



Family Business: Stoking the Fires of a 150-Year-Old Tradition

Andis Bluķis came to Latvia to claim his family legacy: a sauna

The public sauna (*pirts* in Latvian) has been invested with a myriad of different roles throughout the history of Riga, each reflecting the specific needs and trends of the time. With the growth of the modern city, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, public saunas provided a place to bathe for the majority of Riga's residents, most of whom didn't have showers or baths at home. For members of the upper classes, expensive private saunas were like exclusive country clubs – places to meet and do business in an ornate, relaxed atmosphere. With the beginning of the Soviet occupation, in 1941, saunas were nationalized and became a municipal service, like parks and roads, provided to residents by the state. After independence was regained, in 1991, saunas reflected the turmoil of the post-Soviet world, transforming into veritable dens of iniquity, places notorious for illegal business of all stripes. Today, the majority of saunas in Riga are tiny electric-powered chambers, tucked into the bathrooms of gyms and spas, where they provide little more than a quick spot to warm up between pool and shower, or manicure and pedicure.





Baltā pirts

Thankfully, the process of forgetting is gradually being reversed, and the myth of the public sauna will take one step closer to reality this month when renovation work is completed at Riga’s oldest continuously functioning sauna, Baltā pirts, at Tallinas iela 71, in the historically working-class Grīziņkalns neighborhood. Nothing reflects the history of the urban public sauna better than this

The family eventually settled in Managua, the capital of Nicaragua, where Hugo worked at the local market as a quality-control specialist, ultimately earning enough capital to open a drugstore. Through the connections he had made at the marketplace, Hugo also began exporting coffee from Nicaragua to Europe. By 1904, the Lapiņš family had saved enough money from Hugo’s coffee exporting business to return home. Back in Latvia, Hugo finally had the chance to prove his skill at running his own version of the family business; he built his first sauna, next to the Ziedoņdārzs Park, in 1906. Two years later, Hugo opened another sauna and bathhouse nearby, on Tallinas iela, which became known as Baltā pirts.

In the beginning, Baltā pirts was an opulent affair, with glass chandeliers, marble floors, and beautiful, ornate furniture. The mainly upper-class clientele would come to discuss news, politics, and business while sitting in one of the four saunas, which were heated by steam from two enormous riveted-steel cauldrons, filled with 70,000-liters of water, located up in the attic.

Baltā pirts operated as a popular and successful business until 1941, when the Soviets occupied the country. Andis’s

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legendary sauna and bathhouse, which is owned and operated by Andis Bluķis (34), a Latvian American from California whose family built the sauna exactly one hundred years ago, in 1908. Andis Bluķis’s family has been in the sauna business for a long time. In the mid-1800s, Bluķis’s great-great-grandfather, Rainis Lapiņš, a blacksmith from Ropaži, moved to Riga and built a sauna on the corner of Brīvības and Palīdzības streets. Rainis’s oldest son, a doctor, followed in his father’s footsteps and opened his own sauna, on the corner of Tērbatas and Tallinas, before inheriting his father’s successful establishment. Rainis’s youngest son, Hugo, wasn’t included in the inheritance and had to manage on his own; to make ends meet, he began smuggling furs from Russia in old herring barrels. After a few years in the fur trade, Hugo learned that his young wife, Emma, was pregnant. He decided that the best way to support his new family was to seek his fortune abroad, and so, in 1896, Hugo packed his bags and traveled across the ocean to see what fate would bring.

grandmother, Jūlija, who had taken over the administration of the business from her late father, escaped to Germany with her only daughter – Andis’s mother – and eventually settled in Santa Barbara, California. Meanwhile, the sauna was nationalized and taken over by a cooperative called Varavīksne, which managed the establishment until 1991. During the Soviet period, the sauna served the working-class residents of the neighborhood, often seeing as many as 2,000 visitors per day. Shortly after the unsuccessful Communist coup in 1991, Andis’s mother, Ieva Stūre-Bluķe, returned to Latvia with the deeds to her grandfather’s business. She eventually assumed control of the pirts, and the establishment was once again signed over to her family’s name. What she found wasn’t pretty: the sauna’s beautiful pre-war details and finishing had been removed; the building had fallen into disrepair; and the employees hardly kept up the sauna’s early-twentieth-century reputation for high-class service. But Andis’s mother was interested in maintaining the health and

Andis Bluķis, holder of Baltā pirts

wellbeing of her new neighbors, and kept the sauna as a philanthropic service to the long-time clientele. "A lot of people desperately needed this place, and some of them had been coming here for fifty or sixty years," explains Andis. "There was a certain sense of loyalty to them that developed after being here for a while. My mother felt that."

