

## ALL CHANGE AT WESTBAHNHOF

36

by Duncan JD Smith



On 12 December 2015, Vienna Westbahnhof will see its last scheduled international trains. The opening in late 2014 of a new main station in Vienna deprived the Westbahnhof of many long-distance services.

But exotic destinations have still featured this year on the departure boards. There are presently some two dozen international trains leaving each day from Westbahnhof, giving direct connections to cities in nine countries – among them Belgrade, Bucharest, Debrecen, Dresden, Gdańsk, Minsk, St Petersburg and Zürich. From 13 December, all these cities will still be served by direct services from Vienna but passengers will board trains at the new Hauptbahnhof.

These imminent changes will mark the end of an era for a railway station which was once the most distinguished in the Austrian capital.

In December 2009 the fabled Orient Express pulled into Vienna's Westbahnhof for the last time, a victim of high-speed trains and budget airlines. Thereafter the station was dramatically overhauled. Now as much a shopping centre as a railway station, it still contains reminders of a past both glorious and grim.

The Westbahnhof opened in 1858 to accommodate trains connecting Vienna with Salzburg, Bavaria, and beyond. It was a grand affair realised in Emperor Franz Joseph's preferred historicist

LEFT: Bronze sculpture by Flor Kent recalling the Kindertransport trains which took Jewish children from Vienna to safety in 1938 and 1939 (photo by Duncan JD Smith).

style, a *mélange* of Renaissance pavilions and Gothic turrets, with Tuscan-style arcades to afford protection in bad weather. There was statuary, too, including a rendering in Carrara marble of the wasp-waisted Empress Sisi. The rail route to Salzburg was originally named in Sisi's honour. She used the Empress Elizabeth Railway regularly to reach her Bavarian homeland, as well as the Habsburg retreat at Bad Ischl.

The interior was equally impressive and redolent of the industrial age in which the station was built. The four platforms stretched into the distance beneath a glass-and-iron roof over a hundred metres long. It is difficult now to imagine how the place must have appeared when filled with smoke and steam, porters and carts, but Franz Sandmann's 1862 painting of the exterior reveals the extraordinary grace and beauty of this palatial terminus.

Many visitors to the World Exposition in Vienna in 1873 disembarked from trains at the Westbahnhof. This was the first World Fair where substantial numbers of visitors made international journeys by train to attend the event — including a large group of English visitors who were personally escorted to Vienna by Thomas Cook.

As the railway age sped inexorably forward, so the capacity of the Westbahnhof was expanded. Things came to a grinding halt, however, with the arrival of Nazism when, in common with Vienna's other main stations, the Westbahnhof began serving a darker purpose. A wall plaque recalls a hundred and fifty Austrians transported from here in 1938 to the concentration camp at Dachau.

More upbeat is the statue of a young Jewish boy sitting on his suitcase. It reminds passers-by of the Kindertransport trains that departed Nazi-occupied Europe for the safety of Britain in the months before the outbreak of war.

At the end of the war in April 1945 the station was badly damaged during an air raid, and its

## ONLY IN VIENNA

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Existing titles in the 'Only In' series, all written by Duncan, cover Berlin, Budapest, Cologne, Hamburg, London, Munich, Paris, Prague and Zurich. You can find out more about Duncan's work at [www.onlyinguides.com](http://www.onlyinguides.com) and [www.duncanjdsmith.com](http://www.duncanjdsmith.com).

great roof collapsed. Although the line was soon cleared, it was decided to rebuild the station, and in 1949 the old one was torn down. It was the end of an era and only old photographs and paintings recall the former grandeur of this lost palace of travel.

The rebuilt Westbahnhof looked very different when it was unveiled in 1952. Gone were the ornate pavilions and arcades; they were replaced by a sleek, open-plan arrivals hall illuminated by a glass facade. Beyond were eleven platforms reached by escalators, and later a direct connection was made with the city's U-Bahn network. An affectionate nod to the old station was made by installing

the marble statue of Sisi, which was unexpectedly found in a council warehouse in 1982.

The station was revamped again in 2009, in line with current trends seen at other European transport hubs. As BahnhofCity Wien West the station is now a multifunctional space offering not only transport connections but also shops, office space, catering facilities and a hotel. Fortunately the modernist-style 1950s ticket hall has been retained, adding another layer of history to an already storied railway station.

And it's a story that is still being told as witnessed by the thousands of Syrian refugees who have been passing through the Westbahnhof in summer and autumn 2015. ■

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