

Josef Schaffer – A Historicist Architect in Mariánské Lázně

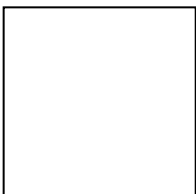
Peter Rutzer

Mariánské Lázně in Western Bohemia, perhaps still better known in Britain by its German name Marienbad, was developed as a spa in the early nineteenth century. The area belonged to the Premonstratensian Monastery in nearby Teplá and it was Abbott Reitenberger and the monastery doctor Josef Nehr who led the early transformation of the numerous springs into a spa town. The town is situated in an attractive wide valley surrounded by wooded hills, and its dominant feature is the park laid out by landscape gardener Václav Skalník. All the key spa facilities – colonnades, springs, baths and hotels – are located around the park. There was a rapid growth in the number of visitors from around 3,000 in the mid-nineteenth century to over 6,000 after the opening of the railway station in Mariánské Lázně on the Vienna-Cheb (Eger) line in 1872. The numbers then rose remarkably to over 30,000 in Mariánské Lázně's heyday as an internationally renowned spa before the First World War, when the list of notable visitors included King Edward VII.

The earliest buildings in Mariánské Lázně were in a classical style, but later the Historicist style that characterised the building of the Ring (or Ringstraße) in Vienna became the dominant influence on the architecture of the town. The key player was Josef Schaffer, the architect of the spa's New Baths and Casino. This article reviews his career, based largely on research by Jutta Johanna Bauernfeind (made available to me by my second cousin Dr Wolfgang Wunderlich, the great-grandson of Josef Schaffer).

Schaffer was born in Mariánské Lázně in 1862. His mother came from Teplá and her father was the monastery librarian: she died when Schaffer was three. The boy's schooling took him from Mariánské Lázně to Plzeň and then to Vienna where he enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in 1879. There he studied under Theophil Hansen for three years. His final report indicated he was a keen and conscientious student who designed several large projects and their interior decoration. He was awarded a silver medal in his final year.

Although the project for which he was awarded the silver medal has not been identified, some sketch books from his student years show that he was particularly attracted to the Renaissance architecture





The Monastery at Teplá, where Schaffer's maternal grandfather was librarian; the abbey later employed the grandson

of Italy and France. He is known to have made a trip to Italy in September 1881.

His teacher Theophil Hansen was one of the most distinguished exponents of the Historicism Ringstraße style of architecture derived from various earlier styles, e.g. Classical, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque, and used as considered appropriate for each building. His major contribution to the Ring was the Neo-Classical Austrian Parliament Building, built between 1874 and 1883.

Studying under Hansen, Schaffer had a very strong education in the Ringstraße style and would have been able to experience many of the major buildings on the Ring either complete or under construction. This would have been reinforced by his first position after his studies in the practice of the architect Emil von Förster, Hansen's brother-in-law, whose preferred style was based on Italian Renaissance models. Schaffer's work with this practice cannot be reconstructed, but he may have had some involvement in the early stages of a major headquarters project with a Neo-Renaissance facade for the General Austrian Land Mortgage Bank (*Allgemeine Österreichische Bodencreditanstalt*) built in 1885-87.

By 1886 Schaffer had, however, left Emil von Förster's practice and was employed by the Unter-Meidling local authority. It has not been possible again to reconstruct his work there or to credit any specific buildings to him.

After three years in Unter-Meidling he decided to return to Mariánské Lázně where he undoubtedly fell on his feet, being appointed Director of the Baths in 1889. The baths belonged to the Monastery in Teplá

and his responsibilities were primarily the technical management and administration of all the baths, including being responsible for the supervision of all the employees. He received a separate element of his income for work as *Baumeister*, which can be translated as either builder or architect, for building work for the Monastery. His contract is only dated 1st January 1891 (but backdated to his taking up his responsibilities on 1st October 1889). He had obviously proved himself valuable as Director of the Baths during his fifteen months' probation and, with his position secure, in February 1891 he married the daughter of the largest building contractor in the area.

Now he began a fertile and productive career as an architect. His first major project was the remodelling of the old baths, afterwards renamed the Central Baths (1891-92). He added another floor, accentuated the slim central projection with a new porch and balcony, added a narrow side extension set back a little from the façade and with subtle decoration changed a plain building into a monumental Neo-Renaissance one, see below.



