

A ONCE PROSPEROUS ART NOUVEAU BATH IN BUDAPEST

Constructions of the Hungaria Bath

MARIANNE SIMON

Institute of History and Theory of Architecture,
Technical University of Budapest, H-1521

Received: October 8, 1987
Presented by Prof. Dr. Mihály Zádor

Abstract

A derelict, dilapidated Art Nouveau bath in Budapest is now reminiscent alone of a one-time bath complex extended over half a block by the turn of the century. The construction history of the Hungaria Bath is described from the first bath house to the »metropolitan bath« combining public bath, exclusive steam bath, hydrotherapeutic institute and swimming pool, followed by decline in the 'twenties until liquidation.

There is a house in Dohány Street, Budapest, with a planked door, broken glass panes, crumbling majolicas, that though, unkempt as it is, attires the attention of walkers-by with its monumental façade rich in details. The inscription over the door — Hungaria Bath — has long lost its validity; thirty-five years have passed since the last bather left. Actually, only this inscription, the doorway reliefs, and the Zsolnay ceramics, here and there still found in the interior, and remainders of the drinking fountain hint to the former bathing life; though, this bath complex, formed of the first, Reform-era bath-house involved half of the block in its heydays at the beginning of this century.

1. Gamperl's Chalybeate Bath

Still in 1826, "András Gamperl, citizen of merit of town Pest, made an important resolution: to build a bath, a thermal bath for his ailing fellow citizens. He had an empty lot in the outskirts of the town, near the Hatvani gate, inherited from the related Mayerhof family, »Mayerhof lot« as popularly called, with a deep well renowned of yielding chalybeate water. So he decided to build a bathhouse to properly make use of the chalybeate spring. He applied at the town council for a permit that was granted him in 1826." [7]

As soon as completed, the bathhouse became popular. In Pest, there was but another establishment similar to the Gamperl bathhouse: Dr. Rumbach's chalybeate bath in the Town Park. The earliest mention of this bath-

house is made in a booklet from 1831: "... this bath is situated in the Theresa town, in Nyári Street, number 215, the water for bathing had been authoritatively tested by the Medical Profession of Pest and found to be restorative, as proficiently experienced by several valetudinarians. — The building interior is ornate, the service is precise and correct" [1].

The building was nearly destroyed by the 1838 flood, but soon reconstructed, it attracted the public again. It was described by Feldmann in 1844 as: "Almost half of the rooms facing the courtyard are occupied by the bath itself, to the left are apartments for the bath operator and the personnel, while the remaining part accommodates a garden and pavilions for the ease of bathers" [4].

Essentially, Gamperl's chalybeate bath had been a tub bath with bath-rooms and guest rooms, open, however, only for part of the year, from May to October.

"The chalybeate bath in Nyár Street" is mentioned in every bath guide from the past century. It is praised in 1845 just as in 1852 and 1853 [2, 3, 6]. Later it is transferred to, and operated by, Rosa Hesz, then by Károly Müller. But there are no more guestrooms, and the service niveau declines. A guide from 1891 on the Budapest baths spends a mere three sentences on chalybeate baths in Budapest, of them the last sounds as "equipment of the baths leaves much to desire" [4]. After the unification of Buda and Pest the springs and baths of Buda become rather competitive, not to be overcome in that form by the chalybeate bath in Nyár Street fed by a chalybeate-chalky well of restricted yield, as cool as 12 °C.

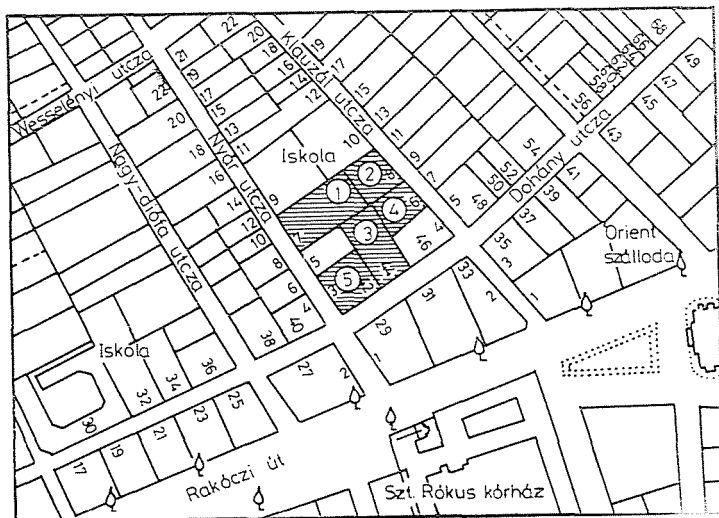
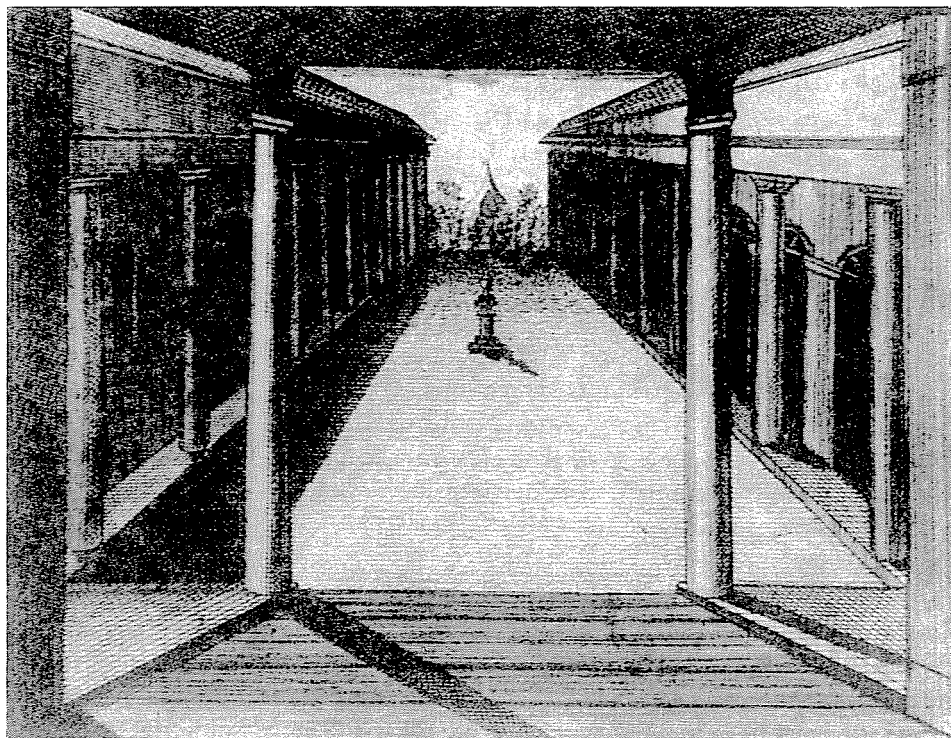


Fig. 1. Buildings of Hungaria Bath: 1. Hungaria Chalybeate Bath 1898; 2. Public Steam Bath 1904; 3. Swimming pool of Hungaria Bath 1909; 4. Steam bath for women 1909; 5. Thermal bath 1916; 3—5. Hotel Continental and Kamara movie 1921



Chalybeate Bath, Install.

