

by Duncan J. D. Smith

On 14 Dec. 2009, the fabled Orient Express pulled into Vienna's Westbahnhof for the last time, a victim of high-speed trains and cut-price airlines. In the months that followed, the station at the top of Mariahilferstraße was dramatically overhauled. Now as much a shopping centre as a railway station, it contains reminders of a past both glorious and grim.

### Station for an Empress

The Westbahnhof opened in 1858 to service trains connecting Vienna with Salzburg, Germany, and beyond. It was a grand affair realised in the Emperor's preferred Historicist 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 Westbahn was originally named in her honour, and she would use it 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 it 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, filled with smoke and steam and carts and porters.

### End of the line?

As the railway age sped inexorably forward, so the capacity of the Westbahnhof was expanded. Things came to a grinding halt, however, with the Second World War, and like Vienna's handful of other mainline stations, the Westbahnhof now served a darker purpose. A wall plaque recalls 150 Austrians transported from here in 1938 to the concentration camp

## STONES OF VIENNA

*Having seen a past both glorious and grim, Vienna's Western Station is again being reinvented for a new age*

# All Change at Westbahnhof: The History of a Crossroads



**A reminder of the pre-war Kindertransport trains that left to England** Photo: Duncan Smith

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.

Near the end of the war in April 1945, the station was badly damaged during an air raid, and its great roof collapsed. Although the line was soon cleared it was decided to rebuild the station, and so in 1949 the old one was torn down. It was the end of an era and only old photographs can convey the former grandeur of this lost palace of travel.

### Born-again Bahnhof

The rebuilt Westbahnhof looked very different when it was unveiled in 1952. Gone were the fussy pavilions and arcades, replaced by a sleek,

open-plan arrivals hall illuminated by a glass façade. Beyond were eleven platforms reached by escalators, and later a direct connection was established with the city's U-Bahn network. An affectionate nod to the old station was made by displaying the marble statue of Sisi, which had appeared unexpectedly in a council warehouse in 1982.

Then in 2008 the station was revamped again, 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.

### What's left of the rest?

In 2015 things will change yet again at the Westbahnhof, when the long-planned Wiener Hauptbahnhof opens on the former site of the old Süd- and Ostbahnhof. Both were also once

beautiful buildings and it is to be hoped that the Venetian lion of Saint Mark that adorned the Südbahnhof before the war will be returned to the site. Trains bound for Eastern Europe will now bypass the West-

bahnhof and proceed directly to the Hauptbahnhof via a new tunnel beneath the Lainzer Tiergarten. So the rail timetable looks set to get a little quieter at the Westbahnhof. But then there's always the shopping... ◇

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