implications when considering sauna as a site of

¹⁰² Alasuutari 2006, 101.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 102.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Edesward 1991, 16.

diplomatic encounters, which are not limited to the gender segregation but often related to it. These can be both positive and negative as is now discussed.

Firstly, it has been argued that the nudity among the sauna bathers encourages identification, “the orientation of the self in regard to [a person or group] with a resulting feeling of close emotional association.”¹⁰⁷ According to Tähtä et al.: “The very fact that all the bathers are without clothes tends to accentuate the part played by identification. - - Identification in the sauna temporarily increases the bathers’ willingness and ability to understand one another and the views of one another.”¹⁰⁸

Moreover, it has been argued that the dress code of nudity makes sauna diplomacy an egalitarian approach to diplomacy as “rank and protocol are shed for the dignity of birthday suit”¹⁰⁹. According to Gannon and Pillai, the consequence of this is that “all people are equal when they enter the sauna and there are no visible symbols of social status. - - Everyone sits where they want to sit.”¹¹⁰ Pertti Torstila comes to the same conclusion in his often-cited speech *Sauna Diplomacy; the Finnish Recipe*, in which he states: “In sauna all are equals [sic]. There are no superpowers or minipowers in a sauna, no superiors or servants. You don’t keep your politics up your sleeve when you are not wearing sleeves.”¹¹¹ Furthermore, according to Ville Kivimäki, the Finnish sauna bathing tradition near the frontlines during the Second World War increased the feeling of companionship among the soldiers of different ranks. In the sauna, stripped from their uniforms and insignia, the privates and officers alike were an “ostensibly equal band of brothers” and, as a consequence, going to sauna with the troops increased the popularity of the higher-ranking officers among the infantrymen.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ ”Identification”, Merriam-Webster.com.

¹⁰⁸ Tähtä et al. 1971, 70.

¹⁰⁹ Virtanen 1974, 37.

¹¹⁰ Gannon & Pillai 2010, 161. See also p. 159.

¹¹¹ Torstila 2010.

¹¹² Kivimäki 2013, 218.

As such, the sauna has been argued to function as a mediator between the private and public spheres of life allowing the “participants to step out of their quotidian social roles” and “meet others openly and as equals.”¹¹³ Moreover, according to Edelsward:

To a Finn, the symbolic significance of going together to the sauna is based on the parallel between baring one’s body and baring one’s innermost self, metaphorically laying one’s private self naked before the other; people who throw off their clothes together throw off their public facade for one another’s benefit. In both cases, the ordinary constraints on behaviour based on privacy norms are violated – private parts of the body which are normally hidden are exposed and the private domains of one’s self are opened.¹¹⁴

As a result, the shared sauna experience can create a feeling of “closeness” and “expansive solidarity” between the participants of the bathing event.¹¹⁵ The same sentiment is echoed by Salomaa:

No clothes, no inequalities, no roles. You are naked, you are with your own body, you accept your own existence. That is already a lot. If you accept yourself, you can also accept others easily. And the same for the others. You feel that you belong to the group, you are part of it.¹¹⁶

However, as already briefly discussed, the sauna as a meeting place also restricts who can take part in this group of equals. The issue has not been overlooked by Gannon and Pillai who point out that “we encounter a paradox related to sauna and gender equality in business and political contexts: The sauna has traditionally symbolized equality but typically the sexes do not sauna together.”¹¹⁷ The same is also observed by Helaniemi, who points out as “the controversy of Sauna” the dichotomy “that even though excluding others from making the decisions was clearly an act of exclusivity, going to Sauna together made all the participants equal in the heat of the steam.”¹¹⁸ According to Alasuutari, manipulating the form of interaction in one’s advantage is a way to use power, and that the same applies also to the sauna institution.¹¹⁹

Indeed, the mental image of the sauna as an egalitarian meeting place is challenged by the fact that sauna usually separates the group along gender lines. Accordingly, the conversation is

¹¹³ Edelsward 1991, 132.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 149.

¹¹⁵ Edelsward 1991, 146.

¹¹⁶ Salomaa, Jukka 1984, 5, cited in Edelsward 1991, 151.

¹¹⁷ Gannon & Pillai 2010, 162.

¹¹⁸ Helaniemi 2016, 41.

¹¹⁹ Alasuutari 2006, 104.

divided with men talking with each other and women similarly conversing within their own group. As Alasuutari observes, sauna bathing as part of social gatherings, in which both sexes are present, upholds this gender division.¹²⁰ As women have historically been shut out of decision making, the practice of sauna diplomacy can be seen as having potentially problematic political implications.

Moreover, sauna bathing might be uncomfortable to people unfamiliar with the tradition: Sitting in a hot, closed space naked with other people does not understandably bring the mental image of relaxation to everyone's mind. In fact, some might consider sauna bathing and the practices related to it, such as taking a dip in a hole in the ice and beating your body with birch whisks, rather the opposite, as an anecdote quoted by Edelsward exemplifies: “[The sauna guest] though he was in hell, and when I jumped into the icehole, he ran screaming to the house convinced that I was possessed by the devil.”¹²¹ Furthermore, as Virtanen points out, “speaking of bathing in the nude could be misconstrued as immodest and sexually suggestive” by people unfamiliar with the tradition.¹²²

However, another, more positive implication of the dress code of nakedness is that wristwatches and mobile phones are also left out, encouraging an atmosphere of togetherness without distractions and schedules. This disconnecting from the outside world can be considered as contributing to the relaxing influence of sauna bathing.

3.3 The Symbolism of the Sauna

The main historical function of the sauna has been the maintenance of personal hygiene, as sauna was the only facility at the homestead available for this function.¹²³ However, the sauna was also used for other purposes. It was the place of giving birth, being the most hygienic room of the house and the event of being born in the sauna integrated the sauna “into the life cycle of the Finn.”¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Alasuutari 2006, 104.

¹²¹ Edelsward 1991, 35.

¹²² Virtanen 1974, 97.

¹²³ Alasuutari 2006, 110.

¹²⁴ Edelsward 1991 110.

Correspondingly, the sauna room was also the designated space for washing the dead. Edelsward recognises this tradition as a ritualistic washing, which was completed with placing the birch switch used during the procedure under the head of the deceased in the coffin.¹²⁵ It was also important to leave the ventilation shaft of the sauna open, as it was thought that the person's soul was set free through the opening.¹²⁶ Sometimes the event of dying also happened in the sauna. According to Edelsward, "in their last hours, people would drag themselves or were carried to die in the sauna."¹²⁷

The sauna was also a significant place for rites of passage into adolescence and adulthood. It was typical for the children to bathe with their mothers if men and women went to sauna separately. For the boys, the transfer from women to the men's sauna group "marked the first rung on the social ladder."¹²⁸ The bridal sauna for the young woman leaving her father's house for marriage was also an important rite of passage,¹²⁹ and is still part of many modern bachelorette parties.

However, as the sauna has become independent of its previous practical functions it has assumed an even more symbolic, even spiritual role: It separates the evening into two parts marking the change from work to leisure and from weekday to weekend.¹³⁰ According to Edelsward, "the symbolic separation of the sauna is conceptualized at once as something practical, as something emotional and as something spiritual, as a separation which encompasses all levels of experience."¹³¹

On the practical level, sauna is a separate space from the everyday sphere as it must be prepared and then physically entered.¹³² It is not a room you visit several times a day like the kitchen and, in fact, might be removed from the other living spaces altogether.¹³³ Moreover, the bathing event and the preparations preceding it recur near identically with every sauna going bearing

¹²⁵ Edelsward 1991, 113.

¹²⁶ Seesmeri 2018, 129.

¹²⁷ Edelsward 1991, 113.

¹²⁸ Leimu 1983, 79.

¹²⁹ Edelsward 1991, 112.

¹³⁰ Seesmeri 2018, 260; Alasuutari 2006, 99-100; 108.

¹³¹ Edelsward 1991, 85.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Seesmeri 2018, 91.

resemblance to a ceremony or a ritual: “Heating the sauna, undressing, sweating, cooling, repeating the sweating and cooling, relaxing afterwards with the other bathers.”¹³⁴ Accordingly, bathing in the sauna has been compared to the Japanese tea ceremony.¹³⁵

The undressing is a significant step in this process of detaching from the everyday sphere. According to Edelsward: “Clothing belongs to the ordinary world. It is part of social hierarchies and possessions and of concepts such as time and work, none of which belong to the sauna. - - Removing one’s clothes means removing oneself from the ordinary world, it means becoming part of the separateness of the sauna.”¹³⁶

As the sauna is a place that exists outside the realm of the ordinary world, it has been argued to function as a space for contemplation and meditation in which the everyday troubles can be left behind. According to Edelsward, when one is “removed from the mundane concerns and problems of ordinary life, it becomes possible to contemplate extraordinary ideas.”¹³⁷

In the days of yore, the sauna was heated only once a week and the heating was a time-consuming process requiring patience from the designated stoker. Accordingly, going to the sauna and washing off the week’s toils was a special event. This is reflected in an old Finnish expression that urges one to enter the sauna with the same reverence as the church.¹³⁸

There were also numerous superstitions concerning sauna bathing,¹³⁹ for example the sauna elf, thought to be living inside the stove, or the hot steam¹⁴⁰ was to be greeted with an invocation before entering the sauna lest the bather falls ill. The habit was common especially among people in Eastern Finland.¹⁴¹ It was also thought that if the bathers sat quietly in the sauna there would be fewer mosquitos in the following summer.¹⁴² There were also some nights, often coinciding with important Christian holidays, when the bathers should vacate the sauna early

¹³⁴ Edelsward 1991, 16.

¹³⁵ Strode 1941, 88; Edelsward 1991, 16.

¹³⁶ Edelsward 1991, 92.

¹³⁷ Edelsward 1991, 92.

¹³⁸ Pentikäinen 2000, 102.

¹³⁹ For more, see *ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 103; Edelsward 1991, 25.

¹⁴¹ Pentikäinen 2000, 102-103.

¹⁴² Seesmeri 2018, 135.

but leave water and birch switches in the steam room so that the spirits of the departed could bathe themselves. If the living entered the sauna on such a night, they would receive a washing from the spirits and be gravely injured.¹⁴³ These kinds of beliefs have, however, lost their relevance nowadays.¹⁴⁴

Nonetheless, Seesmeri argues that the spiritual aspects of sauna are considered even more prominent by modern people than their predecessors.¹⁴⁵ Sauna is seen as a place for unhurried meditation and revitalization – a respite from the hustle and bustle of the ordinary life. Edelsward has made a similar argument. According to her: "Even non-religious Finns tell of a feeling of being "reborn" in the sauna. From the psychoanalytic perspective, the sauna induces a form of mental renewal as the result of the release of unconscious psychic tensions."¹⁴⁶ The same sentiment is echoed by Gannon and Pillai, who make the claim that "entering a sauna is often similar to entering a holy place full of the spirituality of nature. - - The ideal associated with the sauna is a nonreligious cleansing of body and soul. Entering the sauna signifies leaving burdens and controversies behind, relaxing, and cleaning more than the surface of oneself."¹⁴⁷

The significance of sauna bathing as a mental cleansing is discussed also by Kiviniemi. According to him, the fact that Finnish soldiers have such vivid memories of sauna bathing during the battles of the Second World War show that the sauna had cultural significance beyond the upkeep of one's hygiene. In the soldiers' recollections, as interpreted by Kivimäki, sauna bathing is described as a mental, and even spiritual, cleansing of one's mind and soul. In other words, Kivimäki argues, that in the battlefield, the physical washing went hand in hand with the moral purification and lustration. In fact, the significance of the sauna near the frontlines was such that the sauna building was often erected even before the defensive structures were set up in a new position.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ Seesmeri 2018, 108.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 135.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Edelsward 1991, 36.

¹⁴⁷ Gannon & Pillai 2010, 159. According to Seesmeri, attributing something as being holy is an age-old means of expressing that something has special value. Seesmeri 2018, 121.

¹⁴⁸ Kivimäki 2013, 217-218.

However, even though sauna is often referred to as a secular “holy” place¹⁴⁹, no holy symbols are displayed in the sauna nor is there a master of ceremonies guiding the proceedings. Alasuutari has argued that none are required as the bathing itself is a sacred experience and the sauna a place for silent contemplation. On the other hand, sauna has been imprinted so strongly as a symbol of Finnishness by being a part of all the important national holidays from Christmas to the Midsummer’s festivities and added such a strong national corporal-emotional element to them that no idols, flags or anthems are needed.¹⁵⁰ The mental image of the sauna as a symbol of Finnishness also factors in on the above-described eagerness of the Finnish soldiers for sauna bathing: The sauna was seen as symbolically setting the Finns and apart from the enemy because the Red Army who had no such custom.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ See e.g. Seesmeri 2018, 121; Edelsward 1991, 106; Pentikäinen 2000; Käsälä 2013; Mäkisalo 2016.

¹⁵⁰ Alasuutari 2006, 108.

¹⁵¹ Kivimäki 2013, 217.