Fig. 2. The yard of the Chalybeate bath in Nyár street. Engraving from the graphic collection of the Budapest Historic Museum

2. Hungaria Chalybeate Bath

And yet, there are some who guess business possibilities in this chalybeate bath in Nyár Street. In 1897 the bath is purchased by the Ringer brothers: Géza Ringer, bath owner, and Dr. Lajos Ringer, lawyer. By then, the family Ringer has had ample experience with baths. Géza Ringer owns the "first Hungarian steam bath" in Kazinczy Street, and also the "Roman Bath" belongs to the Ringer family, while some years after the bath in Nyár Street, they purchase the King Bath in Fő Street.

Ringer brothers buy the bathhouse 7, Nyár Street, together with the adjacent house 8, Klauzál Street, to soon start a project, by that time only in Nyár Street. The single-storey bathhouse was demolished and in November

1898, the new, two-storey bath palace named Hungaria Chalybeate Bath was opened to the public.

The detailed list of architects, contractors and suppliers of this building appears from the newspaper "Pesti Hírlap", November 4, 1898: "In the doorway there is an enormous gilt-lettered marble tablet: This bathhouse has been built in 1897 to 1898 under the chief burgomastership of József Márkus and the mayoralty of János Halmos, designed by Károly Gy. Kreuzer, architect, on commission by Géza Ringer and Dr. Lajos Ringer, citizens of Budapest, with contributions of the following firms: United Savings Bank Co., Budapest; A. Holzspach & Sons, building contractors; Schlick Foundry & Machine Factory Co., boilers and equipment; Schaeffer & Walcker Co., Berlin, bath equipment; United Electric Co., lighting fixtures; Zsolnay China and Fayence Factory Co., Budapest, wall cladding; Rezső Müller, cabinetwork; Bleuer & Quittner, joinery; Robert Wunsch, concrete structures; János Áprily, stone carvings; Steiner & Simper, house painting; Adolf Schön, cement work; Jakab Klopfer, glaziery; Ede Pick, locksmithery; Alphons Custodis, chimney stack and boiler brickwork" [7].

Designs for the Hungaria Chalybeate Bath cannot be found any more, but to realize it is helped by subsisting designs for a reconstruction in 1922, relying on the original drawings. The details taking shape are completed by a contemporary description in Pesti Hírlap: "From the doorway the path leads across a beautiful, majolica-decorated hall, first to the steam bath. Here there are three basins, the warm one is 182 m long by 72 m wide (?), the lukewarm 7 m long by 7 m wide, and the cool 5 m long by 5 m wide; there is an inhalation room, a drying room, two steam chambers, a shower room and a room for gymnastics; there is also a finely furnished lounge with eighteen enormous couches for after-bath rest.

The first floor comprises 50 tub baths, with three kinds of tubs: china, English fayence and metal. All of them are finely equipped, comfortable, and highly practical. Other fine tub baths are in the basement. The laundry is in the attic, and there are also large, power-driven fans — thus, everything is equipped as practically as possible" [7].

Since then, the building of the Hungaria Chalybeate Bath had been reconstructed to a block of flats, with two storeys added, and halving the high headroom over the ground floor. Though, façades of the new building parts adopted the original romanticistic features, and also the sumptuous iron gates have been maintained, so an image may be formed of the one-time aspect of the bath palace. Though, no detail but the swimming pool in the basement and some stoneware tubs subsist, of which to conclude on the building interior, although the gist of the plan by architect Gy. Kreuzer, unknown by other works, might be the interior, rather than the exterior, of the building, not only for the journalist of that time but also for the actual specialist.

On revival, the bathhouse in Nyár Street in its new building becomes Hungaria Chalybeate Bath. In fact, it cannot compete with baths and springs in Buda. "Magyar Baedecker", the only free guide to all Hungarian baths and mineral waters, barely mentions it in 1899 [5], though, the Hungaria Chalybeate Bath is rather popular, and the high-niveau services are enjoyed by a rather demanding public. "A finely secluded corner, unknown to the public to exist, was reserved to privileged people. It was the Hammam . . . a small private steam bath concealed in the maze of Hungaria Bath . . . All the clientele of the bath numbered low. Young aristocrats, some inhabitants of Lipótváros, writers and journalists well-known since then" as put by the newspaper "Az Újság" in 1929, reminding, not without nostalgia, the palmy times of peace [12].

3. Public Steam Baths

Soon, the bath starts expanding. In 1904, Ringer brothers apply for a permit to transform their three-storey block of flats 8, Klauzál Street (built in 1894) to a bathhouse [13]. At the niveau of the first floor, the courtyard is overroofed in glass with steel trusses, and a reserve steam boiler is added to the bath establishment, to cope with the increased heat demand. Dwellings in the block of flats in Klauzál Street are only kept in the second floor of the street front, the others are made to a bath.

The owners did not lay primary claim on the fine exterior and interior of the Public Steam Bath building. This fact already appears from that a master builder named János Jedlicska, likely to work cheaper than an architect, was entrusted to make the designs, and also that no change of the façade was deemed to be necessary, although the Public Steam Bath was made a new entrance from the Klauzál Street. In spite of its subsequent, frequent reconstructions, the steel trussed glass roof and the tile-clad staircase point to the work of a master builder at the standard quality of the period.

The reconstruction designs went lost. But a contemporary description of the bath subsists. As a matter of fact, Dr. Miksa Weinberger, in his 1905 paper published in the review "Gyógyászat", stresses mainly hygienic significance and merits of the bath. Obviously, since, after the public bath sections of Lukács Bath and Rudas Bath, it was the third cheap public bath in Budapest. The bath had separate sections for men and women. The finer but more extensive cabins were replaced by common dressing rooms each. "In the common dressing room men are provided with aprons, and women with shirts to enter the first compulsory cleaning room to clean feet with an alkaline solution of soap in one of the several footbaths. Hence the second compulsory cleaning room is entered where alkaline solution from an overhead tank washes all the body, followed by showering. Then common baths follow, complete

with sweating rooms, warm, lukewarm and cold basins and several showers." Beyond bathing, also other services were available. "Those wanting to be shaved or to have corns cut, or if women want a hairdressing in the beautiful, large hairdressing room, then a special ticket of 10 fillér is to be bought. Also a cheap snack bar is at disposition . . ." [8].

