

Mattoni

Bohemian, and the most popular mineral water in Central Europe

by Ladislav Sýkora

Travelling in the Czech Republic you can hardly miss the large advertising boards for Mattoni mineral water featuring the iconic red eagle which stems from the Mattoni family coat of arms. In restaurants the naturally sparkling 'Mattonka', as it is affectionately known, has become a synonym for spring water that hasn't lost its appeal since it graced the table of the Habsburg Emperor Franz Joseph I. It may have an Italian name but it comes originally from Karlovy Vary and first appeared on the market in 1857.

Karlovy Vary has been known for its mineral and healing springs for centuries. The city's famous spas were a magnet for the rich European elite when everybody who was anybody, from Peter the Great, Beethoven, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Brahms to Karl Marx visited the spas for the cure, to meet other great 'celebrities' of the time, and to be seen. The outbreak of the WWI brought an abrupt end to Karlovy Vary's former glory but as a spa it has never lost its popularity.

The city was founded by Charles IV, King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor in 1370 and, according to legend, Charles IV discovered the healing power of the springs when injured during a deer hunt. Today Karlovy Vary, with its unique architecture and the largest European spa complex,



Above, Heinrich von Mattoni in 1878; right, a sealed earthenware jug of mineral water as used up to 1867



is on the UNESCO list of Great Spa Towns of Europe.

Mineral water was first exported from Karlovy Vary in 1844 but business was not prospering until 1857 when a local councillor, Karl Boromäus Mattoni, whose ancestor came to Karlovy Vary from Italy in 1697, purchased the lease for his son Heinrich (1830-1910). He paid 7,050 Gulden to export the water from the local healing mineral sources. In the first year of trading the young Heinrich increased the sales to 164,160 jugs*, 44,983 more than previous year, trebling the volume during the ten years he held the lease.

* A 'jug' is 0.5-0.7 litre.

Below, a view of Karlovy Vary/Carlsbad



In 1867 Heinrich Mattoni rented a small spa in the nearby Kyselka, which he later bought, helped by his increasing export profits and an advantageous marriage to the daughter of the Mayor of Karlovy Vary. In 1865 he had a branch in Vienna, in 1872 in Františkovy Lázně, in 1876 in Budapest, and in 1870 Mattoni was appointed the Imperial and Royal mineral water supplier. He also traded in other spa products such as peat extract and salt, and supplied peat to all spas in the region. For his work he was given the status of Imperial Councillor in 1878 and in 1889 the Emperor Franz Joseph I elevated him into the nobility by bestowing the title of 'Edler von Mattoni'. He became the President of the most important chamber of commerce in the Habsburg Monarchy in Cheb (Eger), founded a savings bank in Karlovy Vary and built a railway line from Vojkovice nad Ohří to Kyselka, a large part of which is cut into the rock above the River Ohře. The line is still running today, being operated by the Mattoni company.

Socially very aware, Mattoni established a sickness fund for the workers, built extensive housing in and around Kyselka and supported various social clubs. Mattoni's wealth as well as his social standing and influence increasingly allowed him to build grand buildings such as the Villa Imperial in Kyselka for his son Leo, designed by a well-known architect Karl Hayback. His other son, Heinrich Jr., married the daughter of Julius Pupp, the owner of the world-famous Grand Hotel Pupp.

At the height of his career Mattoni was exporting mineral water to 46 countries with offices in Paris, Brussels, Vienna, Berlin, London, New York, San Francisco, Buenos Aires, Cairo and other capital cities. He supplied royal and imperial courts and was a welcome visitor to the European courts and aristocratic houses.