4 Research Design

4.1 Research Approach

In her seminal article on the study of the material culture of diplomacy *Entangled Objects and Hybrid Practices? Material Culture as a New Approach to Diplomatic History* (2016), Harriet Rudolph does not offer a straightforward method on how to conduct a study on material aspects of diplomacy but rather suggests that researchers should adopt methods from material culture studies to fit their specific research interest.¹⁵²

Despite this, Rudolph presents some rudimentary guidelines on how to approach the study of the material culture of diplomacy. These include comprehensive analyses of the possible objectives of the diplomatic encounter and a thorough examination of the essential artefacts or other material subjects, which should include their physical attributes and their possible functions, as well as their monetary and symbolic value. During this procedure, the researcher “should focus neither on material practices nor on political objectives in diplomacy alone but try to see both dimensions together and analyse the various ways in which they interact in diplomatic practice.”¹⁵³

In this sense, the study of the material culture of diplomacy can be recognized as utilizing the hermeneutic tradition, which is based on the idea that “the mind actively makes sense of the world based on prior conceptual frameworks.”¹⁵⁴ In other words, social, cultural, and political contexts of the past, as well as the present, must be taken into account in the process of understanding. Moreover, hermeneutics abandons the notion of a predetermined method and instead interpretation “occurs interpretively during the interpretive process itself.”¹⁵⁵ This process forms the hermeneutic circle of “reading back and forth, iteratively, between text and context”

¹⁵² Rudolph 2016, 21.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 25.

¹⁵⁴ Given 2008.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

and as this process progresses “further layers of understanding are added as each new insight revises prior interpretations in an ever-circular process of meaning making.”¹⁵⁶

The hermeneutic mode of thought can be applied to the study of texts and text-like objects, which encompasses “forms of creative expression” that can be “rendered in whole or in part on paper,” as well as three-dimensional materials including built spaces in order to uncover the process of meaning-making taking place between the design and architecture of a built space, its designers, and the users who visit and inhabit it.¹⁵⁷

Accordingly, the hermeneutic mode is a particularly suitable research approach for a study such as the thesis at hand, which is qualitative and interpretive in nature. Interpretive study, as defined by Wanda Orlikowski and Jack Baroudi, can be understood as attempts to “understand phenomena through accessing the meanings participants assign to them.” Moreover, in interpretive studies, it is assumed that “people create and associate their own subjective and intersubjective meanings as they interact with the world around them.”¹⁵⁸

4.3 Research Methods and Data

The main data for the thesis was collected with 10 semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews with Finnish diplomats who possess relevant knowledge concerning the topic. Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in Helsinki but, due to challenging schedules and geography, some were done via phone or videocall. All the interviews were one-on-one with the interviewer meeting one interviewee at a time. The initial contact with interviewees were made via e-mail.

Closely corresponding sets of questions formed a loose structure that the interviews followed. However, during the interviews, some minor variations were made to the main set of questions in order to address the interviewees personal experiences of the sauna diplomacy practice. Moreover, the interviewees were free to decide which aspects of the topic they wanted to discuss in greater length. The interviews were conversational in nature and their length ranged

¹⁵⁶ Yanow & Schwartz-Shea 2006, 16.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 15; Yanow 2006, 351.

¹⁵⁸ Orlikowski & Baroudi 1991.

from 30 minutes to over an hour depending on how much the interviewee had to say about the topic.

The selection of interviewees was guided by the principle of credibility, introduced by Karen Brounéus as selecting sources “which will maximize the reliability and validity of the results.”¹⁵⁹ Moreover, it was important that interviewees were “experienced and knowledgeable in the area” of sauna diplomacy.¹⁶⁰ However, also diplomats with no first-hand sauna diplomacy experience were interviewed if they had a good understanding of what the practice of sauna diplomacy entails and premeditated reasons for not employing it in their diplomatic work. This inclusion adds a critical aspect to the study, which it might otherwise lack.

In addition to credibility, an equally important criterion for the selection of interviewees was versatility. In order to draw as comprehensive an image as possible of how Finnish diplomats use and experience sauna diplomacy, it was important to include both male and female diplomats and both so-called career diplomats, who have served in Finnish embassies abroad, and peace mediators, who have had to put their diplomatic skills in use in conflict-related dialogue and negotiations. The interviewees are introduced in the subsection of this chapter.

The interviews function as text-like data, which will be interpretively analysed in order to answer the research questions posed in section 2.4. The method used for analysing the data bears close resemblance to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which is often used in studies focusing on lived experience. Accordingly, it is a common method in the field of qualitative psychology.¹⁶¹ However, as the interdisciplinary field of peace and conflict studies is also to a great extent a study of lived experience, using interpretative analyses in a research such as this seems like a natural fit.

IPA combines elements from phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, and focuses on “how people perceive and talk about objects and events”. These experiences are then closely analysed individually before drawing more general findings from the data. In practice, this

¹⁵⁹ Brounéus 2011, 131.

¹⁶⁰ Rubin & Rubin 2005, 64.

¹⁶¹ Pietkiewicz & Smith 2012.

means that the researcher “will move between important themes generated in the analysis and exemplify them with individual narratives (how particular individuals told their stories), comparing and contrasting them (i.e., showing similarities and differences).”¹⁶² However, a major departure from IPA made in this research is selecting a heterogenous rather than homogenous group of people, which is often the case when IPA is used in psychological studies in order to “find a defined group for whom the research problem has relevance and personal significance.”¹⁶³ In this study, however, selecting the samples with versatility in mind served the research questions better as has been discussed.

Because IPA is concerned with analysing each individual case thoroughly, the number of samples are usually limited to around 10, which is also the case in this research. This allows the researcher to compare similarities and differences in the data, without the data mass becoming unmanageable.¹⁶⁴

The 10 interviewees selected as samples are introduced in the following subchapter. All the interviewees were willing to have their names made public, even though they were given also the option to stay anonymous. With that said, as all the interviewees are important figures in the world of Finnish diplomacy, presenting the data with the knowledge of its source does lend credence to the study. Moreover, ensuring complete anonymity without losing valuable context, such as the country of the diplomatic posting, would have been difficult, as lots of information about the career paths of Finnish diplomats is readily available in the internet.

Additionally, in order to draw out a more comprehensive image of the Finnish sauna diplomacy, selected history studies, biographies, speeches, and newspaper and magazine articles are also used as to contextualize the phenomenon of sauna diplomacy to the extent to which they serve the rather narrowly defined topic of the thesis as a case study on the material culture of diplomacy. Included are, for example, Seppänen’s study on the relationship between Urho Kekkonen and the Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev,¹⁶⁵ Merikallio and Ruokanen’s biography of the

¹⁶² Pietkiewicz & Smith 2012.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Seppänen 2004.

Finnish Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Martti Ahtisaari,¹⁶⁶ and the history of Finland's embassy in Oslo by Pekkarinen.¹⁶⁷

4.3.1 Interviewees

Sinikka Antila, the head of the Department of Development Policy at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, began her career at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in 1985. She has served as Ambassador two times: as the Finnish Ambassador to Tanzania in Dar es Salaam from 2011 to 2015 and as the Finnish Ambassador to Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Malawi from 2007 to 2011. She has also been previously stationed in Namibia. During her time in Africa, she initiated the tradition of Lady Sauna inviting influential local women to the sauna. Antila talked about the Lady Sauna event in public and was chosen due to her known first-hand experience on the topic.¹⁶⁸

Pekka Haavisto, the Chairman of the Board of Governors at the European Institute of Peace, is among the most distinguished peace mediators in Finland, which is why he was chosen as an interviewee. Haavisto is especially well-known for his role as a peace negotiator in East Africa. He has worked as European Union special representative and United Nations special advisor in Sudan, where he participated in the Darfur peace talks. Haavisto also served as Finland's Minister for International Development from 2013 to 2014. Haavisto is a Member of the Finnish Parliament. In politics, he represents and currently leads the Green League.

Sanna Kangasharju was responsible for organizing the famous Diplomatic Sauna Society of the Embassy of Finland in Washington, D.C. for six-years. During her tenure as the Embassy Press Counselor, she networked with hundreds of influential Washingtonians in the heat of the embassy building's sauna. When the Finnish sauna diplomacy is discussed in the media, Kangasharju's name is almost always mentioned, which is the reason she was chosen as an interviewee.

Ritva Koukku-Ronde joined the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in 1985. Previously, Koukku-Ronde has held the position of Under-Secretary of State for Development Co-operation. She is

¹⁶⁶ Merikallio & Ruokanen 2011.

¹⁶⁷ Pekkarinen 2014.

¹⁶⁸ See Nokelainen 2013.

currently serving as the Ambassador of Finland to Germany. Her previous posting was in Washington as the Ambassador of Finland to the United States of America. Koukku-Ronde was chosen as an interviewee due to the fame of the Washington embassy as a sauna diplomacy hotspot.

Arja Makkonen is a diplomat at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs currently serving as Finland's Ambassador in the Southern Caucasus region of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Her previous posting was as the Ambassador to Ukraine in Kiev. She has also held positions in Finland's embassies in Moscow and Warsaw and served as Secretary of State for Foreign Trade and European Affairs. Makkonen was chosen as an interviewee, because the sauna diplomacy practice has known to be active in the Eastern Europe and especially in the Moscow embassy.

Antti Pentikäinen, who is known for his efforts in finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Somalia, works as Reconciliation Director of the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers. He also currently serves as Special Envoy for the Prime Minister of Finland on Migration Crisis and as Advisor to UN Under-Secretary-General Adama Dieng on prevention of genocide and atrocity crimes. Previously, Pentikäinen led Finn Church Aid. He has also worked as Conflict Transformation Director of Religions for Peace, Advisor to Finnish President and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Martti Ahtisaari, and Director of Finance and Administration of Crises Management Initiative. Pentikäinen's father Juha Pentikäinen is a renowned theologian and shamanism expert, whose many published works include writings about the holiness of the sauna. Nonetheless, Pentikäinen was chosen as an interviewee mainly due to his experiences in the field of conflict resolution.

Kai Sauer, who began his career as a diplomat at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland in 1995, is currently serving as Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations in New York. This is his second posting in New York – Sauer worked as First Secretary in the Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations in 2000-2003. In 2010, Sauer was appointed as the Ambassador of Finland to Indonesia. He has also previously worked as Senior Adviser in the United Nations Mission in Kosovo and as Senior Adviser to the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, Martti Ahtisaari. Sauer was chosen based on the recommendation of several other interviewees according to whom he has a reputation as an active sauna bather as well as for his first-hand knowledge of the sauna bathing habits of the known sauna diplomat Ahtisaari, who declined the interview.

Heikki Talvitie, the most seasoned sauna diplomat among the interviewees, has the unique privilege of being Finland's last ambassador to the Soviet Union and the first in the Russian Federation, which is the reason he was chosen as an interviewee – Finland's embassy in Moscow is known for its many saunas. In fact, Talvitie's first posting in Moscow was already in the 1960s, suggesting he has insight on the practice also from the so-called golden age of sauna diplomacy coinciding with the presidency of Urho Kekkonen. Talvitie has also served as Finland's Ambassador to Yugoslavia from 1984 to 1988 and to Sweden from 1996 to 2002. He retired from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland in 2002.

Pertti Torstila has had a long international career first as a peacekeeper and then with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. His many foreign postings include the OSCE ambassadorship in Vienna, the Ambassador of Finland in Hungary and Croatia, and the Ambassador of Finland to Stockholm. Before retiring from the diplomatic career in 2014, he served as the State Secretary of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Nowadays, Torstila holds the position of the Chairman of the Finnish Red Cross. Torstila's speech, titled *Sauna Diplomacy; the Finnish Recipe*, at the XV International Sauna Congress in 2010 is perhaps the most cited source regarding the Finnish sauna diplomacy. His manifested knowledge on the topic of sauna diplomacy is the reason he was chosen as an interviewee.

Lauri Voionmaa began his diplomatic career at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland in 2005. He has been stationed, among other posts, at the Permanent Representation of Finland to the European Union in Brussels, Belgium, at the Embassy of Finland to Nigeria in Abuja, and at the Mission of Finland to NATO also in Brussels. Voionmaa was selected as an interviewee because of his known enthusiasm for and first-hand knowledge of sauna diplomacy.

5 Sauna as a Site of Diplomacy

5.1 The Finnish Sauna Diplomacy Institution: An Introduction

As already acknowledged, the Finnish sauna diplomacy is most often associated with the former President of Finland, Urho Kekkonen, and the legendary sauna of his Tamminiemi residence. Kekkonen's reputation as the father of sauna diplomacy is the result of two main factors.

In the realm of domestic politics, Kekkonen was in the habit of inviting a close circle of friends and contacts to sauna every Saturday night. The secretive gathering gained eminence as the "shadow government" of Finland as the guest list consisted of prominent figures with good connections and knowledge about global affairs. However, according to a former member of Kekkonen's sauna club, the discussion circled around the topical matters of the day rather than politics in general making the claims of shadow governing somewhat exaggerated. Nonetheless, the press actively wrote about Kekkonen's sauna gatherings questioning whether such private events were suitable. There were also rumours that the foreign intelligence organizations MI6 and CIA had wiretapped the sauna building, further adding to the intrigue of the affair.¹⁶⁹

Equally important are the sauna nights Kekkonen had with international guests, especially those from the Soviet Union. In fact, Pertti Torstila implies in his speech *Sauna Diplomacy; The Finnish Recipe* that Finland's integration to the Western economy was a direct result of Kekkonen and the Soviet statesman Nikita Khrushchev's sauna night, during which "Kekkonen kept Khrushchev in the sauna until 5 o'clock in the morning" to encourage the Soviet government to express support for Finland's Western ambitions.¹⁷⁰ A similar claim is made by Gannon and Pillai according to whom "Kekkonen invited his Soviet counterpart to sauna, where the two national leaders could free themselves, to some extent, from outside concerns. They discussed and sweated out previous problems in the sauna so that the Soviet Union and Finland

¹⁶⁹ Forsman 2013.