The public of the Public Bath was composed of social layers quite different from those of the refined Hungaria Chalybeate Bath. Nevertheless, by acting as a public bath, by then scanty in the city, at low price, it was rather busy — 1000 bathers a day — and profitable to its owners.

4. Swimming Pool of the Hungaria Bath

The third, best known period of bath extension starts in 1906. Ringer brothers buy lots 44, Dohány Street, and 6, Klauzál Street, with their blocks of flats. The former gets demolished but the latter, a relatively new, three-storey block of flat built in 1898, will be reconstructed.

Reconstruction consists in trimming the walls around the courtyard to pillars, to top the ground floor by a floor, and to cover the two-storey space above it by a double glass roof. Deepening the basement yielded another useful space for the swimming pool joining the Public Steam Bath, to be used by men and by women for half a day each. The other storeys of the building accommodate a smart steam bath similar to that in Nyár Street. Bath basins are built in the double floor above the basement, while storeys accommodate servicing and rest rooms.

As long as steam baths in Nyár and in Klauzál Streets functioned simultaneously, the former was for men, and the latter for women.

The building of the steam bath for women preserved the most of the former interior of the Hungaria Bath: the inner space with a gallery overroofed with five glass domes, drinking fountains, stoneware pictures.

In spite of the overall inner reconstruction, the façade of 6, Klauzál Street was left intact by the architect: the inscription of the house builder — Aladár Székely, publisher — is still read on the façade. Namely the steam bath for women opened simultaneously with the swimming pool, 44, Dohány Street, of the Hungaria Bath; also their entrance was common.

Both were designed by Emil Ágoston, architect.

The swimming pool is the second, and last new construction in the history of Hungaria Bath. The lot, narrow in the street but deep inwards, is to accommodate a bathhouse of three floors above the ground floor. As a matter of fact, these were not meant as three floors, namely the entresol and the attic were omitted — building specifications for Dohány Street limited the building height to three storeys.

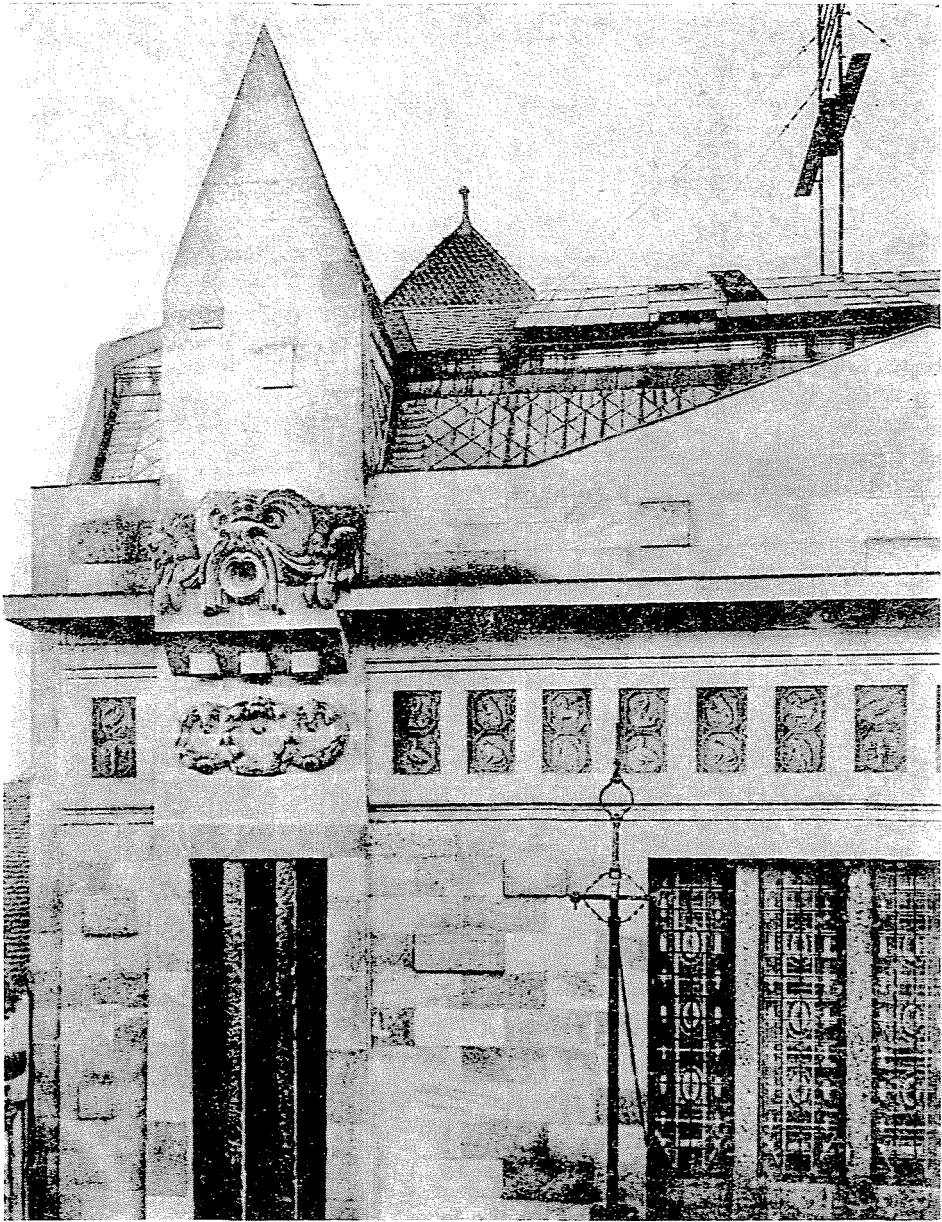


Fig. 3. Swimming pool of Hungaria Bath. Part of the gable. Magyar Építőművészet, 1910

