

by Duncan J. D. Smith

When strolling around Schottentor, tourists will often exclaim: “Look! There’s the Stephansdom.” They are lost, of course, mistaking the Votivkirche on Rooseveltplatz for the city’s mighty Gothic cathedral nearly synonymous with the city itself. But the error is forgivable since the magnificent neo-Gothic Votivkirche resembles the far older one in many ways and has its own intriguing story to tell.

#### Attempted regicide

On 18 Feb. 1853 along the city walls at Mölker-Bastei, a Hungarian tailor named János Libényi lay in wait, hoping to encounter Franz Joseph I on his daily stroll. Libényi was a fervent Hungarian nationalist opposed to the Austrian Emperor’s domination of his homeland. The tailor lunged at the emperor with a knife, but was immediately wrestled to the ground by royal adjutant Count Maximilian O’Donnell.

Of noble Irish ancestry, O’Donnell was descended from a group of soldiers known as the *Wildgänse* (Wild Geese), who fled religious persecution in Ireland to work instead for Europe’s Catholic monarchs.

So grateful was the emperor at being spared certain death, he ordered a church be built close to the spot. The emperor’s brother Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian (later Emperor of Mexico) set about raising funds, and a competition was held to procure a suitable architect. O’Donnell meanwhile was fêted across Europe whilst Libényi was executed for attempted regicide.

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#### Twenty-six years of age

So it was that the architect Heinrich Ferstel, then only 26 years of age, came to design the Votivkirche, a church erected in thanks to God for the emperor’s deliverance. Ferstel combined all the classic elements of Gothic architecture in his plan, overseeing personally the building’s lengthy construction, from the laying of its corner stone on 24 Apr. 1856 (the second wedding anniversary of the emperor and his wife Elisabeth) to its dedication 23 years later (on the imperial couple’s silver wedding anniversary).

By this time the city walls had been demolished and the Ringstraße constructed, punctuated at the northern end by the mighty Rossauer Barracks, whose soldiers used the Votivkirche as a garrison church. Built on empty land outside the wall, the church originally lacked its own parish, and its congregation of soldiers may explain why

## STONES OF VIENNA

*Often mistaken for the Stephansdom, Vienna's Votivkirche is a symbol of how an Irishman saved Emperor Franz Joseph I*

# The Emperor, the Tailor and The Church of Deliverance



*At Schottentor, the Votivkirche towers with detailed Gothic spires* Photo: Duncan J.D. Smith

it still remains devoid of the usual riches found in Vienna’s other churches.

#### Spectacular stained glass

Despite this the Votivkirche has much to offer visitors. Most obvious is the superb stonework on its exterior, from the crown-topped twin spires to the carvings of Christ, the prophets, apostles, and patron saints adorning the entrance. Picking up on the dedication of the building as a church of deliverance, the central portal focuses on Christ and his works of redemption.

Another delight is the spectacular stained glass. The Emperor’s Window in the north transept, for example, depicts a dragon being slain by Saint Michael to represent the emperor’s salvation (the young emperor can be seen on his knees giving thanks). Since many windows were destroyed during WWII, their replacements depict more recent scenes, including the infamous quarry steps at the Mauthausen concentration camp.

#### Little-known treasures

The Votivkirche also contains several lesser-known treasures, including the marble tomb of Count Nicholas of Salm, saviour of the city during the first Turkish siege in 1529. There is also an unusual altar made from artillery shells, reflecting the period when the church was used by the emperor’s troops.

From a more recent conflict is the rusting chunk of Second World War shrapnel embedded firmly in the main doorway. Most unusual of all is a four metre high candle donated in 1930 in memory of the fallen of the First World War. Were it ever to be lit, legend claims that its 1,660-thread wick would burn for 100 years! ◇

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