¹⁷⁰ Torstila 2010.

would be in harmony when Finland eventually entered the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973.”¹⁷¹

However, according to historian Esa Seppänen, the foremost reason Kekkonen invited Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders to his sauna was personal rather than political, even though the two were arguably linked together: Sauna offered Kekkonen a home field advantage in executing his political strategy, which was based on good personal relations with key figures in the upper echelons of the Soviet government. Correspondingly, sauna was always unofficial entertainment, not part of the official program of state visits, and timewise accounted for just 2 percent of the interaction between Kekkonen and his high-ranking Soviet guests during their visits in Finland.¹⁷²

Moreover, Kekkonen’s most authoritative sauna guest Khrushchev is actually said to have much disliked the sauna as a result of the time he spent working at coal mines as a young man: For him, the sauna was a place for colliers to wash off the coal dust – a symbol of poverty and disorder.¹⁷³ In fact, according to Seppänen, the only reason Khrushchev accepted Kekkonen’s sauna offer despite his personal aversion to the custom was to humour his host in order to maintain rapport as good relations with the Western neighbour were deemed politically important.¹⁷⁴

Therefore, Seppänen suggests that Kekkonen’s fame as a sauna diplomat is, at least to some extent, the result of tall stories. Thus, he debunks the common belief that the sauna of Kekkonen’s Tamminiemi residence was a mysterious centre of intrigue, where the fate of the Finnish-Soviet relations would have been determined.¹⁷⁵

Another well-known figure and spokesperson for the sauna diplomacy institution is the former President of Finland, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Martti Ahtisaari. According to Ahtisaari: “Most foreign visitors find the Finnish sauna an unforgettable experience and many of them

¹⁷¹ Gannon & Pillai 2010, 158.

¹⁷² Seppänen 2004, 146-147.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 436.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 436-438.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 432.

have become devotees of it. They often promise to visit us again and not least because of the sauna.”¹⁷⁶

One of the important figures visiting Ahtisaari’s sauna has been Samuel John Maleca, the Foreign Minister of Tanzania. The sauna session between Ahtisaari, who served as Finland’s Ambassador to Tanzania at the time, Maleca, and Ahti Karjalainen, the Foreign Minister of Finland, which took place in East Africa in 1974 was immortalized in a famous photograph. Consequently, the sauna of Finland’s embassy in Dar es Salaam has been dubbed as one of the birthplaces of the Finnish sauna diplomacy.¹⁷⁷

Like Kekkonen, also Ahtisaari is well-known for Saturday night sauna gatherings, but this time, the venue for the event was a Russian-Turkish sauna bath on Lower Manhattan, which Ahtisaari frequented during his posting as the United Nations Namibia Commissioner at the UN Headquarters in New York. In *The Mediator: A Biography of Martti Ahtisaari*, the event is described as serving the purposes of relaxation and bonding between influential Finns:

The Saturday morning sauna became a tradition. More and more Finns, either resident in New York or just visiting, began to climb onto the concrete seats. Not only friends and colleagues but also new acquaintances from the worlds of business and culture now threw water onto the hot stones of the sauna. - - You could speak in the steam room if you wanted to, but usually there was no need. Only after the sauna, lying on the bunk beds in the changing room, did the men lounge around, enjoy a beer and a sausage and talk away the week’s stresses.¹⁷⁸

Despite his formidable stature both as a peace mediator and a sauna diplomat, apparently,¹⁷⁹ Ahtisaari kept these two spheres mainly separate – in spite of the popular belief that the peace agreements of Namibia, Kosovo, and Aceh would have been brokered with the aid of sauna.¹⁸⁰ No reliable information can be found suggesting that sauna was used during the mediation

¹⁷⁶ Cited in Karjanoja et al. 1997, 156.

¹⁷⁷ Nokelainen 2013.

¹⁷⁸ Merikallio et al. 2015, 92-93.

¹⁷⁹ Ahtisaari declined the invitation to be interviewed for this research and thus the information is based on secondary sources.

¹⁸⁰ For example, in the speech *Sauna Diplomacy: A Finnish Recipe* Pertti Torstila states that Ahtisaari “has used sauna diplomacy successfully in many parts of the world, from Africa to Asia, from Tanzania to Indonesia”. Torstila 2010. However, Torstila cautions against using the speech as a reliable source, as, according to him, “the style of the speech is rather extravagant, so it is certainly not an objective study.” Torstila, interview by the author, 29 November 2018. The interview with Torstila was conducted in Finnish and translated into English by the author. The same applies to all the interview sources used in this thesis.

processes of said conflicts.¹⁸¹ As recalled by Pertti Torstila, who was part of the Kosovo process in the late 1990's: "It was busy going, so we didn't have time to invite [the Serbian president Slobodan] Milošević to the sauna. We did go to the sauna, though, but it was with the Finnish team."¹⁸²

However, the sauna might have played a role on a more personal level in Ahtisaari's diplomacy: Fellow peace mediator Pekka Haavisto believes that instead of organizing actual negotiations to take place in the sauna, Ahtisaari used the steam room to develop bilateral relationships with important stakeholders. Based on his experience as a peace negotiator, Haavisto finds it hard to believe that it would be possible to take whole delegations of negotiators to the sauna especially from the different sides of a conflict.¹⁸³

Due to the publicity garnered predominantly by Kekkonen, as well as other sauna diplomats such as Ahtisaari, advocating sauna as a place of negotiation and decision making was in fashion in the 1970s.¹⁸⁴ Subsequently, the "Kekkonian" style of decision making in the sauna is still considered as the traditional, legendary, type of sauna diplomacy,¹⁸⁵ even though, as discussed above, Kekkonen, too, used sauna primarily for the purpose of social bonding rather than actual negotiating.

Accordingly, some of the interviewees for this study felt that sauna diplomacy in its classic form belongs to the past and is irrelevant or unsuitable for contemporary diplomatic practices.¹⁸⁶ As one interviewee ruminated: "I haven't been part of the kind of legendary [sauna diplomacy] situations in which you go to the sauna with another diplomat and get drunk and talk about secret things. I don't believe that sauna is typically used in this manner at all."¹⁸⁷ Nonetheless, the long-standing tradition of diplomatic sauna encounters was considered an

¹⁸¹ Damien Kingsbury does mention in his book *Peace in Aceh: A Personal Account of the Helsinki Peace Process* that the negotiation venue, Königstead manor in Vantaa, Finland, had an "old sauna with a moss covered roof" on the manor grounds. However, whether the sauna was used during the negotiations is not disclosed. Kingsbury 2006, IX.

¹⁸² Torstila 2018, op. cit.

¹⁸³ Haavisto, interview by the author, 19 October 2018.

¹⁸⁴ Särkikoski 2012, 223.

¹⁸⁵ Pentikäinen, interview by the author, 24 October 2018; Voionmaa 2018.

¹⁸⁶ Makkonen, interview by the author, 28 November 2018; Pentikäinen 2018, op cit.

¹⁸⁷ Voionmaa 2018, op. cit.

important factor regarding the modern sauna diplomacy practices. According to one interviewee: “If sauna did not have this kind of history in the Finnish culture as a place where previous generations have made agreements, I would not probably consider it so natural.”¹⁸⁸

The contemporary sauna diplomacy is most commonly associated with Finland’s embassies abroad, with the commonly repeated mantra – also by many of the diplomats interviewed for this thesis – that nearly every, if not all, Finnish embassies would have one.¹⁸⁹ In reality, only less than a third of Finnish embassy buildings and 56 percent of ambassador’s residences had a sauna in 2018. Furthermore, as many as 21 Finnish permanent representations abroad had no access to a sauna either on the embassy premises or at the ambassador’s residence during the time of the inquiry.¹⁹⁰

Nonetheless, according to Lauri Voionmaa, sauna diplomacy can be considered such an established institution among the Finnish career diplomats that everyone at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland (MFA) is familiar with the practice making it “a part of the identity of Finnish diplomacy.”¹⁹¹ In fact, the practice is considered so important at the MFA that it has been included in the training of every Foreign Ministry attaché vying a career in diplomacy.¹⁹² The active sauna deployment by Finnish officials is reified in an anecdote by Voionmaa:

During the [Finland’s presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2006], the sauna [at the Permanent Representation of Finland to the European Union] was actively used for representation. So much so that the stove of the sauna broke down. Apparently, the reason for this was cooking sausages on the stove, which was strictly forbidden. After that, there were some restrictions on sauna use.¹⁹³

Many of the embassies also have sauna societies – regular sauna evenings with a rotating guest list of important figures – the most well-known of which is the Diplomatic Finnish Sauna Society in Washington, D.C. The main objectives of the Sauna Society have been stated as being

¹⁸⁸ Pentikäinen 2018. op. cit.

¹⁸⁹ E.g. Torstila 2018, op. cit.; Voionmaa 2018 op. cit.; Kangasharju, interview by the author, 31 October 2018; Meskanen 2018; Sopher 2015; Savage 2013.

¹⁹⁰ The information is based on personal correspondence via e-mail with individual embassies and permanent missions conducted during October and November 2018.

¹⁹¹ Voionmaa 2018, op. cit.

¹⁹² Torstila 2018, op. cit.

¹⁹³ Voionmaa 2018, op. cit.

to “exchange breaking D.C. news and hot scoops, create buzz and get refreshed in great company” as well as to “spread the word about the joys of Finnish sauna culture and other great achievements of Finns inside and outside the Capital Beltway.”¹⁹⁴ Much has been written about Washington’s Diplomatic Sauna Society and other similar events by the international media¹⁹⁵ and the exclusive gathering has even garnered a whole chapter in the book *No Access Washington, DC: The Capital's Hidden Treasures, Haunts, and Forgotten Places*.¹⁹⁶

The intrigue surrounding the event is neatly described by Philip Sopher in the revealingly titled article *Networking Naked With Finland's Diplomatic Sauna Society* published in the prestigious weekly magazine the Atlantic:

I had heard about the Society from a stranger in a coffee shop and phoned the embassy to ask whether, as an Atlantic employee, I could attend and write an article about it. The person in charge of cultural relations turned me down, so I tried my luck with the person in charge of press relations - - She said the guest list was full, so the sauna would be “cramped,” but she would “squeeze me in.”

The abundant, and predominantly positive, publicity has brought a fresh wave of fame to the unconventional diplomatic practice and perhaps shifted the preconditions about it, at least among the non-Finns, from mental images about Kekkonen to networking and country branding.

However, it should also be mentioned that the embassy saunas serve other purposes beyond official representation and sauna diplomacy. According to one interviewee, the embassy sauna “offers an opportunity to upkeep our own sauna traditions and to teach it to the children. We [diplomats and embassy staff] have lots of children who have been born abroad and have never been part of the everyday Finnish culture, so I think it is important that the personnel have access to the sauna.”¹⁹⁷ Another interviewee brings to focus the importance of saunas for employer satisfaction when coping with busy work schedules in sometimes demanding environments. She tells:

¹⁹⁴ Horowitz 2010.

¹⁹⁵ See e.g. Sopher 2015; Savage 2013; Horowitz 2010; Chaffin 2016.

¹⁹⁶ Kanter 2018.

¹⁹⁷ Koukku-Ronde, interview by the author, 7 November 2018.

For me, the sauna represents contemplation and relaxation. In the embassy in Moscow, there were wonderful sauna facilities. The work conditions could otherwise be quite dreary because of the noise and the traffic and the long work hours. It was wonderful to go to the sauna at 9:30 PM when there was no one else around. You could just be there and let go of the hustle of the day. When it comes to employer satisfaction, saunas are really important.¹⁹⁸

5.2 Considerations When Choosing Sauna as a Diplomatic Venue

All the interviewees felt that the invitation to sauna bathing must be placed carefully and with the knowledge of who are the people who might find sauna bathing agreeable. As articulated by one interviewee: “There are lots of taboos involved with the sauna as well as cultural differences - - you should consider very carefully who it is suitable for and in what kind of situations. It needs to be relaxed and easy-going. - - You have to think beforehand who the target group is.”¹⁹⁹

According to former Ambassador Pertti Torstila, the Finns have perhaps been a bit too eager to invite people to the sauna as they enjoy the custom so much that it is assumed others would automatically feel the same way. “Not at all!”, Torstila exclaims.²⁰⁰ He learned his lesson through trial and error as a young diplomat in Paris, France in the 1970s:

It [the sauna] - - felt like a nice place to meet people, immediate atmosphere and what not, so you started to try it out enthusiastically and you discovered that they [the French] really do not want to come. - - If you just said that ‘hey, everybody, let’s got to the sauna now’, the outcome might be bafflingly negative.²⁰¹

Accordingly, the interviewees stressed the need for cultural sensitivity as nudity is a taboo for many non-Finns and going to the sauna can be seen as “an extremely intimate thing” even among people of the same gender.²⁰² According to Torstila: “I don’t want that anyone feels uncomfortable. You must have a sort of sensitivity. In some other cultures, it would be unthinkable to be naked with other people. That sets certain limits.”²⁰³ Arja Makkonen recalls how the wife of a foreign colleague told her “that she would never undress in front of anyone

¹⁹⁸ Makkonen 2018, op. cit.

¹⁹⁹ Koukku-Ronde 2018, op. cit.

²⁰⁰ Torstila 2018, op. cit.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Makkonen 2018, op cit.

