

by Duncan J. D. Smith

Austrian cinema is best known internationally for the directors, rather than the films, it has fostered. Men like Alexander Korda, Michael Curtiz, Fritz Lang, and Billy Wilder all hailed from the Austro-Hungarian Empire – but politics meant they found fame elsewhere. Despite this, and a decidedly checkered history, Vienna's historic Rosenhügel film studios are still in the business of making movies.

Early Stages

Austria's first major film production company, Wiener Kunstfilm, was founded in 1910 by photographer Anton Kolm, his wife Luise, and cameraman Jacob Fleck. At the time the Austro-Hungarian cinema market was dominated by the French, and so the fledgling company carried favour with local media and cinema owners and quickly became a pioneer in almost every field of silent film in Austria.

Run like a family business, Wiener Kunstfilm is credited not only with producing the first Austrian film drama but also the country's first weekly newsreel, unaware that it was chronicling the last glittering years of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

But it wasn't to last long, and although the company's former French rivals were expelled during the Great War, Wiener Kunstfilm was forced into liquidation by wealthy rival Count Sascha Kolowrat-Krakowsky and his eponymous Sascha-Film.

Samson and Delila

Whilst Sascha-Film was based in Sievering, the studio of Wiener Kunstfilm was located in Mauer, then a village on the Rosenhügel just outside Vienna's southern limits. Between 1919 and 1923 Kolm reestablished his company there

STONES OF VIENNA

Berlin, Paris and Hollywood dominated film in the early 20th century, but Vienna's Rosenhügel studios also played a role

How Silver Screen Vienna Forgot Where it all Began

as Vita-Film, creating a studio lot of American proportions.

Before being forced out of business again, this time in 1924 by a flood of cheap but technically competent American pictures, Vita-Film produced a string of silent movies. Mostly they followed French models using French directors, but an exception was Austria's first silent American-style epic, *Samson and Delila*. With extravagant sets and costumes it was directed by Alexander Korda, the role of Delila being played by his wife, María. Unfortunately for Kolm he didn't live to see the film's Viennese premiere on Christmas Day 1922.

The Final Reel?

Today, Rosenhügel Studios are entered at Speisinger Strasse 121 in the district of Liesing. Walking around what was once one of Europe's largest and most modern studios is still a stirring experience, and stories and ghosts abound. A red marble tablet at the entrance memorialises Kolm as a pioneer of the Austrian film industry and his colossal 990 square metre Stage 1 still appears

much as it did in his day.

After standing empty for nine years, the studio was taken over in 1933 by Kolm's old rival, Sascha-Film, who built the magnificent Sound Stage 6. Here over the next two decades, some of the most popular Viennese films were scored for full orchestra here, starring Willy Forst, Paul Hörbiger, Hans Moser, and Paula Wessely. The vast stage is still a marvelous space and today is



A mural depicting the Rosenhügel Studios and some of its stars

Photo: Duncan Smith

used for rehearsals of the Theater an der Wien.

With the Anschluss in 1938, Rosenhügel was earmarked to become one of Nazi Germany's biggest studios, and as Wien-Film it began turning out propaganda films such as *Heimkehr* (*Homecoming*). Austrian novelist Elfriede Jelinek called it the worst Nazi propaganda film ever made, and it's ironic, or perhaps poetic justice, that her book *Die Klavierspielerin* (*The Piano Teacher*) was made into a film in the very same studios in 2001.

Rosenhügel Reloaded

Narrowly escaping destruction at the end of the war, Rosenhügel lay in Soviet-occupied Vienna until 1955, and afterwards was returned to Austria. Despite several box office successes, including Romy Schneider's turn as "Sissi", the studio was bankrupted once more in 1965. A stint as a television studio for the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF) followed, but it was soon under threat again, this time with plans for a shopping mall. Fortunately, a government-backed private initiative saved the day, and in 1996 after extensive refurbishment Rosenhügel was reinvented as Filmstadt Wien.

The studios today cover a 32,000 square metre lot, offering half a dozen affordable serviced stages to film and television companies worldwide. But Rosenhügel has always courted controversy, and when its lease with ORF runs out in 2014 the studio may relocate to the recently opened Media Quarter Marx in Landstrasse. If the rumours are true then the curtain may fall once and for all on this chapter of silver screen Vienna. ◇

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