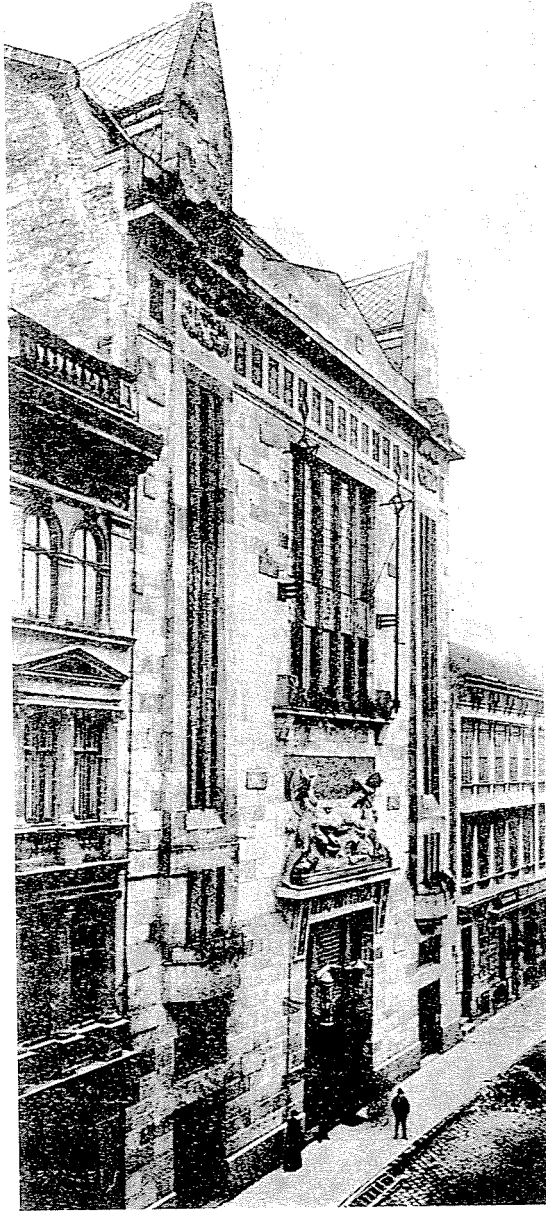


Fig. 4. Swimming pool of Hungaria Bath. Principal façade. Magyar Építőművészet, 1910

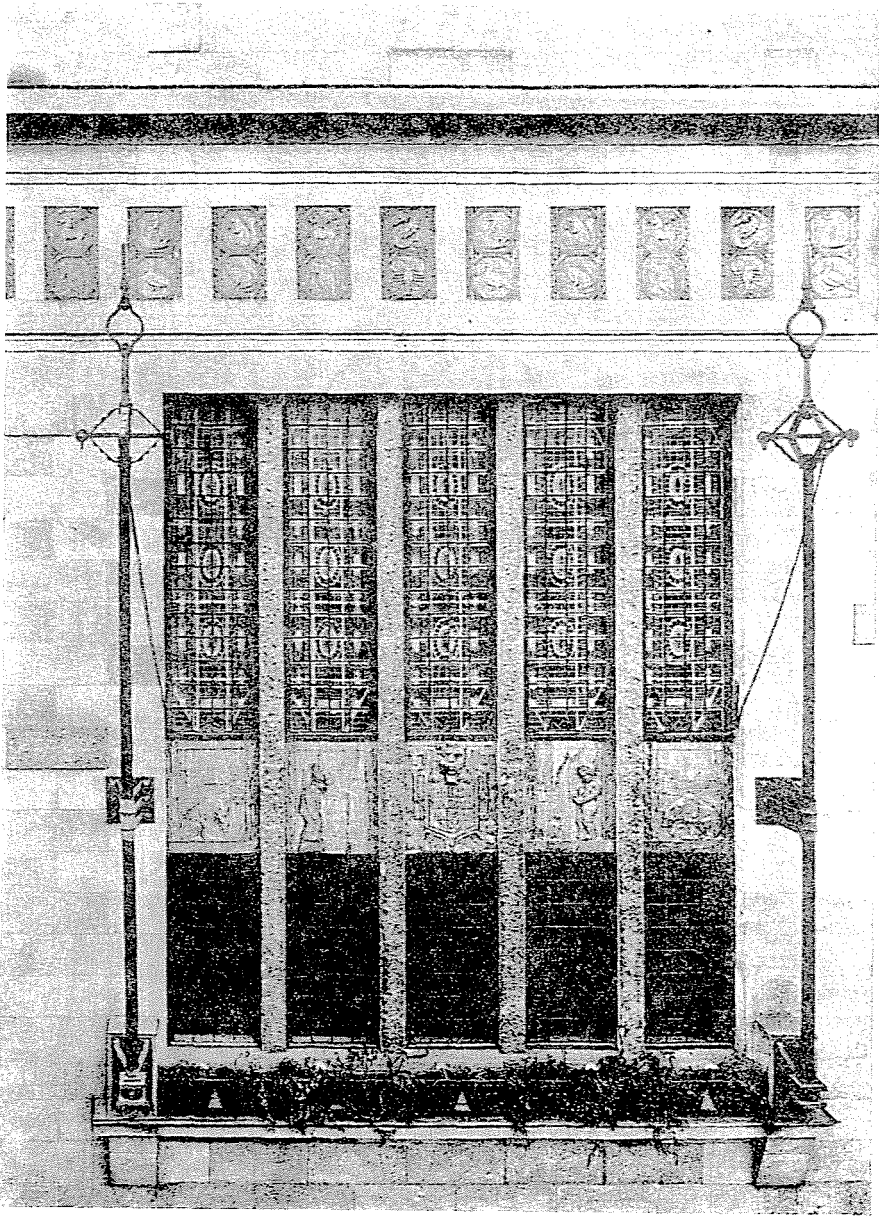


Fig. 5. Swimming pool of Hungaria Bath. Window design. Magyar Építőművészet, 1910



Fig. 6. Swimming pool of Hungaria Bath. Entrance. Magyar Építőművészet, 1910



Fig. 7. Swimming pool of Hungaria Bath. Relief over the entrance. Magyar Építőművészet, 1910

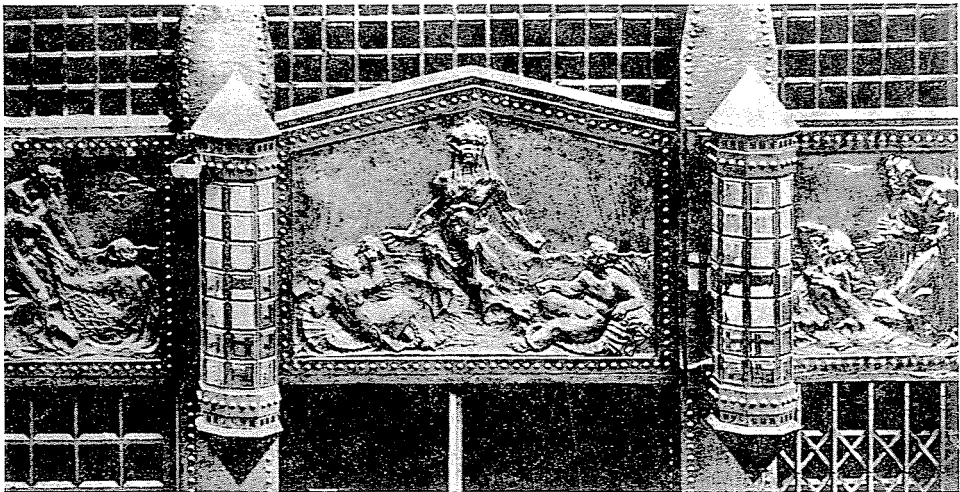


Fig. 8. Swimming pool of Hungaria Bath. Detail of the entrance. Magyar Építőművészet, 1910

With a view on both the air volume and the high-grade equipment, the swimming pool of Hungaria Bath was built at a record speed. In 1907, the plans were submitted to apply for a building permit, and in May 1909, the newspaper "Ország-Világ" heralds the inauguration of "A Metropolitan Bath".