²⁰³ Sauer 2018, op cit.

other than her husband.”²⁰⁴ In similar fashion, former Ambassador Heikki Talvitie remembers how the Mayor of Belgrade came to throw the inaugural water on the stove of Finland’s Yugoslavian embassy’s new sauna fully suited as “a Serbian man would never undress.”²⁰⁵

Accordingly, the interviewees emphasized that one should never put the other party in a situation, where they feel embarrassed or uneasy.²⁰⁶ For example, if the relationship with an associate is extremely formal, the sauna would not feel like a natural meeting place.²⁰⁷ As articulated by one interviewee: “You should not put the guests in a situation in which they completely lose their composure. That is not our objective. We aim to make people feel happy and good about themselves.”²⁰⁸ Another interviewee expressed a similar opinion. According to him, “if there is anything - - that keeps people from feeling like their authentic selves, it is not worth it.”²⁰⁹

As such, some felt that the potential sauna guests should make their wish to go to the sauna expressly known.²¹⁰ As the saunas of the Finnish embassies are well known among foreign diplomats, as is the Finnish sauna enthusiasm in general, expressions of interest in the sauna bathing were considered commonplace by many of the interviewees.²¹¹

Moreover, many of the interviewees felt that the question of nudity should be brought up and discussed promptly after the sauna invitation had been extended, preferable privately with each sauna guest. Antti Pentikäinen tells that he has always done just that in order to “ascertained what people wish for.”²¹² Likewise, Sinikka Antila explains that during her time in Africa, she had a custom of always attaching a brochure to the sauna invitation with the information that wearing a towel or African cloth *kanga* was quite OK and that being naked was not required.²¹³

²⁰⁴ Makkonen 2018, op cit.

²⁰⁵ Talvitie 2018, op. cit.

²⁰⁶ Torstila 2018, op. cit.; Koukku-Ronde 2018, op. cit.; Pentikäinen 2018, op. cit.

²⁰⁷ Voionmaa 2018, op. cit.

²⁰⁸ Koukku-Ronde 2018, op. cit.

²⁰⁹ Pentikäinen 2018, op. cit.

²¹⁰ Makkonen 2018, op. cit.

²¹¹ E.g. Torstila 2018, op. cit.; Talvitie, interview by the author, 31 October 2018; Voionmaa 2018, op. cit.; Kangasharju 2018, op. cit.

²¹² Pentikäinen 2018, op. cit.

²¹³ Antila 2018, op. cit.

However, according to Antila, the Finnish sauna culture was generally well known in Namibia as a consequence of the Finnish missionaries going there in the 1870s. According to Antila, “where the Finns go, they build a sauna. - - Therefore, it was totally natural for the Namibians to come to the sauna and be there in a relaxed manner - - and to discuss things.”²¹⁴

Perhaps as a result of the fame surrounding the event, the question of nakedness usually resolved itself spontaneously at the Diplomatic Sauna Society in Washington. In Sanna Kangasharju’s experience:

The power of example was really strong, so if I threw away my towel almost everyone followed suit. Because many were in the sauna for the first time, they wanted to do things correctly. But I made it always clear that it is quite OK to wear a towel in the sauna room, which was actually really dark, so people dared to be without towels in there. I always thought that if they have made the decision to come to the Sauna Society then the threshold has been already crossed. Those, who would consider it [being naked] unthinkable never showed up.²¹⁵

However, due to the lewd reputation that sauna has in some countries “there have been some quips about ulterior motives” and that in those situations “you should be prepared to explain what is the meaning of sauna is for Finnishness and Finland,” Voionmaa tells.²¹⁶ Likewise, Torstila feels that the code of conduct for the Finnish sauna bathing must be made known to people: “That you don’t booze or fuck in there, all of that is out of the question.”²¹⁷ Pentikäinen, too, thinks that for sauna diplomacy to work, its cultural significance to the Finnish people should be explained to the sauna guests thoroughly. He explains:

For the most part, people know what the sauna is and what it is about in the Finnish context. Usually, I have explained to them that in the past, people were born in the sauna and, also went to die in the sauna because it eased the pain. - - I explained to them that it was a holy place for Finns for this reason. When you had to survive in the snow, the sauna was built first in order to stay alive. The meaning of the sauna derives from this. My father has studied the sauna as a mythical place and talks often about the sauna sacrament. He has this idea that the sauna is a ritualistic place where people talk about things they wouldn’t otherwise speak of. From there comes my approach to think of the sauna as a ritualistic place, which is part of the Finnish folklore, and that it is more holy than a secular place. This way people have understood and thought that they are coming to get to know a Finnish tradition, and that has encouraged them to come. - - When you tell people about the symbolic meaning of the sauna, they are not so interested in the physical process but the psychological process that can be related to it. - - I

²¹⁴ Antila 2018, op. cit.

²¹⁵ Kangasharju 2018, op. cit.

²¹⁶ Voionmaa 2018, op. cit.

²¹⁷ Torstila 2018, op. cit.

have been left with the feeling that [the sauna guests] have considered [the sauna bathing event] as a meaningful experience and that sort of feedback I have also received.²¹⁸

Nonetheless, according to Heikki Talvitie, the usefulness of sauna diplomacy was severely restricted in the Netherlands, because “the sauna was considered a shady place, more like an oriental massage parlour with all sorts of things involved.” Hence, Talvitie used the embassy sauna in the Hague only with other Nordic diplomats who were familiar with the Finnish sauna culture. He recalls that “they all liked the sauna - - so it turned out to be quite good after all”.²¹⁹ Similarly, another interviewee tells that she has invited only colleagues from other Nordic countries and Estonia to her sauna – “the sort who have known what sauna bathing is about.”²²⁰

Moreover, several of the interviewees mentioned Muslims as being off limits when it comes to sauna diplomacy due to considerable cultural differences. For instance, according to Torstila: “It [sauna bathing] is a very sensitive cultural matter. - - There are countries in which it would be a complete taboo, for example, it would not come to question in the Muslim culture.”²²¹ Another interviewee felt that “sauna would not be a good meeting place for those who are not familiar with the sauna culture. - - For example, quite many of those who have grown up in the Islamic culture would find sauna bathing a perplexing situation.”²²²

On the other hand, as put by one interviewee, “sauna diplomacy is personal diplomacy – and you can always find sauna enthusiast also from other cultures.”²²³ Pentikäinen warmly recalls how he became good friends with a prominent figure from the Organization of Islamic Co-Operation through a shared sauna experience.²²⁴ “You could think that a Finnish theologian, who is leading the Finn Church Aid, would not be the first person to make friends with Head of the Cabinet of the Secretary General of the OIC,” he muses.²²⁵ Similarly, Haavisto

²¹⁸ Pentikäinen 2018, op. cit.

²¹⁹ Talvitie 2018, op. cit.

²²⁰ Makkonen 2018, op. cit.

²²¹ Torstila 2018, op. cit.

²²² Haavisto 2018, op. cit.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Pentikäinen 2018, op. cit.

²²⁵ Ibid.

remembers how his Afghan chauffeur showed great eagerness to familiarize himself with the Finnish sauna bathing custom.²²⁶

Furthermore, in Lauri Voionmaa's experience sauna has been regarded as "an exotic place and an experience" also by those who have had no prior contact with the Finnish sauna culture. According to Voionmaa, one of the most successful sauna diplomacy experiences during his career happened during Finland's presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2006 when a delegation of European diplomats visited Finland. The programme for the visit also included a sauna night at Nuuksio national park near Helsinki.²²⁷ As recalled by Voionmaa:

I remember how we stood on the water's edge at lake Kattilajärvi with the other diplomats and enjoyed the silence. For many of them, it was a really exotic experience. - - There was no secretive sauna diplomacy involved or any agenda, but for sure everybody was left with a really positive image of Finland. That balmy night in Nuuksio has lived on in many people's imagination.²²⁸

Nonetheless, getting to know the sauna culture has also sometimes led to amusing incidents, such as the following recollected by Sinikka Antila. She tells:

I will always remember how the then CEO of Namibia's National Planning Commission came there [to the sauna]. She had probably never been to the sauna before. - - So, she was wearing a wig like many African women – they had these exquisite hairdos that changed every day and usually it was a wig – and went to the sauna wearing it. I just kept thinking that she must be feeling sweaty. But it was a good experience for her nonetheless.²²⁹

Similarly, all the interviewees who had practiced sauna diplomacy felt that the bathing had been a pleasant experience for the participants, even with some occasional faux passes or blunders. Kangasharju recalls how the heat was sometimes too much for some guests and on a few occasions, someone even fainted but, nevertheless, always returned to the Sauna Society gatherings and the steam room.²³⁰ Pentikäinen also remembers a sauna event during, which a high-ranking UN official got minor burns from the hot steam. According to Pentikäinen, the potentially dangerous situation became a bonding element between the two of them and

²²⁶ Haavisto 2018, op. cit.

²²⁷ Voionmaa 2018, op. cit.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Antila 2018, op. cit.

²³⁰ Kangasharju 2018, op. cit.

afterwards, Pentikäinen always remembered his new friend with burn-soothing lotions and rubbing sponges when they met.²³¹

However, in addition to cultural considerations, there are also gender considerations involved with sauna bathing and thus, with sauna diplomacy. As enunciated by Pentikäinen:

You must be very careful about gender questions. Nowadays, especially, it is really important that - - people do not get the feeling that they are in a situation in which they don't feel natural or safe. I certainly would not suggest joined sauna bathing to female colleagues."²³²

As put by another interviewee: "Obviously, men and women can't go to the sauna together - - You go separately."²³³ Accordingly, the issue of exclusivity, and, specifically, the question of whether conducting work matters in the sauna shuts women out of decision making, is at the heart of sauna diplomacy. In Arja Makkonen experience, "there have been situations during my career when I have felt being left out when the men have gone to the sauna."²³⁴ Pekka Haavisto, too, has noticed how "the socializing is interrupted in an unpleasant way" when part of the group is excluded from the bathing.²³⁵

The seasoned former Ambassador Heikki Talvitie also thinks that "the sauna diplomacy did, for the most part, segregate women" especially during the 1960s and 70s when women were still a small minority at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Even after female diplomats became more common in Finland, the same did not necessarily apply abroad. For example, in Moscow "it became a problem for us that we had female diplomats and they had absolutely none."²³⁶

In order to solve this issue, Talvitie, as well as several other interviewees, presented the option of separate bathing but with mutual socialization before and after the sauna in a shared social space as the natural way to include both sexes to sauna nights.²³⁷ This way, the conversation could effortlessly continue all through the evening with everybody being included in the

²³¹ Pentikäinen 2018, op. cit.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Sauer 2018, op. cit.

²³⁴ Makkonen 2018, op. cit.

²³⁵ Haavisto 2018, op. cit.

²³⁶ Talvitie 2018, op. cit.

²³⁷ E.g. Talvitie 2018, op. cit., Voionmaa 2018, op. cit., Sauer 2018, op. cit., Kangasharju 2018, op. cit.

discussion as “you don’t talk that much when you are in the steam, it happens rather afterward, these conversations.”²³⁸

Antti Pentikäinen was among those who felt that it was essential to arrange the sauna gathering in a way that everybody, regardless of their sex or enthusiasm for steam bathing, could feel included. He explains:

We go together some [sauna] place - - and spend time with each other in the cafeteria area, and from there go to the sauna at separate turns, but afterwards, the discussion continues there. If some of the participants don’t want to join the bathing at all, it is easier for them to be part of the group this way. That is the main idea behind the common social space.²³⁹

By the same token, Pentikäinen feels that “it would not be suitable for the guys to go to sauna somewhere and have a fun night among themselves.”²⁴⁰ Torstila does not share this notion, as the following anecdote exemplifies:

Some woman from the *Riksdag* [the Parliament of Sweden] called me and said that in Sweden it is not appropriate to do this [organize sauna evenings for men], because women need to have the same opportunities. So, I said to my wife that would you take the Swedish women under your care, because they can’t very well join our sauna evening. But it never caught on. What a typical Swedish reaction for some female parliamentarians to think that it should not be allowed if everyone can’t join in.²⁴¹

However, it would be ill-advised to assume that sauna diplomacy would be solely the domain of men. An early example of female agency in sauna diplomacy is Finland’s first female ambassador Tyne Leivo-Larsen, who served as Finland’s Ambassador to Norway between 1958 and 1966. Heikki Talvitie, who began his diplomatic career at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in 1964, recalls:

Tyne Leivo-Larsen had a sauna built there [in Oslo] and she started using it for entertaining. She thought that she had to break the patriarchy because women will always be left out if all the matters are conducted in the sauna among the men. It drew enormous amounts of attention in Finland back then. - - I think she had a good principle.²⁴²

²³⁸ Talvitie 2018, op. cit.

²³⁹ Pentikäinen 2018, op. cit.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Torstila 2018, op. cit.

²⁴² Talvitie 2018, op. cit.

Talvitie assumes that Leivo-Larsen invited mostly local male politicians to her sauna, “as those were the ones who dominated the politics back then”, and that the bathing procedure was conducted with the modesty of towels.²⁴³ According to the history of the Oslo embassy by Jussi Pekkarinen, the wooden sauna building became an integral part of the Osloites mental image of the Finnish embassy and remained a topic of discussion long after Leivo-Larsen had moved on to other duties.²⁴⁴

There are also more contemporary examples of sauna diplomacy initiated by women. The then President of Finland Tarja Halonen became known as a practitioner of sauna diplomacy when the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon praised his sauna experience at the presidential residence in his speech at the Permanent Mission of Finland. However, whether Halonen and Ki-moon actually went to the sauna together is not disclosed in the speech.²⁴⁵

Another example is the Lady Sauna tradition started by Sinikka Antila in Namibia. “It was logical that as I am a woman, I should organize sauna nights specifically for women because you can’t very well go to the sauna with men,” she explains. The Lady Sauna events recurred three to four times a year with the guest list including usually local women in influential positions as well as occasional foreign diplomats. The tradition continued during Antila’s ambassadorship in Tanzania, where all the sauna guests received the membership and the diploma of “the secret sauna society of Dar es Salaam.”

