

From America with Love

How I Saved a Czech Historic Building

by Steven E. Brummel

In 1977 Adolf Loos's name and fame as an architect barely registered with me - then a 25-year-old American law school graduate - when I stumbled upon an historic house he built in Pilsen/Plzeň. I had gone there to continue my quest, started in 1969, to find family who might have survived the Holocaust. Based on a combination of research and luck, I found a survivor living in this Loos house, one built for my family, and simultaneously learned that the house was slated to be torn down by the city authorities. Without hesitation I vowed to save the house as a historic landmark, albeit I realized I was seriously handicapped as a foreign, inexperienced, American fighting the bureaucracy in a Communist country. This is the story.

Searching for Survivors

My grandfather, Emanuel Brummel, was born in a village outside Pilsen in 1868. He left Bohemia for America in 1888 - his passage paid by his older brother Moritz - but most of his brothers and sisters, including Moritz, remained in Bohemia, married, had children and prospered in Pilsen and Prague.

Since an early age I had been curious about the Brummel family history. At age 8 I learned about the Holocaust and the effects it had on the family. According to my grandmother, the last contact was

a telegram sent in 1941 just before Pearl Harbor: "GREAT DANGER SEND MONEY". I vowed then I would go and search for any survivors.

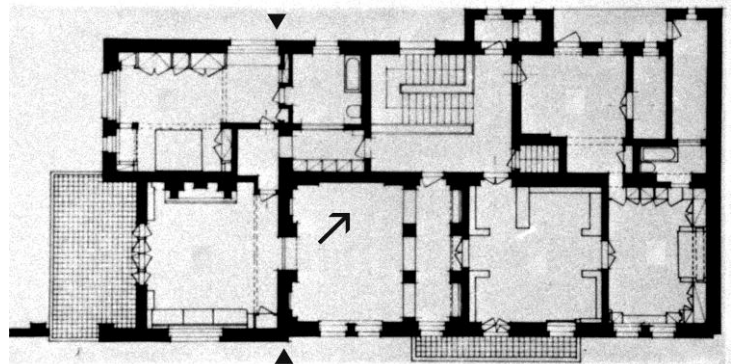
I started with a visit to Prague in August 1969 but did not get far. I went back in September 1977 - this time much better prepared with all names and addresses as they stood in 1941. But I still did not have any leads that led to any living person in Czechoslovakia. The Jewish town hall in Prague held the Nazi records on all Jews in the country - recorded on 3x5 inch index cards: name, birth date, residence, a record of transfers to concentration camps and, if killed, a record of the date of death. I checked all the family names I had against the index card records. Most names recorded deaths but two did not - for Johanna Brummel and Hans Brummel. But where were they today? Were they still alive? How could I find them?

Frustrated, I started flipping the index cards and then noticed that someone had written her name, her address and the year on the back of the cards of each Brummel family member: *Jana Brummelová, Leninova 58, Plzeň, 1969*. I did not know who Jana Brummelová was but she was the key to my search. With the help of a Czech friend, Irena, I found a telephone number. Irena called as I thought the caller had to speak Czech. But, no, Jana Brummelová spoke English as well. She had adopted the Czech version of her name and was in fact Johanna Brummel, the wife of Moritz Brummel's son, Hans Brummel. She knew who my grandfather was, was a bit in shock and anxiously waiting for me to come. I caught the next available train for Plzeň.



Brummel House, Plzeň

A view of the house from the west along Husova Avenue, towards the historic centre of Plzeň. Loos's principal addition is in the foreground. The original two-storey house may be seen beyond, its façade rendered and painted to match Loos's addition. As part of his work, and in keeping with his approach to ornament, the old house lost its 19th-century decoration, including the cornice visible on the next page, in the photograph top left.



Brummel House, Plzeň *Left, the house undergoing the additions and remodelling by Loos circa 1927. The original façade is visible on the right, later rendered and painted to fit with the new work. Above, a plan of the first floor. The line between the two triangles marks the main boundary between the old house and Loos's work, to the left. The single arrow corresponds to the photo on page 8, top right.*

The Brummel House of Plzeň

Jana Brummelová, then 77 years old, stood in the entrance-way of a large house in Plzeň on Leninova Street. Jana (she dropped the name Hanni after the War) summarized family history for me. She married my father's first cousin Hans in Pilsen in the early 1920s. Together Hans and Hanni in 1929 renovated the house, originally built by Jana's parents, on what was then called Husova street using the architect Adolf Loos. During the War, Hanni and Hans were forced as Jews to leave the house – on a street then renamed Adolf Hitler Strasse. They and other family members were sent to concentration camps – first Terezín, then Auschwitz. Remarkably both Hanni and Hans survived Auschwitz and returned to Pilsen and to their house – others did not.