Original designs of the building are missing. Its façade, however, bearing marks of the Viennese "Art Nouveau", is seen in several photos. In 1910, the building was presented in "Magyar Építőművészet", and found by Anton Schroll, famous Viennese photographer, worth to be recorded.

Save a single drawing by Emil Ágoston, the building interior can only be realized from descriptions. "The building is entered across a revolving door, and one stops in surprise from a dazzling, glittering sight rousing amazement even in the most world travelled people. An enormous swimming pool is facing the entrance, watered from an overhead spring profusely flowing into the basin. The chalybeate water of the bath flows continuously in mighty jets into the large swimming pool whence it outpours to the drain so that water in the large basin is always clean. At a significant height over the swimming pool, there is a stained glass roof that can be opened by means of an ingenious device, so that in fair weather bathing can be in open air.

The pool is big enough to accommodate 3000 at a time. There is an electrically driven swimming machine to teach swimming, as well as diving towers and a toboggan for water plays. The building is topped by sunbath areas and outlooks. Every part of the equipment is luxurious. An outstanding view is offered by the rich marble decoration of the swimming hall, the swimming pool clean as glass, joined by a richly flowered courtyard.

The bathers are offered every comfort. Snack bar, rest room, sleeping room and reading room, finely and comfortably equipped, align in this new bath glittering with marble, copper fittings and mirrors . . ." [9].

Two decades later, a paper stated that ". . . although columns in the water were rather troublesome in contests, but even so, Hungaria was excellent for training" [11]. Storeys above the swimming pool accommodated cabins, tub baths, rest rooms, and of course, servicing chambers. The grandiose entrance to the swimming pool was leading, across the entrance hall and the mezzanine cloakroom gallery, to the ladies' steam bath at 6, Klauzál Street.

By now, hardly anything subsists from the original interior: the once openable double glass roof with reliefs along the bracings, the coffered ceiling of first-floor rest rooms, the by now divided space of the entrance hall, doors, railings.

Fortunately, the façade suffered less from reconstructions, although, in adding a storey, the frieze under the cornice was broken through in order to raise the roof and to make a window facing the street, while the triple copper door praised by contemporaries is now replaced by planks and safety grating to frame the entrance.

5. Hungaria Bath Co.

In 1910, Hungaria Bath comprized four units: steam bath for men, 7, Nyár Street; steam bath for women, 6, Klauzál Street; public steam bath, 8, Klauzál Street; indoor swimming pool, 44, Dohány Street.

All these exceeded the frames of a private enterprise, so Ringer brothers established Hungaria Bath Co.

No doubt, the bath is in its heydays. Owners, now backed by a stock company, plan further extensions. To this aim, they purchase the four-storey block of flats on the lot 42, Dohány Street.

Reconstruction of 42, Dohány Street is undertaken by Imre Novák, architect [14]. The plan of 1912 involves transformation of the basement and the ground floor, and construction of a glass roof over the courtyard. Part of the service rooms over the swimming hall are to be relocated, and new services introduced, such as cold hydrotherapy, pelotherapy, wrapping room, dentistry, dispensary, and hygienical gymnastics. The attic in the inner façade is converted to stores and canteen for the personnel.

Although at that time, inner transformations were restricted to part of the building — storey flats were spared — also the façade was transformed. The embossed historicistic building façade was cleaned, a stone socket was made, and the façade was stone clad up to the first floor, “to agree architectonically and in beauty with the monumental stone façade of the adjacent indoor swimming pool” [15].

By about 1916, 42, Dohány Street underwent another transformation. “A thermal bath is built with five pools, a wrapping room, effervescent bath, thermotherapy, inhalation, snack bar” [16]. The bath gets completed but never operated any more, because of shortage of equipment — tubes, fittings, machinery.

Hungaria Bath Co. is still worse affected by economy troubles due to World War I. Permanent coal shortage forces the Company to shut down the swimming pool.

6. Epilogue

This is the end of the history of Hungaria Bath constructions. In 1920, the enterprise tending to bankruptcy is purchased by the Hungarian General Real Estate Bank. The Hungaria Bath Co. continues to operate as a concern of the Real Estate Bank.

To restore economy of the concern, the new management undertakes radical reconstructions: the swimming pool is transformed to a movie theater.

Feeling the antagonism to close the newly built indoor swimming pool operating but one decade, a detailed motivation is enclosed to the appli-