Antila emphasizes that the sauna of her residence was used also for more inclusive gatherings with the help of her husband, who took the men to the sauna.²⁴⁶ Nonetheless, Kai Sauer feels that the question of exclusivity might nowadays very well be turned on its head. As argued by Sauer:

If you look at the statistics about how many women there are among the Finnish diplomats and how many women are holding leading position these days, you notice that they are well

²⁴³ Talvitie 2018, op. cit.

²⁴⁴ Pekkarinen 2014, 84.

²⁴⁵ Ki-moon 2011. Tarja Halonen was contacted for more information but she declined to comment on the grounds of her busy schedule, which allows her to give interviews for only PhD or higher-level research purposes.

²⁴⁶ Antila 2018, op. cit.

represented, and as such have equal possibilities to use sauna diplomacy. You could ask, is it excluding the men?²⁴⁷

The question posed by Sauer is one that Arja Makkonen has also closely considered:

If you think about working in a big embassy where certain matters are handled by some male diplomat, and then you as an [female] ambassador would invite women to the sauna and in there also talk about his stuff, it would certainly not be right. It would definitely be exclusive. - - At least you would need to report very carefully what was discussed to the person who was left out because of his gender.²⁴⁸

As such, it can be argued, that the issue of exclusivity and how to handle it is indeed for both sexes to consider nowadays.

With that said, two of the female diplomats interviewed for this thesis brought up some practical considerations that can be seen rendering sauna diplomacy as less handy a tool for female diplomats than for their male colleagues. According to Ambassador Arja Makkonen: “It is such a work to get yourself presentable again after the sauna when you are red and sweaty and not wearing any make-up. - - For the men, everything is easier.”²⁴⁹

Koukku-Ronde feels similarly:

I think it [sauna diplomacy] is a bit of a guy thing. - - It is more natural for men, because after they have taken a shower, they are totally ready to go. For women, it is a bit different especially if you are the ambassador. After the sauna, you would need to have a beauty salon and a hair-dresser and such, it is not for everyone.²⁵⁰

Accordingly, several of the interviewees remarked that sauna diplomacy has become less commonly used as the field of Finnish diplomacy has become predominantly female.²⁵¹ Among them is Makkonen who feels that sauna diplomacy is to a large extent part of the past. According to her, “there are lots of women [diplomats] these days and we maybe want to handle work matters during the day as business as usual.”²⁵² Furthermore, she pointed out that as sauna

²⁴⁷ Sauer 2018, op. cit.

²⁴⁸ Makkonen 2018, op. cit.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Koukku-Ronde 2018, op. cit.

²⁵¹ Talvitie 2018, op. cit., Torstila 2018, op. cit. Makkonen 2018, op.cit.

²⁵² Makkonen 2018, op. cit.

bathing takes a lot of time – sometimes the whole evening – and “people are usually up to their necks in work,” arranging sauna meetings is challenging timewise in any case.²⁵³

However, not everybody was as enthusiastic about the practice. As argued by Ambassador Ritva Koukku-Ronde: “When you think about the objectives and the different means at our disposal, sauna is a pretty good method and excellent for those who find it suitable for them. - - It can’t be forced like ‘this is a good thing so I must do it’, it has to feel authentic.”²⁵⁴ Accordingly, Koukku-Ronde, even though being an enthusiastic sauna user on her free time and confessedly going to the sauna of her summer cottage “every day during the summer,” felt that the steam room would be ill-suited for her diplomatic purposes.²⁵⁵ She explains:

I do advocate the sauna as a Finnish spring of wellness and do talk about it positively and bring it up. But I just don’t consider it as an effective tool for myself. I rather organize a concert or some other entertainment with good food and such – let’s say [a Finnish musician] playing jazz. I think that is more suitable. People come dressed up and with make-up on and that is also how they want to leave at the end of the night. - - I would not have the heart to throw them into the sauna. - - You have to identify the people who are experimental enough to try it. When you are the ambassador, your colleagues are not that adventurous anymore – they are getting quite old. - - It would be too exotic.²⁵⁶

Furthermore, Heikki Talvitie felt that the precondition for successful sauna meetings is that the host enjoys the sauna. Talvitie assesses that the gratification of the bathing itself has been a vital ingredient in his personal sauna diplomacy successes. As such, he feels that “it must be said that I myself like to go to the sauna. So, if for someone sauna bathing is odious, I don’t think there is any point of even trying - - it would sort of be like the host refusing to eat his own food at dinner. It gives a bad impression.”²⁵⁷

²⁵³ Makkonen 2018, op. cit. The same sentiment was echoed also by Koukku-Ronde.

²⁵⁴ Koukku-Ronde 2018, op. cit.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Talvitie 2018, op. cit.

5.3 Sauna Diplomacy and Diplomatic Objectives

5.3.1 *Showing Hospitality, Networking, and Bonding in the Sauna: “It helped us skip over the small talk”*

As put by one interviewee when regarding the objectives of diplomacy, “of course we have the interest to make people feel welcome,”²⁵⁸ and that the same sentiment applies also to sauna diplomacy. In fact, according to Torstila, it was for this very reason that the sauna bathing experience was offered to foreign visitors during the preparations for the OSCE summit of 1975, also known as the Helsinki Accords.²⁵⁹ Likewise, nearly all the interviewees mentioned giving a positive image of Finland and showing hospitality as being among the reasons for practicing sauna diplomacy.²⁶⁰ Sinikka Antila, for example, tells that the Lady Sauna was closely tied with this aim as “sauna is such an important part of the Finnish culture”. Similarly, Koukku-Ronde emphasizes that “you don’t take people to the sauna just for the sake of it” but that the diplomatic sauna encounters were always part of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs advocacy work to lobby Finnish interests abroad.

Moreover, the aim of giving a positive image of Finland was often related to the goal of creating a network of contacts with the sauna guests and giving them the opportunity to connect also with each other. According to Koukku-Ronde, going to sauna “is networking. You connect the people to each other through mutual experience.”²⁶¹ Peace mediator Antti Pentikäinen, too, mentions these two factors as greatly motivating his sauna diplomacy. According to Pentikäinen:

The sauna is a place where getting acquainted with people might have happened. They are usually colleagues from work that I have invited, and maybe the sort of people I want to invest in by showing them gratitude or reverence, and that’s also how they have taken it – that inviting someone to this kind of special place is the best that Finland has to offer.²⁶²

²⁵⁸ Talvitie 2018, op. cit.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ E.g. Antila 2018, op. cit., Kangasharju 2018, op. cit., Koukku-Ronde 2018, op. cit., Voionmaa 2018, op. cit.

²⁶¹ Koukku-Ronde 2018, op. cit.

²⁶² Pentikäinen 2018, op. cit.

Pentikäinen adds that he prefers to take his guests to the smoke sauna whenever possible so that even those who have had the opportunity to try the regular Finnish sauna before would have a unique experience.²⁶³

By far the most well-known, and maybe also the most elucidative, example of using the sauna to advocate Finland and build connections, is the Diplomatic Finnish Sauna Society of Washington D.C. Sanna Kangasharju, who was responsible for organizing the Sauna Society's monthly gatherings during her tenure as the Embassy Press Counselor, tells that the primary goals of the Sauna Society were to spread information about Finland and to build a strong network of contacts.²⁶⁴ This is how Kangasharju explains the motivation behind the event:

Why I always appreciated and liked the Sauna Society, was that it was such a natural part of our genuine culture to invite people to the sauna. That's what the Finns do when they want to show hospitality. It was not some sort of fabricated gimmick to get people to come. - - Just that we had a nice sauna and we wanted to invite people there and talk about Finland.²⁶⁵

The usual guest list of the Sauna Society included American political journalists and congressional advisers, about a score at each gathering. According to Kangasharju, the uniqueness of the event and the limited number of attendees gave the function a certain "underground feel," which appealed to people. As explained by Kangasharju:

Washington is such a centre of media and political actors that when you manage to get a breakthrough in here, the word definitely spreads. - - It was a big thing to get an invitation to the Sauna Society. And, as is known, Americans are positively competitive, so I got constantly messages with recommendations of who should be invited to the Sauna Society and people also asked directly if they could get an invitation for themselves. For a diplomat, that's a dream come true when growing your social network. People really wanted to come to our event and even competed in who would get to be members of the Sauna Society.²⁶⁶

Kangasharju feels that the Sauna Society aided her networking aspirations substantially. Moreover, several of the contacts she created in the sauna has developed into friendships. "Without the Sauna Society, my social network would be much smaller than it now is," she tells.²⁶⁷

²⁶³ Pentikäinen 2018, op. cit.

²⁶⁴ Kangasharju 2018, op. cit.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

The networking function of the sauna can also be combined with information gathering. As told by Torstila:

When I was the ambassador in Sweden, I started organizing the *bastukabinet* [sauna cabinet], which was very popular. Twice a month on a Friday the sauna was heated and open for leading officials, cultural representatives, newspapermen, and politicians - - it was always crowded. - - The guests also wanted to meet each other, and they had an opportunity for that. And when they started to talk about politics it was nice to be there and listen to how things are in Sweden.²⁶⁸

Similarly, Voionmaa tells that while stationed in the Nigerian capital Abudja, he used the sauna weekly, taking the colleagues from the other Nordic countries to bathe after their regular Tuesday night walk as it was “an opportunity to hear juicy gossip and other information.”²⁶⁹

In Kai Sauer’s experience, inviting foreign colleagues to the sauna has brought “a sort of goodwill and helped to stand out from the crowd - - Going to sauna stays in the guests mind better than repetitive dinners and such.”²⁷⁰ In other words, the sauna has served Sauer as a venue for social interaction that can also be used to advance a positive image of Finland. Moreover, Sauer has noticed that networking naked no longer remains a solely Finnish enterprise. As told by Sauer:

In here [New York], a German colleague has a sauna in his new residence. When the Germans renovated the ambassador’s residence a few years back, the then-ambassador justified the need for building a sauna – before that there was none – precisely on the bases of networking, that it contributes to networking. I would take that as a sign that others have also noticed the potential of sauna diplomacy.²⁷¹

Moreover, after the initial phase of networking with new contacts, the sauna was also favoured as an informal place where the casual acquaintance might develop into a closer connection. For example, Sinikka Antila mentions building trust and creating companionship as some of the goals she has had for her sauna diplomacy,²⁷² and Kai Sauer has noticed that the relationships he has with certain contacts have gotten more depth through mutual sauna experiences.²⁷³

²⁶⁸ Torstila 2018, op. cit.

²⁶⁹ Voionmaa 2018, op. cit.

²⁷⁰ Sauer 2018, op. cit.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Antila 2018, op. cit.

²⁷³ Sauer 2018, op. cit.

Similarly, Lauri Voionmaa feels that in many cases sauna is a superior place for connecting with people as it is less formal than a dinner with a protocol mandated seating arrangements and menu items to consider. In contrast, the sauna is “straightforward and handy” and the lack of formalities allows people to be more relaxed.²⁷⁴ “It is informal. - - It is very Finnish. It is suitable for entertaining. I can easily tell all sorts of stories about things related to [sauna culture] or Finland and Finnishness. It creates instantly a particular kind of connection,” Voionmaa lists.²⁷⁵

For Antti Pentikäinen, sauna diplomacy has been primarily about creating a personal social sphere with international guests and forming a connection that, in his words “has not been otherwise possible.” Moreover, “for informal meetings and getting to know new people, the sauna is a good place. - - It has been a bonding element,” Pentikäinen adds.²⁷⁶

Similarly, Makkonen considers the sauna less as a “work arena” and “more like a place to deepen your association with someone”. According to her: “Obviously, you also talk about work matters - - but maybe mostly about personal things like your families and future plans.”²⁷⁷ Moreover, Makkonen tells that one of the goals for her sauna diplomacy has been “to get to know that group of people better so that it would be easier to work with them in the future when they know you as a different person than just through work.”²⁷⁸ Moreover, going to the sauna also serves the purpose of “building a certain mood,” in her opinion.²⁷⁹

Likewise, Talvitie tells that even though “there were also official matters” discussed in the sauna meetings, sauna was primarily a medium through which “you got to know people better.” “It’s not always just that you ask straight away, what is going on, you also talk about other things,” Talvitie adds.²⁸⁰ Talvitie has also witnessed the power of sauna as a bonding tool, and,

²⁷⁴ Voionmaa 2018, op. cit.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Pentikäinen 2018, op. cit.

²⁷⁷ Makkonen 2018, op. cit.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Talvitie 2018, op. cit.

as the following anecdote demonstrates, also others than the Finns have successfully used the sauna to this effect:

[Russian President] Yeltsin came to visit in Finland in the summer of 1992. [Yuri] Deryabin was then the Russian Ambassador in Helsinki. I asked him if he had ever met with Yeltsin and he said no. I informed [Finland's President] Koivisto about this. When we were then having lunch at [the President's summer residence] Kultaranta, Yeltsin said that he did not care much about the former Soviet Ambassadors but that Deryabin was his man. - - I turned completely red as I had just told them that they [Yeltsin and Deryabin] had never even met each other. So, I asked Yuri [Deryabin] what was that about and he told me that they had been in the sauna in [the Russian Embassy to Finland] the whole previous night. Sauna! It goes to show, that sauna diplomacy is not to be neglected.²⁸¹

However, Koukku-Ronde thinks sauna bonding should not be given too much credit. In her opinion “there are other means to developing a confidential relationship,” and that she has “great confidential relationships” even though never having used sauna diplomacy personally.²⁸² Torstila, too, is of the mind that friendships do not necessarily form in the sauna. Nonetheless, he adds that going to sauna together “does deepen the already existing friendship and gives it a new dimension.”²⁸³

During the Diplomatic Sauna Society gatherings, Sanna Kangasharju noticed that the sauna also added value to the conversations. Similar to the bonding element, the sauna encouraged the participants to talk more openly, and perhaps about matters that they would not bring up in another kind of situations. According to Kangasharju:

Just the environment that you are in an intimate, dark space gave the communication a whole new dimension. - - The same thing that works in Finland, the intimacy of the sauna, brought the conversations the kind of depth that can't be reached at a cocktail party. - - It is difficult to see another natural forum for the conversations we had at the sauna events. The sauna helped us skip over the small talk.²⁸⁴

Kangasharju assumes that one of the reasons people were more open in the gatherings, was because they had had to go out of their comfort zone to show up and after doing so were freed of tensions.²⁸⁵ Torstila, too, thinks that in the sauna “you relax and talk in a different manner

²⁸¹ Talvitie 2018, op. cit.