During this time, Andis graduated from college, where he studied music composition and Russian literature, and began working in the Internet programming field, enjoying the fruits of the dot-com boom of the 1990s. After eight years in the industry, Andis took six months off and thought about starting his own business. As Andis tells it, "Right at that time, the question of what to do with [the sauna] became more acute for our family. The business wasn't doing very well, and we had to decide whether we were going to try to renovate the building, and resurrect it, or sell it. Candidate number one was me. I was living happily in San Francisco and

programming, and generally content with my life. But I decided to take on this business, rather than start a Web development business in California. And I don't for one minute regret it; it's been quite an extraordinary experience." Andis left his apartment in San Francisco, packed up his things (as his great-grandfather Hugo had done more than a century before, from the opposite side of the ocean), and moved to Latvia to take over the family business in early 2004.

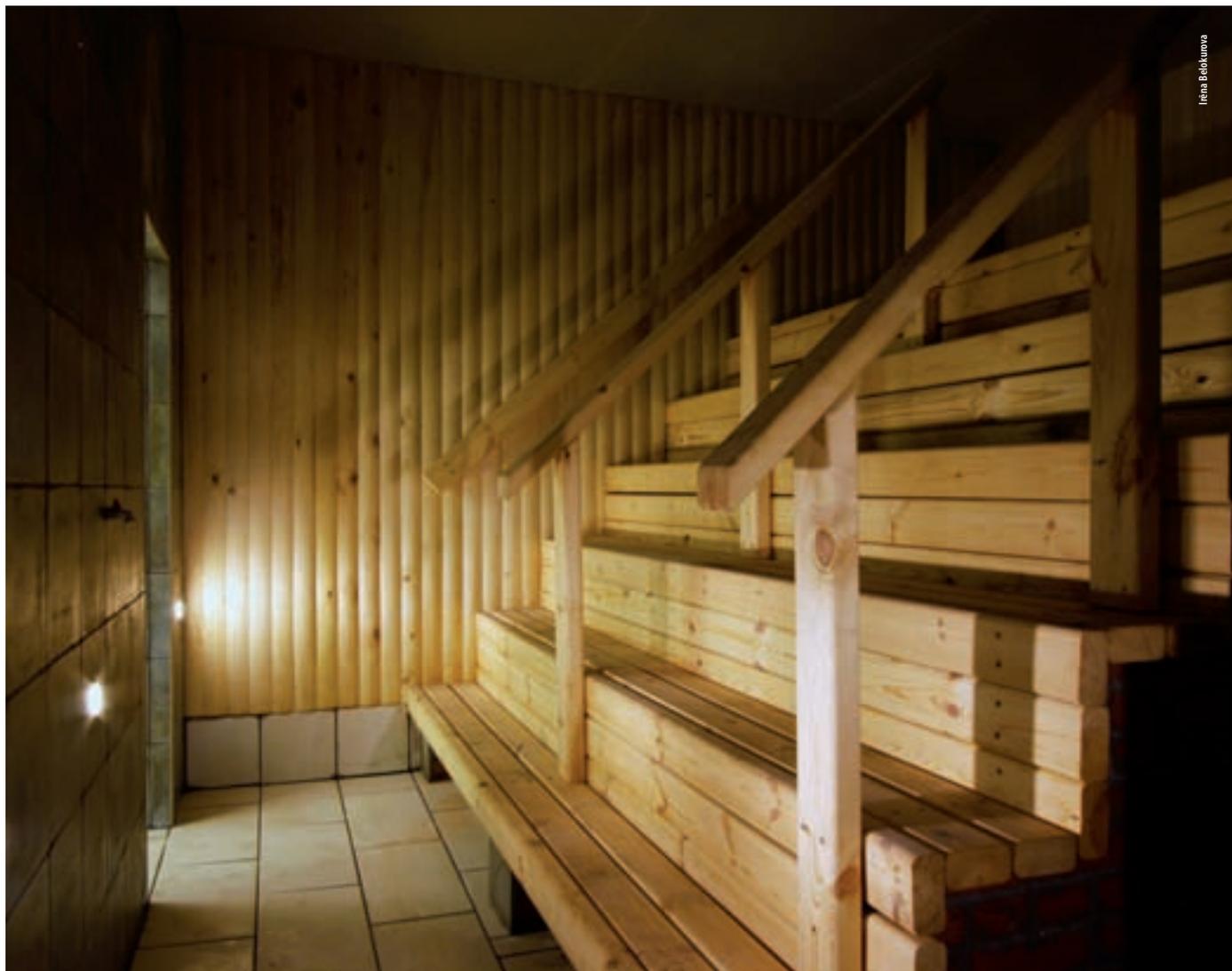
When he got off the plane in Riga, Andis didn't know much about running a business in the Baltics, much less about how to fix up and restore a one-hundred-year-old sauna. He did have a certain degree of management experience, after helping operate a dot-com business in California, and knew a thing or two about construction, from helping some friends renovate a house during college. "Putting that all together, I felt like I could do well with the business, and believed in what it could be. And I had grown up in



