

by Duncan J. D. Smith

On 16 August, 2001 a fire broke out on Marxergasse in Vienna's 3rd District. Allegedly caused by a careless workman, the flames raged for eight hours. Only when the smoke cleared could the damage be assessed: The legendary Sofiensäle, once Vienna's most beloved ballroom, was a smouldering ruin.

Bath to ballroom

The story of the Sofiensäle is a very Viennese one. It begins with a child of empire, the Bohemian Franz Morawetz (1789–1868), who came to Marxergasse after his wealthy wife bought him a textile business there. In 1838, after the venture had failed, Morawetz instead built a Russian steam bath (*Banya*), at the suggestion of a visiting Russian soldier. One of his first visitors was the chambermaid of Archduchess Sophie, the emperor's mother, who came looking for a cure for joint pain. So impressed was she that the archduchess followed suit. The establishment was named Sofienbad in her honour.

Success then came quickly for Morawetz and in 1846 he was able to extend his operation. His chosen architects, Eduard van der Nüll and August Sicard von Sicardsburg, designed for him one of Vienna's first steel-framed public buildings. With the inclusion of a ballroom-cum-concert hall the Sofienbad became the Sofiensäle – Sofian Rooms – and in 1848 Johann Strauss the Elder conducted at the opening ball.

Winnetou and the wounded soldiers

The new Sofiensäle held almost 3,000 people and offered year-round entertainment, with bathing during the summer months and concerts and balls in winter. Thousands of Viennese learned to waltz here under the reliable

STONES OF VIENNA

Once a bathhouse, the building that became the universally adored ballroom-cum-concerhall, the Sofiensäle open again

A Ballroom Reborn



The facade of the Sofiensäle is being refurbished to reflect the original look Photo: Duncan J.D. Smith

baton of the Strausses.

From the turn of the century the main hall (*Großer Saal*) also served as a lecture venue, and in 1912 the author of *Winnetou*, Karl May, came to speak. In the audience were two very different onlookers: Nobel Peace Prize winner Bertha von Suttner and unemployed artist Adolf Hitler.

During the First World War the Sofiensäle doubled as a convalescent home for wounded soldiers, and in 1926 it witnessed the founding assembly of the nascent Austrian Nazi Party. The ignominy continued in the 1930s when the building was used as a collection point for Jews awaiting deportation.

Maske in Blau

After the Second World War the Sofiensäle returned to peaceful pursuits, and in 1946 it played host to the Austrian premiere of Fred Raymond's operetta *Maske in Blau*. The vaulted ceiling of the *Großer Saal* guaranteed excellent acoustics prompting Decca Records to adopt it in 1950 as its principal European recording venue. Notable works included the first complete studio recording of Wagner's *Ring Cycle* conducted by Georg Solti. After Decca's departure in the mid-1980s the Sofiensäle were reinvented once again, this time as Vienna's biggest clubbing venue.

Out of the ashes

When eventually the increasingly tatty premises burned down it seemed to be the end of the line for the Sofiensäle. The once grand *Großer Saal* was a roofless shell, its boxes with their red velvet seats now open to the elements. Demolition seemed inevitable. That the ornately plastered façade and *Großer Saal* had listed status, however, saved the day.

After several years of litigation the ruins were acquired in 2006 by the IFA (a part of the Soravia real estate group), who announced a €50 million renovation. The old façade has subsequently been restored and now gives access to a brand new multi-functional structure beyond, containing 68 apartments, a hotel and restaurant, various studios, and a fitness centre. And at the heart of it all is a re-roofed and revitalised *Großer Saal* that will function as an events venue. The new Sofiensäle are thus set to welcome a new generation of pleasure seekers. ♦

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