²⁸² Koukku-Ronde 2018, op. cit.

²⁸³ Torstila 2018, op. cit.

²⁸⁴ Kangasharju 2018, op. cit.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

than you would in a restaurant table - - it puts you in a laidback mood to sit wearing a towel and drinking beer and grilling a sausage.”²⁸⁶ However, as Torstila points out:

Much depends on the participants’ readiness to discuss and share information in general, of course. But there exists no more opportune location, it creates the basis, but maybe this point of view should not be overemphasised. One should not generate a feeling that the sauna is the kind of a centre of espionage where information is plucked out of people - - or a place where you tell your secrets. In that case, they surely don’t tell you anything.²⁸⁷

Nonetheless, Pentikäinen firmly believes that sauna makes people more open to talking about difficult matters and ecclesiastically calls the sauna a space of pastoral care, which “gives you an opportunity to talk about things you would not otherwise talk about.”²⁸⁸ Such a situation was depicted in Kati Juurus’ documentary film *One Man Peace* (2012) about the Somalia peace process from the point of view of one of the negotiators, Pentikäinen’s colleague Abdullahi Farah. In the documentary, Pentikäinen and Farah are shown to be sitting in the sauna, when Farah starts to tell a story about a young child whom he saw trying to suck milk out of the breast of his deceased mother. Pentikäinen describes the situation as follows:

Abdullahi - - had previously mentioned that experience, but it was the first time I heard him tell the whole story, and only later when I realized what it meant to him. It was the most fundamental turning point of his life, to which he has reflected himself and his life. It was the guilt that he felt because of it that made him become a peace mediator, and he has suffered in that role and been ready to take unbelievable risks. That experience troubled him greatly because he did not do anything – did not try to save the child. He had been hungry for many days and been running for his life and he said that they were not human anymore. He recognizes that he did not have the resources, he could not do it, but the experience did not give him peace. Now he is supporting 8 orphaned children.²⁸⁹

As enunciated by Pentikäinen, “for this kind of stories, this kind of encounters, with that depth sauna is a suitable place.” He firmly believes that it was the atmosphere of the sauna that encouraged Farah to share his story.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁶ Torstila 2018 op. cit.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Pentikäinen 2018, op. cit.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ According to Pentikäinen, at that point the documentary team of Kati Juurus had been following the Somalia negotiators for two years and that the presence of the camera was so commonplace for all involved that it did not have an effect on their behaviour. Ibid.

Sometimes the particular attribute of the sauna that has encouraged people to discuss matters openly with each other has been the privacy of the space, as is evident in this anecdote told by Talvitie:

In the '60s, when the Finnish Parliament's Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs arrived [to Moscow], Ambassador Vanamo hosted a dinner party for them. Two guys stayed in the sauna and Vanamo asked me to go get them. They were Juha Rihtniemi of the National Coalition Party [centre-right political party in Finland] and Aarne Saarinen of the Communist party, and they said that they are not going to join the dinner, because in Finland they can't be seen publicly together so now they are going to stay in the sauna – that it is an extraordinary opportunity for them to discuss matters with each other.²⁹¹

Similar thoughts are expressed by Voionmaa, who tells having chosen the sauna as a private meeting location out of the public eye as “in a restaurant, you can't talk about everything.”²⁹² Voionmaa tells an example of this:

You might not want to be seen in some restaurant talking about security matters with [the safety manager of a big Nigerian security company] and he probably doesn't want to be publicly profiled as a briefer of diplomats.²⁹³

However, not all the interviewees agree on the tongue-loosening effects of the sauna. According to Kai Sauer, “the discussions you have in the sauna are not that different than you would normally have. - - work is obviously a common subject matter, so you do talk about work stuff and sometimes maybe even aid that process through these conversations. - - The discussion is maybe somewhat more informal.”²⁹⁴

5.3.2 Sauna as a Political Arena: “Not too serious, not too official, but with discussions on substance matters”

For many of the interviewees, the main reason for using sauna specifically for work purposes, rather than hospitality or personal bonding, was to make the occasion seem less formal and to put the other side in a laidback mood. As professed by Koukku-Ronde, going to the sauna is part of the process of “how we can get our contacts receptive to our ideas and collaboration. It

²⁹¹ Talvitie 2018, op. cit.

²⁹² Voionmaa 2018, op. cit.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Sauer 2018, op. cit

is a good tool because it lets you get on an emotional level.”²⁹⁵ Similarly, Voionmaa tells having always “made a conscious decision to take people to the sauna as opposed to taking them somewhere else.”²⁹⁶

Nevertheless, none of the interviewees consider having used the sauna as an actual negotiation venue. Lauri Voionmaa sees the sauna as “a place for very informal discussion and the actual negotiations are held around the table,”²⁹⁷ while Kai Sauer tells that he “cannot brag about having fulfilled some negotiation goals on the benches of the sauna.” Antti Pentikäinen brings up the issue of exclusivity which, in his opinion, makes sauna ill-suited for negotiation purposes. According to Pentikäinen:

Maybe somehow intuitively, I have never aimed for negotiating matter-of-fact contracts in the sauna. - - I have never had the feeling that the sauna would be the right place for that, especially as it is not an inclusive space where all the important parties can be present.²⁹⁸

Noteworthy Heikki Talvitie, who served at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs during the so-called golden years of sauna diplomacy, also emphasizes never having made agreements in the sauna. Instead, he tells that the bathing has served the purpose of leading the conversation to the desired topic, which is later continued in more official fashion elsewhere.²⁹⁹ According to Talvitie:

With the Russians, the sauna thing has been practically continuous and very informal, kind of a place where the actual matters have been prepped. If you had to make an official proposition it was already talked about beforehand in the sauna meetings.³⁰⁰

Moreover, Talvitie tells that the sauna of Finland’s embassy in Moscow also served the purpose of getting to know the Soviet colleagues in a different way that would be possible just by visiting the Ministry for Foreign Affairs during the 1960s. The Soviet diplomats arrived usually in a big delegation to “watch over each other” for lip offs as drinking vodka was often part of

²⁹⁵ Koukku-Ronde 2018, op. cit

²⁹⁶ Voionmaa 2018, op. cit.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Pentikäinen 2018, op. cit

²⁹⁹ Talvitie 2018, op. cit

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

the night. Afterward, the meetings were re-examined at the embassy and it was discussed “what kind of guys the other side was.”³⁰¹

As a matter of fact, the possibility for young diplomats from the West to meet their Soviet counterparts in relative privacy was a benefit reserved only to the Finns – and usually also related to the sauna. According to Talvitie:

You could not really meet those people otherwise than in the sauna evenings – both sides were cautious not to talk too much substance because you never knew what might happen. But nevertheless, there was a willingness to give these youngsters experience in being in contact with Western diplomats and Finland was a handy partner in this regard and it also benefitted us to be able to operate like that. Diplomats from the NATO countries could never be alone with the Soviets.³⁰²

Even though claiming to never have used the sauna as a negotiation venue, Talvitie has certainly gotten things done with the aid of the sauna – often in cooperation with his Soviet colleague Yuri Deryabin, a fellow sauna lover, whose posting in Helsinki and Moscow coincided with Talvitie’s city of residence. The socialization happened, extraordinarily, given the Cold War setting, also at the private homes of the Talvitie and Deryabin families. As told by Talvitie, the evenings usually progressed with the men going to the sauna and “putting matters in order” while the wives kept company to each other. That was the case also in the following story told by Talvitie:

In 1944, the entire archives of the city of Viipuri were left behind in Viipuri³⁰³. Those included the plats for quite a big part of contemporary Finland. - - Finland had officially asked the permission to photocopy the maps insofar as they covered the area which is currently Finland, but the answer was no – that it is not possible because they are spoils of war and could not be conceded. So, we took care of this matter with Deryabin. I took the issue up with him and he thought that it is quite unreasonable that we don’t have those maps covering the Finnish area. It took a few years – the Soviet Union changed their military law so that we could photocopy them - - This goes to show that when you go through the official channels the answer is no but when you go through the sauna the problem is solved. That’s the thing with sauna diplomacy. You need to find the right people and a sauna and even better if you have this kind of sauna institution with then. - - We exchanged the papers wrapped in cellophane in the steam room. It was a [symbolic] gesture that sauna diplomacy must be given the credit it deserves – that it bears fruit.³⁰⁴

³⁰¹ Talvitie 2018, op. cit

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Viipuri, a city in Russia located in the Karelian Isthmus, was the 2nd biggest city of Finland before the Second World War, during which it was invaded and thereupon annexed by the Soviet Union.

³⁰⁴ Talvitie 2018, op. cit

Another not insignificant success Talvitie and Deryabin's sauna meetings yielded was the revoking of diplomatic passports from the so-called Russian War Reparation Inspectors who by the 1990s were regular businessmen taking advantage of the late Soviet Union's post-Second World War privilege as the winning side of the Continuation War between Finland and the USSR. According to Talvitie, dealing with sensitive issues of that sort were easier managed through the sauna meetings than by bringing them up through official channels, as it seemed less confrontational and had the added value of having the goodwill of the contact person. In other words, it seemed like a more *diplomatic* option, and that is perhaps also how it was perceived by the other side given the results.³⁰⁵

Nonetheless, Talvitie emphasises that even when sauna is chosen to function as a political arena with influential participants and important objectives, the occasion must not be too formal. As put by Talvitie, "sauna bathing can't be the sort of affair where you have a guy wearing a tuxedo behind your back holding a tray."³⁰⁶ He tells an example from his Stockholm years:

There was an old former Prime Minister [Thorbjörn] Fälldin - - who said to me 'Hey Ambassador, you have a good sauna at the residence', so I invited him to bathe. Fälldin came, and then, when he was leaving, I asked him if I could call him a cab, but he said he had a bicycle. It was locked to the water gutter of the embassy building. So, he took it and started pedalling. It was a fitting end for the sauna evening with a former Prime Minister – not too serious, not too official, but with discussions on substance matters.³⁰⁷

However, the laidback nature of Talvitie's sauna meetings was always not so well received at the Ministry. During Talvitie's ambassadorship in Belgrade, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland notified Talvitie that the sauna evenings could no longer be covered from the official embassy budget as "it is not [diplomatic] entertaining if two men sit face to face and eat a greasy sausage."³⁰⁸ Nonetheless, the steamy institution got to continue after Talvitie wrote a report to Finland about his latest, and presumably also the last, effort with sauna diplomacy that had taken place during the Soviet Premier Gorbachev's visit to Belgrade. As told by Talvitie:

³⁰⁵ Talvitie 2018, op. cit

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

I got Gorbachev's Foreign Minister to the sauna and he told me their point of view of the events, which had taken place during the visit. And the sauna, specifically, was where this happened – I don't know how else I could have gotten that information. - - [Finland's] Foreign Minister Väyrynen read the report and notified the administrative department that sauna bathing must continue, which I, of course, agreed to.³⁰⁹

Talvitie clarifies, that even though the atmosphere of the sauna meetings has been informal, he has always had a clear agenda in mind for the encounters. "I had questions in mind. It was usually a political overview – going through the relations between Finland and Russia," he tells.³¹⁰ Similarly, Torstila feels that even though "using the sauna should not be too official or give the other side the feeling that they are being forced with their backs against the steam room wall," having a clear agenda in mind does help because that way "you get answers to concrete questions,"³¹¹

Voionmaa also emphasises that choosing sauna as a venue for diplomatic encounters needs to be well planned and that the steam room should be entered with a clear agenda in mind. He gives the following example:

You have particular topics in mind and a handpicked group of people with whom you want to form good contacts workwise. For example, you know a German official that is a really influential person in the local diplomatic circles and that he might have contacts to the local government and the security apparatus. Then, you plan how you could get that person in your "net" so you can form a good relationship with him. In this situation, it might be a good idea to invite him to a sauna night like 'let's talk about things in the sauna and have a good meal after that'. It might also be a good idea to invite some other people as well so that it doesn't look too much like a set up - - maybe balance the situation by inviting a Brit and a few officials from smaller countries.³¹²

Accordingly, when it comes to having an agenda and clear objectives in mind, the practice of sauna diplomacy is seen as not so different from other types of diplomatic encounters by many of the interviewees.³¹³ As explained by Torstila, "you don't do it for no reason and both sides are aware of that. It is part of official entertaining even though in a very unusual form."³¹⁴

³⁰⁹ Talvitie 2018, op. cit

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Voionmaa 2018, op cit.

³¹³ Voionmaa 2018, op cit., Torstila 2018, op cit., Talvitie 2018, op. cit., Kangasharju 2018, op cit.

³¹⁴ Torstila 2018, op. cit.

