

## The Kaiser, the Tailor and the Church of Deliverance

### *9th District (Alsergrund), Votivkirche*

In 18th February 1853, atop the old Renaissance city walls close to the Schottentor, Hungarian tailor János Lebényi lay in wait for the Austrian Kaiser. Lebényi was a fervent Hungarian nationalist opposed to Austria's domination of his homeland: the ruling Habsburg was the young Franz-Josef I (1848-1916) who would go on to become Europe's longest-serving monarch.

The tailor lunged with a knife at the unsuspecting Kaiser but failed to inflict any lasting damage due to the speedy reactions of royal adjutant Max O'Donnell as well as a Viennese butcher by the name of Josef Ettenreich. O'Donnell was one of many Irish soldiers, known collectively as the "Wild Geese", who had fled religious persecution in Ireland to work for Europe's Catholic monarchs.

So grateful was the Kaiser at being delivered from a premature demise that he ordered a church be built close to the spot. The Kaiser's brother Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian, later Emperor of Mexico, set about raising funds and a competition was held to procure a suitable architect.

So it was that Heinrich Ferstel, then only 26 years of age, came to design what became known as the Votive Church (Votivkirche), the word "votive" meaning an offering given in thanks for deliverance from some hardship or other unfortunate predicament.

Ferstel combined all the classic elements of Gothic (Middle Ages) architecture in this one structure, overseeing personally the building's lengthy construction, from the laying of its corner stone on April 24th 1856 (the second wedding anniversary of the Kaiser and his wife Elisabeth of Bavaria - 'Sisi') to its dedication 23 years later to the day (the imperial couple's Silver Wedding anniversary).

By this time the old city walls, built in the mid-16th century and on which the Kaiser had so narrowly escaped death, had been dismantled. It was decided that the bastions, used so effectively against the Turks during their second siege of Vienna in 1683, were now longer useful. Indeed, the disgruntled citizens of Vienna had used the walls to protect themselves against Austrian governmental forces dispatched to quell the 1848 Revolution.

In their place the famous Ringstrasse Boulevard was laid out, punctuated at either end by two huge barracks (Kaserne) from where soldiers and cannon could be quickly dispatched should civil unrest occur again. Today only the Rossauer Kaserne still exists, at the northern end of the Ring, its name meaning "Horse Forest Barracks" since it occupies a former forested area where there was once a waggoner's drinking halt (the other barracks stood where Otto Wagner's Postsparkasse saving's bank now stands). The soldiers based at the Rossauer barracks, many of whom were in the legendary Deutschmeister Regiment, used the Votivkirche as their own church, it having been designated a garrison church by Imperial Decree in 1862 whilst still being constructed.

This accounts for why the church never developed any civilian parish of its own (it remained a garrison church until 1918), why it remains devoid of the usual glittering ecclesiastical treasures found in Vienna's myriad other churches and why the much-photographed, twin-spired church receives relatively few visitors.

Of the visitors that do make the effort some leave disappointed that the church seems so empty whilst others do so quite oblivious to the building's unusual raison d'être. All of

which is a great shame as this iconic Viennese building will offer up its secrets willingly to those who know where to look.

Most obvious of all is the profusion of superb stone carvings on the exterior, from the filigree twin spires, beautifully illuminated at night and reminiscent of the true Gothic cathedrals at Chartres and Cologne, to the carvings of Christ, the prophets, Apostles and Imperial patron saints that adorn the three portals of the main east doorway (see photo). Many of the biblical figures significant to the history of man's salvation are harmoniously united with long-forgotten local saints of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (note also the Habsburg imperial crowns topping off the spires). Picking up on the dedication of the building as a church of deliverance, the central portal focuses on Christ and his redemptive work.



Another delight is the spectacular stained glass, mostly blown out during the Second World War, but still represented by the great Rose Window as well as the Emperor's Window (in the North Transept), the latter representing the deliverance of the Kaiser from his assailant by means of a depiction of a dragon being slain by Saint Michael. The young Kaiser can be seen on his knees giving thanks, a secular incident being thus elevated to a sacred plane.

The new windows, however, generally replaced the old monarchical themes with a sort of Austro-Christian Hall of Fame showing important national personages and events. Thus, the Empress and Crown Prince windows in the Chapel of the Cross, to the left of the chancel, now show the story of the Upper Austrian farmer Franz Jägerstätter, a conscientious objector executed by the Nazis. Similarly, in the nearby Baptistry, windows once donated by the Crown Lands of the monarchy now depict the work of great Austrian missionaries in lands as far afield as China, Asia, India and Africa.

Next door, in the Confessional Room, is a window showing the steps leading down to the infamous quarry at the concentration camp of Mauthausen. A swift about-turn at this point will reveal the pulpit at the base of which can be found a sculpture of the building's architect Heinrich Ferstel, a device identical to that used in the pulpit of the Stephansdom. A glance upwards will also reveal coats of arms painted onto the arcade walls of the nave representing all the kingdoms and provinces that appeared in the Kaiser's full title.

Finally, there are several unusual objects to be found lurking within the cavernous painted interior of the Votive Church that should not be missed. These include the Egyptian marble tomb of Count Niklas von Salm, saviour of the city during the first Turkish siege in 1529. There is also a niche along the southern wall that contains numerous memorial plaques to the regimental dead of the nearby barracks, together with the Kaiser's motto of "Viribus Unitis" (With United Forces) inscribed in the centre.

Another chapel, on the north wall opposite, is dedicated to St. Barbara, patron saint of miners and artillerymen. It too commemorates the war dead, its altar supported by huge gun shells. Unmissable here is the enormous 4-metre high candle donated by the First Austrian Artillerymen's Association in 1930, in memory of the fallen of the First World War. Were it to be lit continually its 1,660-thread wick is designed to burn for a hundred years! The window of St. Barbara's Chapel depicts the famous weeping icon of Mary said to have

brought victory to Prince Eugène of Savoy over the Turks at the Battle of Zenta in 1697. The actual icon itself, discovered in the Hungarian village of Pocs in Hungary (now Slovakia), today hangs just inside the Stephansdom. That just leaves the canopied high altar (or Baldachin), its mosaic of Mary made in the Vatican workshops and donated by Pope Pius IX whose name it bears.

In 1987 the Votive Church was officially designated as the University's church and today it also functions as a true parish church, its clergy undertaking pastoral duties as well as tending to the numerous Austrian and foreign visitors to Vienna in its role as the Vienna International Religious Centre (VIRC).

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