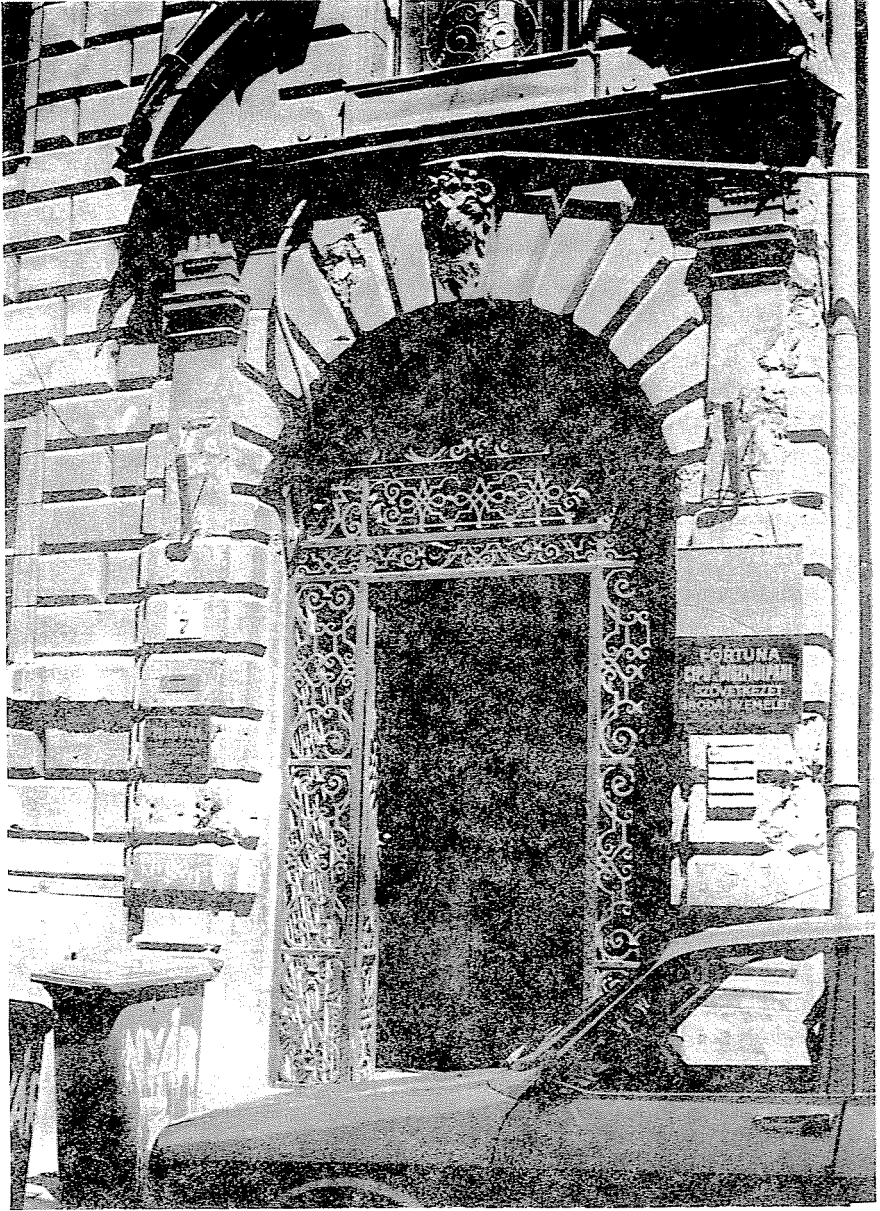


Fig. 9. Hungaria Chalybeate Bath. Wrough iron entrance. Actual condition



Fig. 10. Hungaria Chalybeate Bath. Remnants of the cornice, and wrought iron flag holder



Fig. 11. Swimming pool of Hungaria Bath. Principal façade. Actual condition



Fig. 12. Swimming pool of Hungaria Bath. Entrance. Actual condition

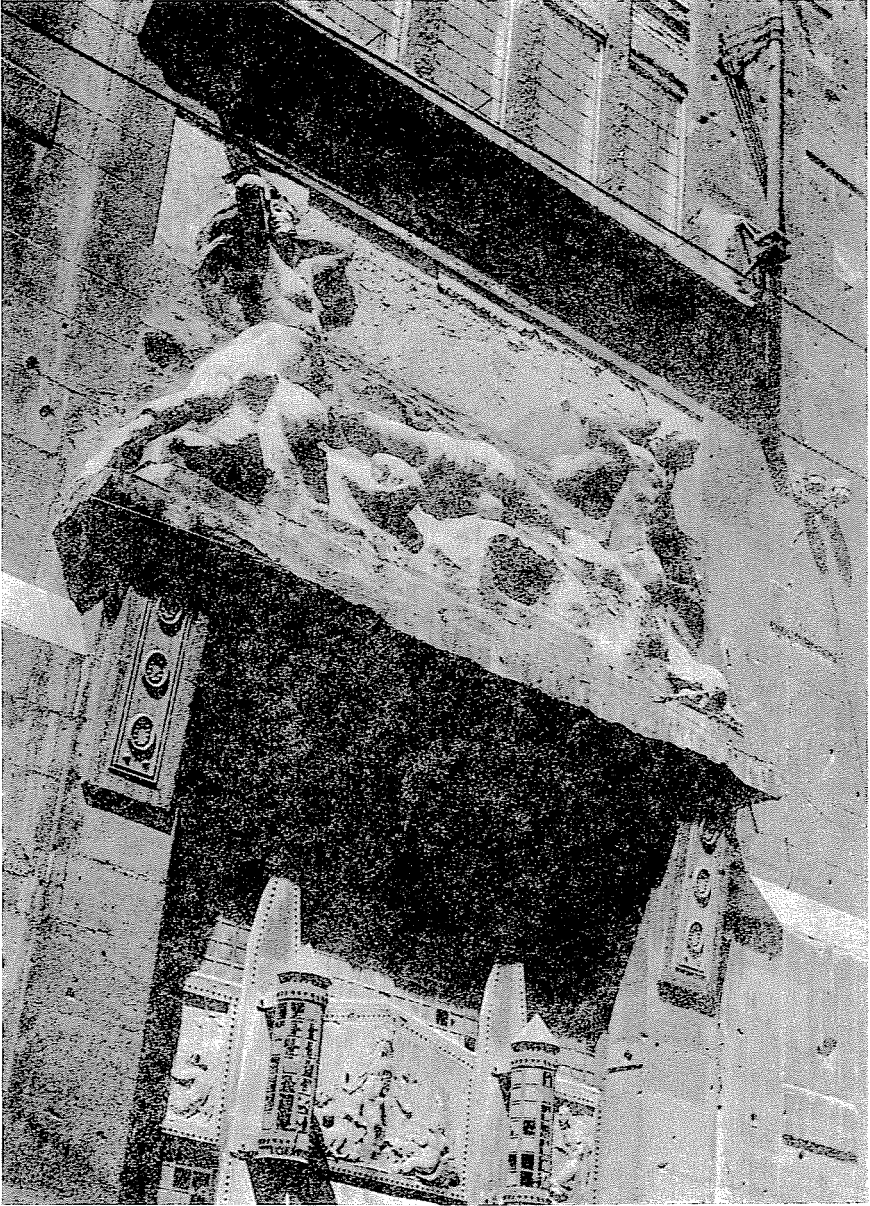


Fig. 13. Swimming pool of Hungaria Bath. Detail of the entrance. Actual condition