With these considerations in mind, many of the interviewees felt that Finnish diplomats should take advantage of the sauna wholeheartedly as “it is a unique thing for us who don’t have that many unique things.”³¹⁵ As expressed by another interviewee: “The Finns should not avoid this kind of forum that is beneficial to us, and which we can use to soften relations.”³¹⁶ Moreover, as argued by Torstila: “You have to use this tool with careful selection to get the wanted results. But when you get to it and notice who are the people who like to come, it is a very good way of socializing and entertaining.”³¹⁷ In fact, the interviewees predominantly considered their sauna diplomacy experiences as successful.³¹⁸ Among the most fervent sauna diplomacy enthusiast was Voionmaa, who expressed his feelings on the subject as follows:

I think the sauna has been good. I feel that the objectives I have set for it have been fulfilled. I think sauna is a better place for entertaining than a restaurant or even dinner at home. It strikes a certain chord with people. - - I can’t remember any situation in which the sauna would have turned out to be an unsuccessful meeting place.³¹⁹

5.3.3 Sauna in Peace Mediation and Dialogue: “A place where the transformative change could happen”

As already discussed, sauna has sometimes been given credit as a place where conflicts have been transformed into a peaceful resolution. Most examples of this can be found in popular sources³²⁰ but also in the academic literature, a notable example of which is the book *The Art of Making Peace: Lessons Learned from Peace Treaties*. In it, international law scholar Sarah Nouwen writes: “Once negotiations are ongoing, the obvious focus is to reach an agreement, to be written down in a text. But, [according to] Martti Koskenniemi - - the making of peace occurs as much in socialization around the negotiations (in his example, the Finnish sauna with some vodka) as in the ensuing text.”³²¹

However, when considering sauna diplomacy in the context of peace mediation and dialogue between conflict parties, both the peace mediators interviewed for this thesis, Antti Pentikäinen

³¹⁵ Torstila 2018 op. cit.

³¹⁶ Talvitie 2018 op cit.

³¹⁷ Torstila 2018 op cit.

³¹⁸ E.g. Torstila 2018, op. cit., Talvitie 2018, op cit., Voionmaa 2018, op. cit., Pentikäinen 2018, op. cit., Kangasharju 2018, op.cit., Sauer, interview by the author, 29 October 2018; Antila, interview by the author, 30 October 2018.

³¹⁹ Voionmaa 2018, op cit.

³²⁰ E.g. Torstila 2010; Henley 2012.

³²¹ Nouwen 2007, 86. Martti Koskenniemi, quoted by Nouwen, declined the invitation to be interviewed for this thesis.

and Pekka Haavisto, considered sauna to be a completely unsuitable peace negotiation venue due to cultural reasons, gender issues as well as accessibility in a conflict setting.

According to Haavisto, the venue for peace mediation is often chosen in a short notice based on what is reachable for the conflict parties and safe to access. In those situations, the option of taking the conflict parties to the sauna is not available. As explained by Haavisto:

There is no fixed base for peace mediation. - - Typical peace talks take place at two possible settings: Either in the areas controlled by the conflict parties, in which case the ongoing fighting bring their own challenges, and the coordinates of the meeting place may have to be changed several times during the same day to make the meeting safe. Or, in a third country where the conflict parties also have access. - - Saunas are pretty far from those places.

Moreover, even if a sauna would happen to be available, Haavisto feels that it would not be a suitable meeting venue. According to him, “in peace negotiations, it is fundamental to create a confidential atmosphere and the sort of cultural space that is agreeable to all the parties”, and sauna does not fulfill these criteria for cultural and gender reasons.³²² In fact, Haavisto finds it altogether doubtful that peace negotiations would have ever been held in a sauna. According to him, “it is difficult to believe that a tableful of negotiators or parties from the opposite sides of the conflict would have been taken to the sauna at the same time.”³²³

Pentikäinen does not state an opinion on whether sauna might have been used as a venue for peace negotiations in some point in history but does think that, at the very least, its time as a place for negotiating has gone. According to Pentikäinen:

For my generation, the sauna as a negotiation venue is no longer relevant. - - When you need to create impartial, safe spaces for different genders to be together, the sauna is not that place. - - It would cause awkward, unpleasant situations even though in the Finnish culture that would not be the case. When in an international company, you can't expect that people understand it [sauna culture] or that they should even have to understand it. From this point of view, its time is over.³²⁴

Haavisto expressed a similar sentiment. According to him:

If the negotiation situation would involve sauna bathing, it would separate the negotiation group to men and women. In contemporary peace negotiations, this is not a desirable situation. - -

³²² Haavisto 2018, op cit.

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Pentikäinen 2018, op cit.

Keeping people around the same table is hard as it is, you can't bring any additional dividing elements to it.

Haavisto and Pentikäinen, who have both been part of the peace mediation process in Somalia, mentioned the country, located in the Horn of Africa, as a particularly unsuitable place for sauna diplomacy. According to Pentikäinen, "in the Somali culture, it is already a lot to get a joined negotiation space for men and women. It would be totally ill-advised to suggest sauna bathing, it would not be suitable."³²⁵

However, he reveals that sauna bathing did play an important role in the Somalian peace process in another capacity: It was a bonding element, which brought the group of mediators closer together and helped them endure the pressures of the difficult process. As explained by Pentikäinen:

Going to the sauna was a custom for us to talk about the difficult aspects of the work. - - When I think about the process in Somalia, it was the core group's mutual trust and resilience to withhold the burden and encumbrance of the process that mandated the end-result. It was such a difficult process and every day there were reasons to quit. Legitimate, good reasons that you can say at your workplace and at home and in public that I can't do this anymore. - - That we did not give up stemmed from the strong bond which existed within the group. - - [The group] was dedicated to bringing some kind of peace to Somalia, and sauna had an influence in creating that bond.³²⁶

Pentikäinen tells also another example of the power of the sauna in interpersonal relationships:

When I was working with Ahtisaari, he hosted meetings for the special representatives of the United Nations Secretary-General in Finland. In one of these meetings, there were representatives from Africa - - and they were quite a quarrelsome lot. Either subject matters or personal chemistry had caused discord between them and they could not get along. - - So, I took them to the sauna and naturally it was the first [sauna] experience for many of them. - - On top of being in the sauna the for the first time it was of course also the first time for them to go roll in the snow. I threw a snowball at somebody and that started a snowball fight. With exhilaration, we did three rounds of sauna bathing and snowball fighting on the yard and that took away the tension between them and they became friends. Years later they came to tell me what an impact it had on their cooperation that I took them to the sauna and to snowball fighting. - - It shows that the sauna is a place where you can discharge this kind of psychological tensions. Some people use a football game for the same reason, but the sauna is yet more intimate and emotionally deeper. We also talked about things in there, but it was primarily a kind of a relaxation tool.³²⁷

³²⁵ Talvitie 2018, op. cit

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Pentikäinen 2018, op cit.

As such, Pentikäinen has been considering using the sauna as a space for post-conflict dialogue also between former parties of armed conflicts. As explained by Pentikäinen:

Nowadays, we understand much better the importance of transformative relationships. The work I currently do is, to a large extent built on the idea that one peace agreement is not enough and that it is more likely to be revoked than to stay in effect. The UN is struggling with how to reach a transformative change between the communities and people after the peace agreement has been signed. I am inclined to think that the sauna has the potential for being a place where this transformative change could happen. I am willing to try this myself.³²⁸

Pentikäinen specifies that the transformative sauna bathing might potentially take place in one of the special reconciliation retreat centres located in different parts of the world. In there, people from opposing sides of former conflicts meet regularly for dialogue and shared activities in a “hospitable, home-like space.” According to Pentikäinen, people taking part in the post-conflict retreats cook and eat together, pray together if they have similar religious convictions, walk in nature, and spend time with each other. Usually, there are some 30-50 participants in each gathering. Pentikäinen equates the sauna bathing, which those who are interested in trying could join with the result of “perhaps finding something in there,”³²⁹ to a walk in the forest – also an activity that not everybody is interested in partaking.

None of the reconciliation centres currently have a sauna but Pentikäinen tells that he has already suggested building one to a few centres and has also volunteered to do the construction work himself when he has spare time. However, he emphasizes that the project is somewhat fanciful an undertaking and that the money for it would certainly come out of his own pocket, as other facilities, such as equal spaces for prayer, are of much higher priority. Moreover, Pentikäinen points out that, at the very least, the participants would have to be informed of the sauna etiquette and the Finnish sauna culture beforehand, preferable by Pentikäinen himself, so that they would have the needed information for deciding if they want to embrace the experience.³³⁰

³²⁸ Pentikäinen 2018, op cit.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Ibid.

Somewhat surprisingly, former ambassadors Sinikka Antila and Pertti Torstila, who, unlike Pentikäinen and Haavisto, are not peace mediators, also mentioned having sauna diplomacy experiences, which could be considered a dialogue between parties in conflict.³³¹

For Antila, the occasion took place during her ambassadorship in Zambia, where the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland had a partnership with the UN Women to support women's political participation in the country. As part of those efforts, the Finnish and Swedish embassies organized a dinner for female ministers and political leaders from the opposition party and the dominant party. According to Antila, the Finnish and Swedish ambassadors, both of whom were women, were seen as reliable intermediaries and the evening was a major success. Encouraged by the experience, Antila decided to re-establish the Lady Sauna, which she had not been organizing in Zambia in fear that the event would not be as warmly embraced as in Namibia, and to invite the same group of women to the sauna of her residence. The evening exceeded Antila's expectation. She tells:

The residence in Zambia has a small, a rather traditional sauna cottage that properly fits only five or six people. I was also a bit afraid of how things would go in Zambia as [sauna bathing] was not a familiar culture there like in Namibia, but it went just so well. I thought that maybe three or four would come but they all came, and we sat there almost on top of each other. And after the sauna, we had dinner and they talked so much that it seemed that there is no end to it. - - My deputy [Head of Mission], who was also a woman, started to wonder if we get to sleep at all that night. So, after that, I was really dismayed that I hadn't organized it sooner. - - There were lots of tensions between the opposition and the dominant party, so the fact that you could get them to sit there like ducks in a row is to my knowledge totally unprecedented in Zambia. - - You are sitting there quite naked, so it definitely takes away some of the tensions.³³²

Torstila's experience of organizing a dialogue between conflict parties in the sauna happened before his diplomatic career at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, when he was serving as a reserve lieutenant in the UN peacekeeping mission in Cyprus in 1966-1967. As told by Torstila:

I was a lieutenant and the leader of a reconnaissance squadron. My job was to travel along the demarcation line between the Greek and the Turkish, visit the villages and test the waters about what the situation was – if the heat was rising and should you expect clashes, shootings, interference, the sort of daily recon work. - - I worked with these people on the daily bases and the Finnish enthusiasm for sauna bathing was well known. [Saunas] were everywhere. We also had two, and both sides [of the conflict] knew it. I then brought up this subject. They probably had to go to their superiors to get permission, but at least once it happened. - - So, I managed to get the representatives from both sides to the sauna at the same time, officers in key positions. - - They probably would not have agreed to meet each other if there had not been this Finnish

³³¹ Antila 2018, op. cit., Torstila 2018, op. cit.

³³² Antila 2018, op. cit.

mediator who was friends with them both. - - It was based on the kind of comradery and awareness that we are not going to negotiate anything, that the aim is to create contact and to get those guys to talk with each other about their points of view on the conflict. It was a learning experience for me as I heard straight from the horse's mouth how stark their convictions were and how tightly the different parties were holding on to them. It is a conflict that is yet to be resolved. - - So obviously no peace came out of it - - but I hope the sauna experience did serve the purpose of developing a personal relationship between the two of them and in that way appeased the situation, so that if they looked at each other over the barrels of their rifles day after day from their bunkers and behind their sandbags - - it would soften that exchange.³³³

Torstila's experience shows that, at least once, parties from the opposing sides of an active armed conflict have indeed met in a sauna to have a conversation with each other, even if informally.³³⁴

³³³ Torstila 2018, op. cit.

³³⁴ Interestingly, in the chapter *The Finnish Sauna* of the book *Understanding Global Cultures*, Gannon and Pillai write: "During the Finnish presidency of the EU in 2006 the concept of sauna diplomacy was still active: The Finnish minister of foreign affairs was encouraged to invite the Greek and Turkish sides of the Cyprus issue to negotiate in a Finnish sauna" (Gannon & Pillai 2010, 158). As it happens, Pertti Torstila served as Finland's Secretary of State between 2006 and 2014. However, in Finland, the Secretary of State is the title for the highest permanent civil servant of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and thus a different position than the Minister for Foreign Affairs, held by Erkki Tuomioja in 2006. When contacted by e-mail via his assistant Ayla Shakir, Tuomioja commented the above citation as follows: "The entry you have found about the year 2006 is completely unknown to me, both in connection to myself and in general. Neither as the Minister for Affairs nor in any other official capacity, have I been to the sauna, save once (that was with [the foreign minister of Germany] Joscka Ficscher after we had first together taken part to a relay run event around the Töölönlahti bay)." Accordingly, it should be assumed that Gannon and Pillai indeed mean Torstila's sauna diplomacy experience in Cyprus in the 1960s but have gotten confused about the year the occasion took place and in which capacity Torstila participated in it. Torstila briefly mentions the event in his speech *Sauna Diplomacy; the Finnish Recipe*, which he gave in 2010. The quote by Tuomioja is translated from Finnish by the author.

6 Conclusion

This thesis set out to analyse the Finnish sauna diplomacy as an example of the material culture of diplomacy, which examines the role of materiality in diplomatic encounters. In order to answer the main research question of the thesis – how can the sauna as a site of diplomatic encounters be situated within the material culture of diplomacy – personal accounts of Finnish diplomats with knowledge of the practice of sauna diplomacy have been examined from the point of view of diplomatic objectives.