*Above, Schaffer's Central Baths of (1891-92).
Below, The New or Main Colonnade (1888-89),
designed by Miksch and Niedzielski*



The Historicism style had earlier started to appear modestly in Mariánské Lázně, but the first major Historicism building was the famous Neo-Baroque New or Main Colonnade (1888-89), see above, designed by the Viennese architects Hans Miksch and Julian Niedzielski and opened in the year Schaffer returned from Vienna.

Schaffer remained true to the Renaissance as the inspiration for all his major works and that is his lasting legacy to both Mariánské Lázně and Teplá, but there are exceptions. His next completed project (1893) was a Neo-Romanesque portal, for the church at the Monastery in Teplá. See below.



This was followed by his most imposing Neo-Renaissance work in Mariánské Lázně, the New Baths (1892-96). Despite the extra range and capacity in the renovated and extended Central Baths for those taking a cure, the increasing demand from spa visitors justified a significant further expansion of the spa facilities in the immediately following years. The increase in capacity was also accompanied by greater luxury in the facilities to cater for the affluent international guests, particularly evident in the Royal Cabin, later used by King Edward VII, and the Roman Bath. While there is no direct prototype for this building in Vienna, perhaps not surprising since its function has no parallel in the Ring there, almost all the elements of the building can be linked back to works around the Vienna Ring.

He then designed his own house in Mariánské Lázně, the Villa Palladio (1899-1900), with subsequent modifications, including an additional storey, in 1902 and 1911), named after the famous Italian Renaissance architect. The entrance portal is flanked by two female caryatids and above the rusticated ground floor the façade of the next two floors is divided by ten Corinthian half-columns and balconies, making it one of the most impressive villas in Mariánské Lázně. Schaffer and his family had an apartment in this building, with the remaining rooms being guestrooms for spa visitors.

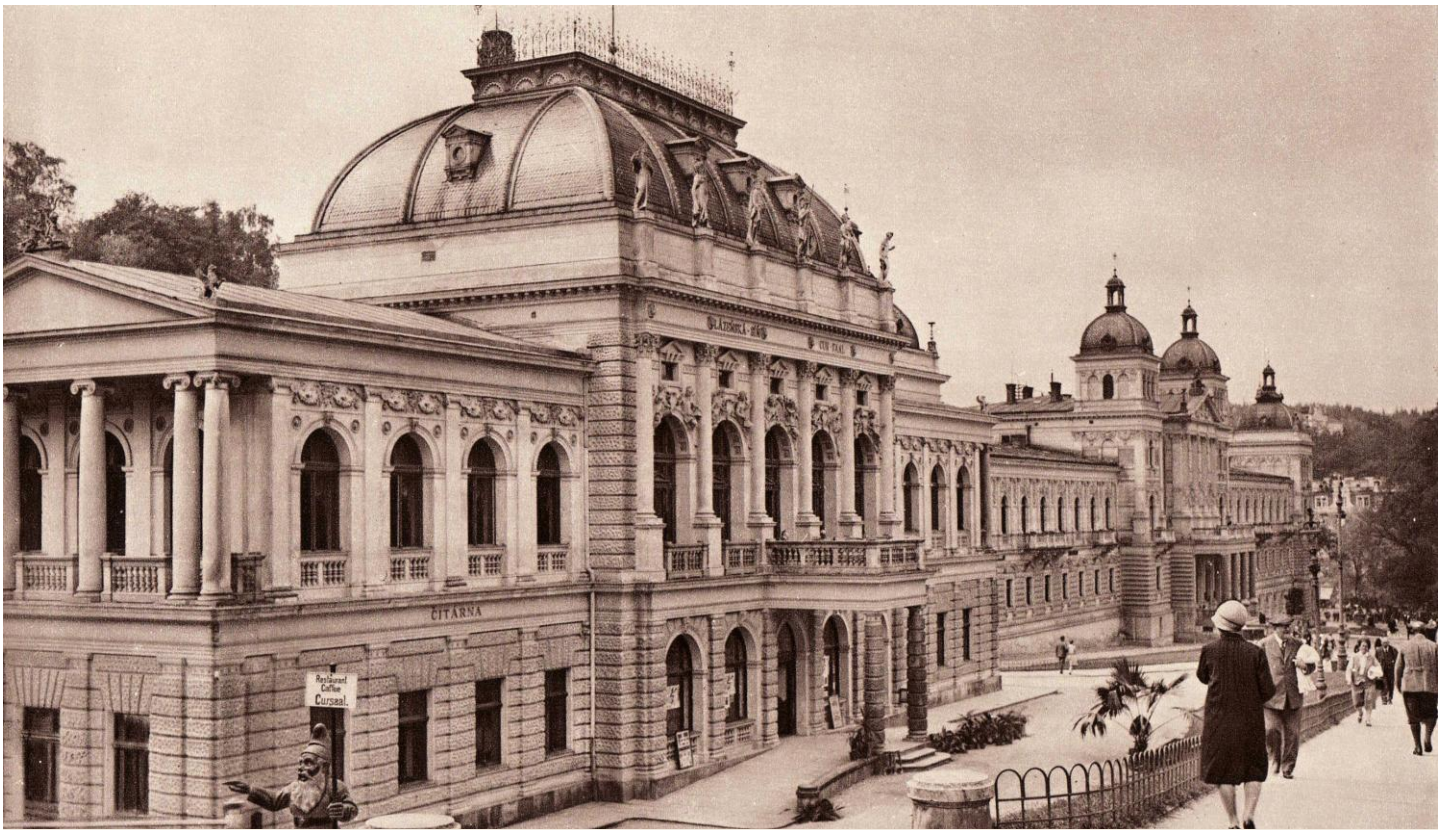
His next major work, the Spa Hall (*Kursaal*), now called the Casino (1900-01), lies between the Central Baths and the New Baths, see back cover. Externally the façade of the Casino is all the work of Schaffer, but he did incorporate the existing assembly rooms into the building. The façade has a dominant projecting central pavilion with two subordinate wings. The rusticated ground floor focuses attention on the first floor of the central