Fig. 14. Swimming pool of Hungaria Bath. Detail of the façade. Actual condition

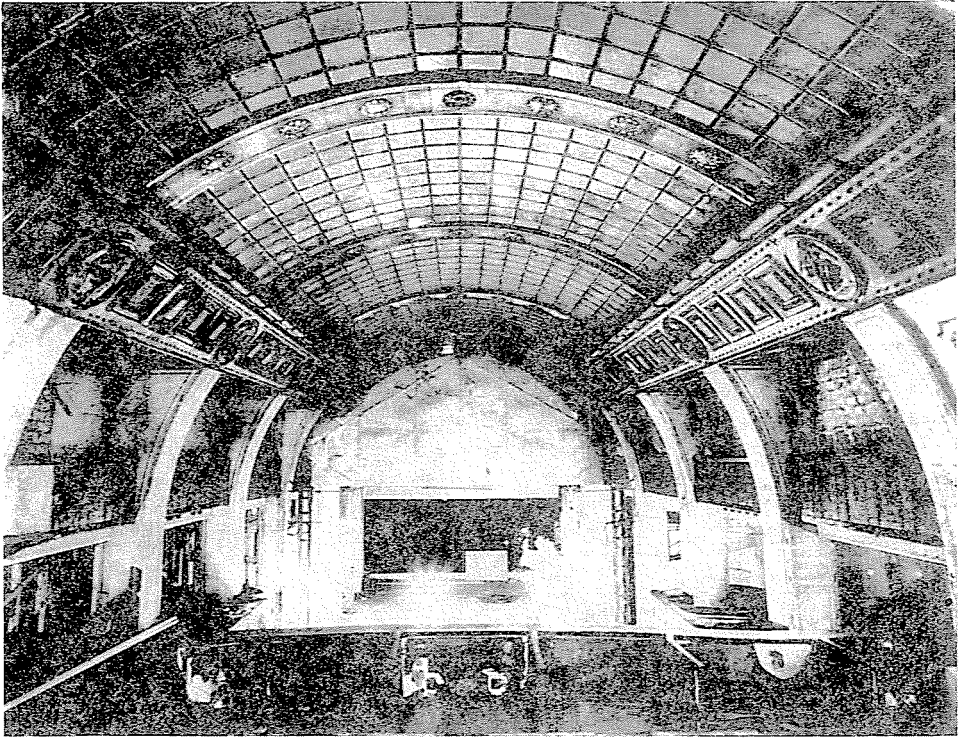


Fig. 15. Swimming pool of Hungaria Bath. Interior of the swimming pool transformed to theatre

cation: "This swimming pool fails its destination for years. We are unable to maintain it as a swimming pool since water at about 10°C has to be pumped to the pool. Pumping requires much of coal. This has not been allocated to us by the Coal Board since long, stating that in shortage of coal for producing essentials of life, no coal for filling this swimming pool can be made available" [17]. Besides of coal shortage, uneconomical operation, another serious cause of closing the swimming pool was the — unmentioned — competition by newly built municipal baths, swimming pools, the Gellért Bath completed in 1918, and — last but not least — the recent fashion of lido going.

In transformations — again planned by Imre Novák — the swimming pool is filled up, and covered by a floor sloping to form the auditorium, the space is divided by a balcony. The original entrance hall of the swimming pool would be insufficient — even by dimensions — to accommodate the simultaneous entering of public to the movie, but proprietors were unwilling to sacrifice "the doorway 44, Dohány Street, built as a bath entrance, and central to the block" [17]. So the triple doorway and the entrance hall were divided and the middle part remained the entrance to the ladies' steam bath

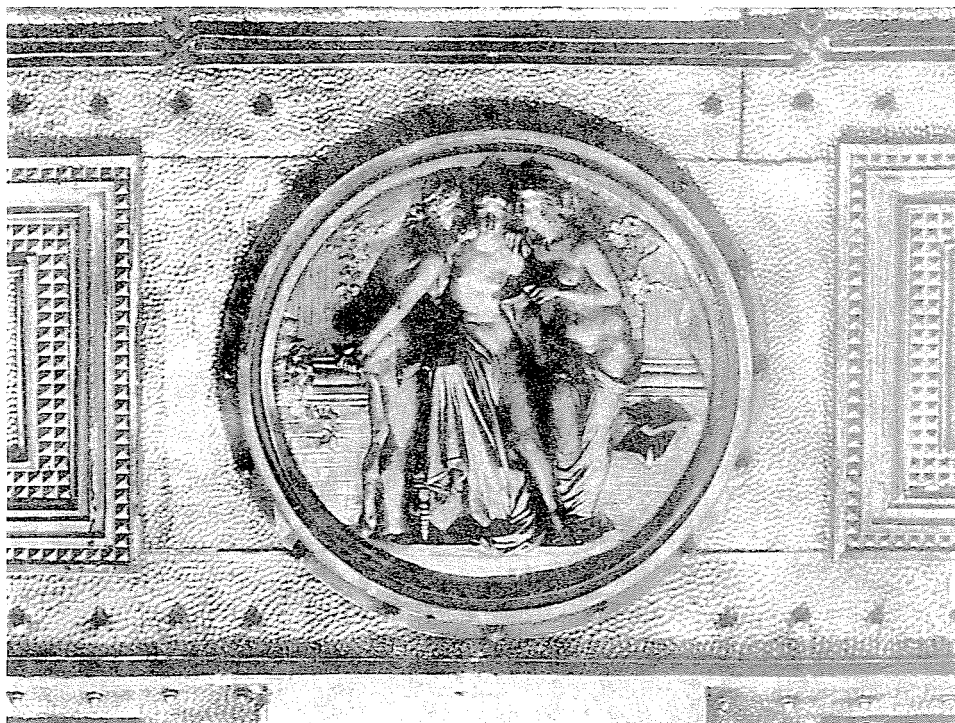


Fig. 16. Swimming pool of Hungaria Bath. Interior detail with embossed copper ornaments

in Klauzál Street, while the two lateral doorways became exits for the public. The movie entrance was developed on the ground floor of the neighbouring block of flats, 42, Dohány Street, maintaining the hall overroofed with an oval stained glass dome made in the transformation of 1912 as an impressive entrance hall.

The Kamara movie at 42—44, Dohány Street, inaugurated in 1921, essentially remained unaltered to now. It functioned as a cinema until 1950, then, after slight transformations, as a repertory theatre for 13 years. Since then, the auditorium is unused, except at times for film sceneries.

Simultaneous to the movie construction, upper floors of the Hungaria swimming pool were reconstructed to a hotel, with other rooms and entrances at 42, Dohány Street. Reconstruction comprised to add a floor, to divide a storey headroom, and to build in partitions as needed for hotel rooms. Hotel Continental functioned until 1970, then imminent collapse of the neglected building imposed it to be shut down. Though, the part at 44, Dohány Street is not abandoned but after a slight structural reinforcement now it houses offices.