Jana told me that I was now standing in the “Brummel House” of Plzeň. She continued that the house no longer belonged to her or any other member of the Brummel family. It had been nationalized by the Communist regime in the late 1940s and she lived there on sufferance in a small portion of the building. Yet Jana still had keys to the other sections of the house (now separate apartments) and took me on a tour of the entire house. It is a classic Adolf Loos house. While it featured an austere exterior, it had creative, customized interior design. Loos designed the furniture as well as the rooms. Fitted wood furniture could collapse into the wall. The freestanding furniture was beautiful and ergonomically comfortable. One of the chairs was the most comfortable chair I ever sat in.

And, at the end of my visit, Jana announced wistfully that “*the house will soon be demolished to make way for a bus station.*” She said she had lost so many things in her life that the loss of this house would be too much of a blow.

A feeling overwhelmed me and I blurted out: “*I'll save the house?*”. I did not know how I was going to do this. The house was owned by the Czechoslovak Government under a Communist regime. I was a 25 year-old, recently-minted US law graduate with no experience in American law let alone any international law. It was the middle of the Cold War.

Building a case – International Diplomacy

With a difficult goal and no knowledge how to achieve it, I went back to America and immediately started working on this case. I knew I did not have much time left before the bulldozers would come. I did research on Adolf Loos and the architectural significance of the Brummel House. I contacted architectural preservation societies in the US (including the US Government's Heritage Preservation Service or HPS) and in Austria.

I learned that at the United Nations level there existed an historic preservation organization – the International Committee on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). Both Czechoslovakia and the US were members. An HPS official made a very helpful recommendation. He informed me that ICOMOS's rotating presidency was occupied that year by the head of the HPS, that their next annual

meeting would take place in Moscow in May 1978 and then suggested I write a letter to his boss as ICOMOS President explaining the architectural significance of the house and making oblique, diplomatic reference to its imminent demolition. His boss would then present the letter to the Czech delegation in Moscow, say demolition could only come about due to an unfortunate oversight and recommend action be taken to save the house. I followed his advice, sent the letter and held my breath. A month after the Moscow meeting, I received a letter from Jana announcing that the Brummel House had been declared an historic preservation site and would be saved. The bus station would still be built but now on an adjacent plot.

Closing

I never saw Jana again. She died in 1980 but was able to live in the house until the end of her days, knowing that it would not be torn down. Through Jana, I did get news and contact details on one other Brummel family member who survived – Kurt (now Michal) Brummel in Prague. With the fall of Communism, the Brummel House did return to the surviving Czech branch of the Brummel family. Later I also found Jana's niece, Eva Brummel, who was on the last *Kindertransport* train out of Prague in 1939 and who lives in Bristol.

I did not save the house because I thought it would come back to the family. I did it to save a vestige of the family history designed by a great architect – hopefully one that others in the Czech Republic and beyond would appreciate. But of course my prime motivation was to save it for Jana and all the descendants of my grandfather's older brother Moritz. Without his brotherly act of paying passage for my grandfather in 1888, I would not be here today. To mark this, I named one of my sons after him: Eliot-Jan Moritz Brummel.

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Brummel House, Plzeň *The luxurious Dining Room on the first floor formed part of the original house and was fully refurbished by Loos. This recently taken photo corresponds with the arrow on the plan on page seven.*

EXHIBITION LEARNING TO DWELL: ADOLF LOOS IN THE CZECH LANDS

Comprising drawings, original furniture and glass never seen in Britain before, this show will open at the Royal Institute of British Architects, London, on 24 February 2011. It is curated by Dr. Irena Murray, who will present a lecture on Prague Castle to The Friends on 4th May in RIBA, 66 Portland Place, London W1B 1AD, (*see page 16*).

Adolf Loos was born in 1870 in Brno, Moravia, the son of a stonemason. After his studies in Dresden he spent three years in Chicago, where he met the pioneering modernists Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan. In Vienna his first important work for the Goldmann shop (1898) already showed him as a determined opponent of the decorative style of the Wiener Werkstätte with its Arts and Crafts values.

From 1904 he built a series of outstanding private houses around Vienna, in Plzeň, Brno, Montreux and Paris in a radically purist style characterised by strong cubic forms, fine materials and an almost complete absence of ornament. Among the best is the Müller Villa in Prague, a national monument in the care of the Czech State. He died penniless in 1933 despite having been one of the most talented architects of his generation and the major influence on post-First World War domestic architecture in Europe.

Photos courtesy of Foibos

www.great-villas.com

Photo of the dining room (Radovan Kodera), Exterior 1920s, internal plan.

All other pictures come from the Brummel family archive.



Left: *Members of the Brummel family using the rooftop level of the house in the 1930s. The proximity of industrial buildings in this part of Plzeň is clearly seen here.*