Irena Bekurova

California, which has a lot of health spas and where people are very health-conscious in general; I wanted to bring that tradition here. I also had faith that, sooner or later, people would become interested in taking better care of themselves and their health.” After rolling up his sleeves, Bluķis got down to work. He closed down the sauna for a month, fired some of his more problematic employees, downsized the bloated payroll, and called a general meeting, where he explained what he wanted to do. Bluķis spent a year legalizing construction work, navigating the local bureaucracy, putting the bookkeeping in order, drawing up architectural sketches, planning the layout of the building, and “achieving rudimentary order.” He then began the first of three stages of renovation work, overhauling the building’s basic infrastructure – electrical wiring, plumbing, and communications. The results were immediately apparent: things ran more smoothly and business improved. Baltā pirts’s long-time clientele were happy, too. “Customers came to thank me personally for giving

them a clean place to come bathe. That gave me a lot of hope.” The second phase of renovations will be completed this month, when the women’s sauna area and a café are opened, allowing Baltā pirts to offer day spa services for the first time. (The third phase, which includes a gym and beauty salon, on the top floor, will be finished sometime in the near future.) “But at the same time, we are definitely retaining what has been here for one hundred years – the sauna where everyone goes together. There’s a cultural and society aspect to that, which I don’t want to lose. I want to preserve the traditions of the pirts, but also to make sure the quality of services and general hygiene levels are up to modern standards.” He was also careful to preserve those features that give the building its indelible old-fashioned charm, like the one-hundred-year-old stove, which is fed all night with whole cords of wood, so that the facilities are ready for the first customers when the building opens, at eight a.m. As every Latvian knows, the pirts means much more than just a hot



Irena Bedkumova

room to sweat in. Part and parcel of the sauna tradition is a whole bounty of wisdom about how to live well and maintain your health. By resurrecting and preserving a public sauna, Blužis has provided a forum for these ideas to be shared and disseminated. “Everyone who comes here likes to share this knowledge and pass it on to another. There’s a lot to know – about herbalism, what temperature is good for you, the general effects the pirts has on your skin, your heart, and your muscles. ... The pirts provides an opportunity to take a breath and relax a little bit, to enjoy a moment of peace and quiet, to meet people and talk to strangers – in a time when we are all becoming more and more isolated, because of technology and our hectic pace of life – as well as a chance to reflect and delve into oneself.”

After traveling halfway across the world to seek his own fortune, mirroring the trip made by his great-grandfather almost one hundred years before, Andis couldn’t be happier with what he has found – something that can’t be measured in terms of monetary

gain. “I had a very good job in California; I was earning good money and was very comfortable. But when I stopped and asked myself whether I was content, whether I felt a sense of accomplishment in what I was doing, I came to the conclusion that I could feel even better. I was spending most of my time involved in a process that I liked – thinking and solving puzzles and using my mind – and that was pleasant; but the end result was always another Web site that sold stuff and made rich people richer. And when I compare that to what I do now – helping a lot of people that are not that socially well off, who are very grateful to the point of being teary-eyed and say thank you to me on a regular basis; improving the general health of people and giving them a place to relax and feel better (they often come in upset and high-strung, but leave smiling and happy) – well, that gives me a much bigger sense of accomplishment than building a Web site.” 

By **Richard Kalnins**