section with its five windows generously decorated with elegant, reclining figures and framed by six Corinthian half-columns that lead the eye upwards above the cornice to six standing sculptures set in front of a roof that recalls Palladio's Basilica in Vicenza. This roof form had also been used in Vienna in the central section of the University Building facing the Ring.

His next major project was a new library (1902-06) for the Monastery in Teplá where his maternal grandfather had been the librarian, see back cover. It is a large, open library hall, three storeys high; the first and second storeys are surrounded by internal balconies or walkways. Wooden bookcases predominate on the lower two floors, the ground-floor bookcases being relatively plain while the first-floor bookcases are surmounted by numerous *putti* under the projecting balcony of the second floor. The second floor is as high as the lower two floors together and the walls of the hall at this level are dominated by Corinthian half-columns framing semi-circular topped alcoves, each decorated by two elegant figures, with an ornamented coved section curving inwards above the columns to the ceiling above. It is a most satisfying work and more than worth a visit to Teplá, where the Monastery Church is another important attraction.

Schaffer was also involved in remodelling the Town Hall after 1900. All his major works date from before the First World War. Besides his official position as Director of the Baths and his work as an architect, he was also a town councillor and head of the Building Commission, a role that as an employee of the Monastery in Teplá brought with it potential conflicts of interest. He overcame concerns that were raised and he retired in 1930, receiving thanks from the monastery, the baths and the town council for his successful and effective public service and for his outstanding furtherance of the interests of the international spa and its facilities. He died in 1938 and his last work is the elegant two-columned classical memorial over the family vault in the main cemetery of Mariánské Lázně, where he is buried. He remained true to his Renaissance inspiration to the end.

Peter Ratzler is a retired corporate treasurer whose mother was born in Mariánské Lázně. A member of The Friends, he is particularly interested in Santini and Czech Cubism. Jutta Bauernfeld studied art history at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich. Her MA dissertation on Schaffer's spa commissions is the main source for this article.



The Work of Josef Schaffer

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*Above, Mariánské Lázně: on the left the Spa Hall/Kursaal of 1900-01, now called the Casino;
in the distance the New Baths of 1892-96.*

Below, Monastery of Teplá: the interior of the Library, 1902-06