All the diplomats with first-hand experiences of sauna diplomacy interviewed for this thesis told they had chosen the sauna as a meeting venue specifically to pursue certain objectives which they believed would be best driven forward with the aid of steam bathing. An oft-mentioned reason for the sauna being a good diplomatic tool was the more relaxed atmosphere it created compared to other sorts of settings, also when work-related subject matters were discussed. The laid-back mood, in turn, helped the conversation reach a deeper and more personal level, which was useful not only for information gathering purposes but also for getting to know the other person better. Good personal relationships with work colleagues were considered extremely valuable for attaining current and future diplomatic and foreign policy goals as Heikki Talvitie's "sauna institution" with Russian diplomat Yuri Deryabin distinctly demonstrates.³³⁵ In general, many of the interviewees felt that the sauna helped them to connect with their fellow bathers on a more personal level than is usual in a professional interaction. As such, the research findings uphold, at least to some extent, Lisa Edelward's claim that sauna bathing offers "a good opportunity to really get to know the other person."³³⁶

Accordingly, widening one's network of contact and deepening existing work relationships were mentioned as objectives for sauna diplomacy by all the interviewees who had used the practice. Furthermore, the sauna was considered a space where taking a discussion beyond the small talk came more naturally than, for example, at a cocktail party or a restaurant. Several of the interviewees considered that they had had conversations in the sauna that would not have probably taken place elsewhere. However, several of the interviewees also felt that the sauna

³³⁵ Talvitie 2018, op. cit.

³³⁶ Edelward 1991, 165.

should not be given too much credit as a place where secrets are being shared either because they felt that that was not the case, or because they considered such a reputation to be harmful to their future sauna diplomacy objectives.

Other reasons mentioned for choosing the sauna for a meeting place included showing hospitality and giving a positive image of Finnish culture for country branding purposes. Several of the interviewees told that using the sauna with these objectives in mind was effective especially because inviting guests to the sauna is considered a natural part of the Finnish culture and thus doing so felt a natural – and sincere – thing to do also in the context of international diplomacy.

It is worth noting that none of the interviewees had used the sauna as a negotiating venue, even though some work matters had been prepped in the sauna before the actual negotiations. Furthermore, sauna diplomacy was generally considered ill-suited for formal peace mediation purposes by the interviewees, even though sauna diplomacy has enjoyed a reputation of helping to bring conflicts to a peaceful resolution.

Nonetheless, fostering informal dialogue between conflict parties was mentioned as an objective for sauna diplomacy by some of the interviewees and the sauna was also suggested as a potentially effective space for transformative change in post-conflict settings. The reasons for choosing the sauna for these purposes were often rooted in the belief that the sauna made people more relaxed and eased the tensions between those involved in the bathing event. Indeed, this was the positive outcome in several of the sauna stories told by the interviewees, including Antti Pentikäinen's account of the UN officials whose personal disagreements the sauna helped to ease and Sinikka Antila's story of the bipartisan sauna night for Zambian women politicians, who, after finding common ground in the sauna, talked all night. Accordingly, the claim that sauna bathing would increase the participants "willingness and ability to understand one another and the view of one another"³³⁷ can be upheld based on these findings.

As reflected on by Pentikäinen, sauna bathing is not an activity that everyone wants to join, nor should they, but for those who are interested, it can be an experience which leads the participants potentially to new revelations – and rapport. In a similar fashion, it was emphasized by all the interviewees that, even though having a great effect in some situations, sauna bathing is

³³⁷ Tähkä et. al. 1971, 70.

not for everyone and each case should be evaluated individually. Many of the interviewees also felt it important to explain thoroughly what the Finnish sauna culture was about to their potential guests so that the practice could be experienced on a more profound level and, also to avoid misunderstandings that might arise from some of the conventions of the practice.

The reasons mentioned by the interviewees for dismissing the sauna as a venue for diplomatic interaction were primarily cultural and gender-related. The sauna was considered as being too exotic and the nudity related to it too much of a taboo for certain groups, the most often mentioned being the Muslims. However, also the French and the Dutch were brought up as unsuitable targets for sauna diplomacy, and one interviewee also felt that older age made people too unadventurous to be receptive to the practice.

Nudity and its implications were intrinsically linked to gender-related reasons as well. Many of the interviewees stated that they had decided to conduct work matters elsewhere due to the exclusive nature of the sauna space, which usually divides the group along the gender lines. However, a noteworthy finding, which came up in several of the interviews, is that as the world of Finnish diplomacy has become predominantly female, also women have started to ponder the issue of exclusivity from the point of view of an active agent – as they should. As one female ambassador pointed out, discussing the business of her male subordinates in a women's sauna night would not be fair practice in her position as the Head of Mission. Accordingly, gender division should nowadays be discussed not only as a mechanism of inequality, which leaves women out but as a disruption to the group dynamic which can have a negative effect on both genders.

Other reasons mentioned for not choosing the sauna as a diplomatic venue were the personality of both the potential sauna guests and the hosts themselves. If the work relationship was extremely formal or the colleague considered too unadventurous the sauna invitation was not extended. Moreover, one interviewee also considered the sauna space as unsuitable for her personal style of diplomacy, even though she enjoyed sauna bathing in her free time and endorsed the practice of sauna diplomacy for those for whom it felt like a natural way to conduct official business. A similar sentiment was expressed also by another interviewee, according to whom sauna diplomacy could only be effective if the host him or herself felt comfortable in the bathing situation. Time-related and practical reasons as well as special considerations set

by the working environment, such as an active conflict zone, were also mentioned as influencing the decision to not use the sauna.

All the interviewees with first-hand knowledge of sauna diplomacy considered that their experiences had been predominantly or always positive and that the diplomatic objectives they had set for the encounters had been met. Accordingly, many of them vouched for sauna diplomacy – with the preconditions discussed above – and felt that Finns should continue to take advantage of the practice, which was considered beneficial for them.

The only sauna diplomacy experiences mentioned during the interviews which might be considered unsuccessful were Pertti Torstila's recollections from his younger years when he had started trying out the sauna diplomacy practice too eagerly on less-than-impressed Parisians. However, he considers the trial and error of his early sauna diplomacy days as an education in how to properly take advantage of the practice, what he has since done with great aplomb.³³⁸ Furthermore, one of the interviewees mentioned as a negative experience related to sauna diplomacy having felt being left out because of her gender.

Several possible reasons can be identified for why the experiences recounted by the interviewees were so overwhelmingly positive. Firstly, based on the interviews, the diplomatic objectives that the interviewees had set for the sauna encounters can be considered relatively unambitious and thus easier to meet. The objectives were more often related to “soft diplomacy” goals, such as giving a positive image of Finland, showing hospitality, networking, and bonding with colleagues, rather than forwarding “hard diplomacy” objectives such as negotiating a deal, which – as already established – was not the objective of sauna diplomacy for any of the interviewees.

Moreover, as discussed above, all the interviewees brought up a number of considerations, including sensitivity to cultural differences and personal preferences as well as gender issues, which needed to be addressed before the sauna bathing could take place. Accordingly, the sauna meetings had been carefully premeditated to suit the context and objectives of the encounter and the people invited to come had been equally carefully chosen with those objectives in mind. Usually, the interviewees had made inquiries beforehand to ascertain if an invitation

³³⁸ Torstila, *op. cit.*

would be welcome and only then extending it to potential guests. In other words, the diplomats had planned the sauna encounters extensively to ensure that their diplomatic objectives would indeed be met. This goes to show that sauna diplomacy is a genuinely well integrated part of the Finnish diplomacy toolbox and that the Finnish diplomats using it are exceedingly knowledgeable of how to use it to their advantage.

With that said, it must be also taken to account that the selection of interviewees might have had an impact on the results as all the interviewees were quite eager to talk about their sauna diplomacy experiences – perhaps on the grounds that they were so positive. Those who declined to give an interview could have done so on the grounds that their experiences were less than successful. In fact, it was implied in one case that declining the interview was done out of a personal reluctance to speak ill of such a formidable and revered institution within the Finnish diplomacy. Moreover, the two interviewees who had no personal sauna diplomacy experiences naturally could not have any negative experiences to share.

Moreover, it must also be said that finding female interviewees was much more difficult than finding male interviewees, which made upholding the gender balance challenging. It was more typical for women to decline the request for an interview or simply to ignore it altogether whereas many of the male interviewees eagerly seized the opportunity to talk about their experiences. As such, it is possible that women either have less experience in sauna diplomacy or that their experiences are less positive than those of male diplomats, even though such conclusions cannot be drawn based on the research data.

An even more striking imbalance exists among the career diplomats from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the peace mediators, only two of whom agreed to give an interview. Possible reason for this might be that sauna diplomacy is simply not as significant a practice in their line of work, which can also be recognized in the comments by peace mediators Antti Pentikäinen and Pekka Haavisto. Thus, commenting on the practice might not have been considered meaningful. As such, the sauna diplomacy practised at the Finnish embassies was given the most emphasis in this thesis, and, based on the findings discussed above, it can be assumed that this reflects the reality of the practice rather well. Having said that, it must be pointed out that the sauna diplomacy practiced at the Finnish embassies has also been somewhat exaggerated by the media and the diplomats themselves as far fewer embassy buildings and ambassador's residences actually have a sauna than is often assumed. Moreover, it was pointed out by several

interviewees that the embassy saunas also serve other purposes beyond sauna diplomacy – namely enhancing employee satisfaction and connecting the embassy staff to Finnish culture while abroad.

Nevertheless, when taking into account the findings discussed above, it can be established that **sauna diplomacy is an excellent example of material aspects playing a role in diplomatic encounters, because the material setting of the diplomatic interaction – the sauna space – was considered to be constitutive for creating an intended effect in terms of diplomatic objectives by the diplomatic actors who had chosen it as a meeting venue**, thus fulfilling the precondition set for the material culture of diplomacy by Harriet Rudolph.³³⁹

As such, when it comes to the field of peace and conflict studies, the thesis at hand can be seen as contributing to the knowledge of how the venue of a diplomatic encounter can affect the outcomes of the meeting, which, as pointed out in the introduction, is of consequence also in the context of peace negotiations. However, more research about how and why certain places have been chosen as venues for peace negotiations and what impact the settings have had in the success or failure of the negotiations is needed.

Moreover, even though the sauna was deemed an unsuitable place for formal peace mediation purposes by the interviewees, it was considered an apt space for informal bonding between different stakeholders, such as the peace mediation team or even conflict actors. Moreover, it was also suggested that the sauna could possibly function as an effective setting for transformative change in post-conflict settings, which might bear important implications regarding conflict transformation. Accordingly, the potential of the sauna as such a space should be a topic of future research. It might also be fruitful to map out and compare the possibilities offered by other intimate spaces similar to the sauna.

³³⁹ Rudolph 2016, 13. According to Rudolph's definition, the material culture of diplomacy includes "all practices in foreign policy communication in which single artefacts, samples of artefacts, or else the whole material setting of diplomatic interaction is supposed to be constitutive for creating an intended effect in terms of diplomatic objectives – regardless of whether this effect was accomplished in the end or not." As the sauna was consciously chosen as a site of diplomatic encounters based on its assumed effect on the encounter it matches this description.

Furthermore, as is evident in Torstila's account from Cyprus, the UN peacekeeping corps' saunas have been used as a venue for dialogue between conflict parties at least once.³⁴⁰ However, whether using the sauna to encourage rapport between conflict parties has been a more common custom among the Finnish peacekeeping force is yet to be investigated, as are the other purposes for the peacekeepers' sauna bathing. Possible research questions include how and why the tradition began, what the official objectives for it are, and what individual peacekeepers' personal connection to and experience of sauna bathing during missions are.

Finnish peacekeepers' sauna tradition can be situated within the broader topic of the sauna at war, which Tsonis argues "is a topic in need of fuller study."³⁴¹ Notable cases of the sauna at war include the saunas built by the Finnish soldiers near the enemy lines during the Russo-Finnish Wars of 1939-1944 and the makeshift saunas Ukrainian soldiers have used during the current conflict in Eastern Ukraine in order "to cope with stress."³⁴² According to Virtanen, the Finnish Marshall Mannerheim "ordered the building of these "Korsu" saunas close by every military post and close to every frontline position."³⁴³ In Finland, the sauna was also important to the women and children at the home front during wartime, as is evident in the sauna memories analysed by Seesmeri.³⁴⁴ The question of the significance of sauna bathing in relation to coping with stress during war and conflict both in the frontline and the home front poses an interesting topic for future research, which has so far only been briefly touched upon in academic literature.³⁴⁵

Finally, it must be noted that – in order to study sauna diplomacy as an example of the material culture of diplomacy – this thesis has approached the topic of sauna diplomacy strictly from the Finnish diplomats' point of view. However, it would also be valuable to hear the sauna guests' side of the story to ascertain how they experienced the encounter and whether the sauna bathing did truly have its assumed effect on them. Until then, we must, based on the findings of this thesis, assume that sauna diplomacy is indeed an excellent tool for fulfilling a number

³⁴⁰ Torstila 2018.

³⁴¹ Tsonis 2016, 49.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Virtanen 1974, 124.

³⁴⁴ Seesmeri 2018, 123.

³⁴⁵ See e.g. Kivimäki 2013, 217-218; Seesmeri 2018, 123.

of diplomatic objectives – most of which have to do with personal diplomacy. As one of the interviewees for this thesis described his diplomatic sauna experience: “There was no secretive sauna diplomacy involved, or any agenda, but for sure everybody was left with a really positive image of Finland.”³⁴⁶

³⁴⁶ Voionmaa, op. cit.

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