He met the British Monarch, Edward VII, on the King's last visit to Marienbad (Mariánské Lázně). Edward VII visited the spa nine times between the years of 1897 to 1910 and is recorded as saying: "I have travelled all over India, Ceylon and been to all the spa towns in Europe but nowhere the poetry of beautiful nature has touched my heart more than in Marienbad."*

Heinrich Mattoni's greatest success is undoubtedly



The bottling room of the Löschner source in 1908

his transformation of Kyselka (translation from the German name of the village Giesshübler Sauerbrunn used until 1950, today Kyselka) where he bought several mineral water sources and started exporting the water as Mattoni's Kyselka. He bought the sources 'Otto', named after the Greek King Otto I, 'Empress Elizabeth' - after the Empress Sisi, 'Emperor Franz Joseph I', and source 'Dr. Joseph Löschner', a well-known European balneologist, Rector of Charles-Ferdinand University in Prague and personal doctor to the Habsburg ruling family.

Heinrich completely rebuilt the entire village bringing in a railway line and adding spas, a sanatorium, a colonnade, beautiful promenades, a public drinking hall with a park, as well as a new villa quarter and modern bottling plants. The highlight was the 'Château Mattoni', a majestic villa with a tower in the French style, surrounded by an English park planted with rare trees, with lakes and fountains. On the River Ohře he built his own electricity power station and a saw mill in addition to his brickyard and a bottle factory.

Mattoni was a pioneer in bottling mineral water and

An original mineral water label from 1874



*The quotation by King Edward VII comes from the publication Hamelika, Museum of Mariánské Lázně

his was the first company in the world to use glass bottles for export, starting in 1867 as a trial and from 1873 exclusively in glass. It was also the year when the red Mattoni eagle first appeared on the label. Advertising and promotion were extremely important to him as a large number of exhibits in the Mattoni Museum confirms. Around the world he has always been regarded as a magician of advertising and even the crash of the Mattoni balloon 'Kyselka' at the Jubilee Exhibition in Prague in 1891 brought huge gains with the world press covering the story. He became a Knight of the Council of Franz Joseph I and was the bearer of the Papal Order of St Gregory the Great and of the Marian Cross of the Teutonic Knights.

When Mattoni Sr died in Karlovy Vary in 1910, the many thousands of people attending his funeral - the largest the city had ever seen - blocked the road from Karlovy Vary to Kyselka. With Heinrich's death also ends the golden age of Kyselka. The company was taken over by the sons Heinrich Jr and Leo, who during the great economic crisis sold it to the future Czech Ambassador to the Court of St James's, Dr Max Lobkowicz. With the outbreak of WW2 it was confiscated, together with all other mineral water sources in Czechoslovak borderland, and given to the SS which supplied the German regiments on the front. In 1945 the Mattoni

company, including the spa, was briefly returned to Dr. Max Lobkowicz who had spent the war with President Beneš in exile in London, but in 1948 it was confiscated again and nationalised.

Two separate entities were created, Czechoslovak State Spas and West Bohemian Springs, both visibly declining in the following years due to lack of investment. The last blow to the spa came with the disastrous privatisation and the sale to internationally-wanted fraudsters and speculators. West Bohemian Springs fared better having been bought in 1991 by an Italian entrepreneur Dr Antonio Pasquale, who brought in investment, modernised production and after forty years of stagnation and decline embarked on continuing the Mattoni tradition of running the international trade in mineral water.

Today Mattoni 1873 a.s., is regarded as an important leader among the European mineral water suppliers, employs some 3,300 people in eight countries and exports into twenty around the world. It also generously sponsors the conservation of the cultural and architectural heritage in Kyselka, with numerous buildings now completed. Villa Mattoni in Kyselka used as a hotel - Château Hotel Giesshübl in 1918-1938, is currently ruinous but work has begun on its reconstruction.



However, the Villa Mattoni in Karlovy Vary has not survived. It was used as a nursery school until the mid-1960s, then demolished and replaced by the Hotel Thermal, one of the most significant buildings of Czech Brutalism.

Ladislav Sýkora is the director and curator of the Mattoni Museum in Kyselka, housed in the former bottling plant of the Löschner spring

Left, the bottling house of the Löschner source, designed in 1907 by the Karlovy Vary architect Alfred Bayer, now the museum