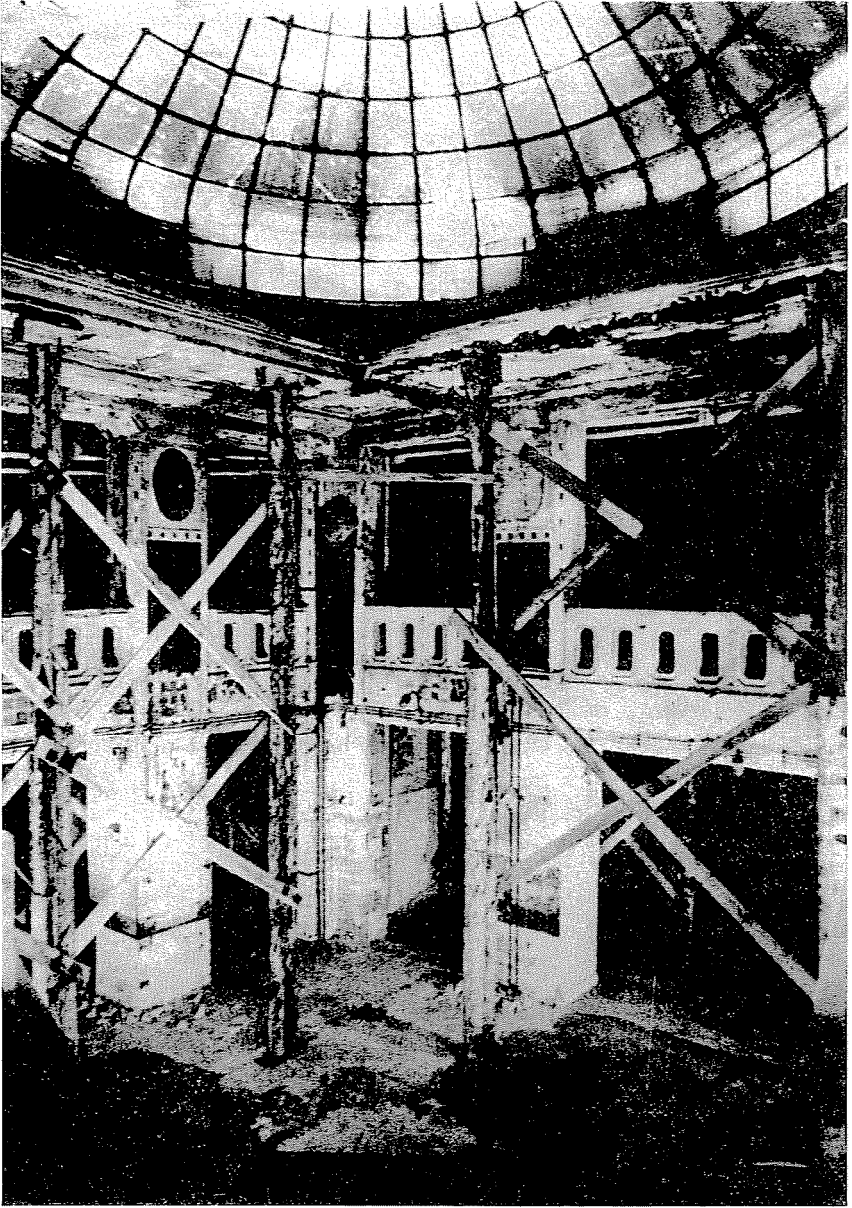


Fig. 17. Steam bath for women, 6, Street Klauzál. Central space. Actual condition

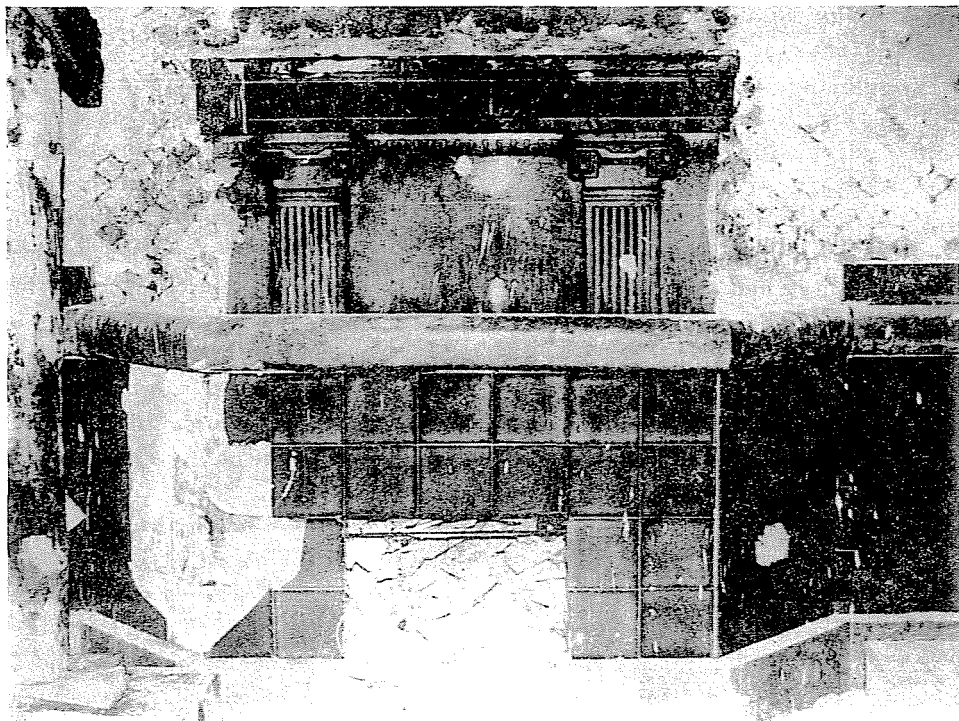


Fig. 18. Steam bath for women, 6, Street Klauzál. Drinking fountain. Actual condition

Closure of the swimming pool, emblem of Hungaria Bath, is soon followed by liquidation of the other, increasingly uneconomical units. In 1922, the steam bath for men, operating in the first bathhouse in Nyár Street, is shut down. The bath laundry is made “the public laundry with the greatest capacity in Budapest”. [11] But in 1936, even this is shut down, and the building is added two storeys to act as a block of flats.

The Public Bath functioned up to the mid’20s. In 1928 the house is added two further stories with bachelor’s flats. The once bath storeys are first used for stores, then house the laundry across the street, evacuated in connection with the construction of the block of flats. Its premises are now stores.

The bath in Klauzál Street — since 1922 steam bath for men and women — had been shut down in 1952. Since then, the building has kept its form, namely its large, gloomy and un-aerated rooms could not be given another function. Thus, destruction of the rooms earlier used for stores — initiated in the ’20s by the unwillingness of the company to invest into the declining bath unit — due to weathering, rain, frost, has been increasingly damaging

the building because of managerial indifference rather than of the transformations. Actually, the bathhouse is empty and dangerous to life.

The functionless building complex is facing annihilation: in the past fifteen years its partial demolition has often been decided. Though, the swimming hall of Hungaria Bath and the women's steam bath are the most important works of Emil Ágoston, architect (1876—1921) who died at a young age but handed down several high-standard buildings (Hotel Astoria, Krayer house at 31, Váci Avenue, blocks of flats in Nyúl, Király and Dob Streets, etc.). Rather than to its ingenious exterior and interior alone, its merit lies in the daring reinforced concrete structure meeting unique, novel demands. "It bears the stamp of the spirit of modern times; it is giant by conception and dimensions; its execution meets illimited requirements, and its means range over all the novel feats of engineering" [10]. Nonetheless, the building, protected only by a council degree, is missing from the register of monuments or monument-type buildings.

Actually, there is a hope for saving it, namely the Municipal Council offered to fund its transformation to Arany János Theatre in Budapest so that the auditorium would be the former swimming hall, while servicing units could be housed in the ladies' steam bath building at Klauzál Street. Of course, constructions would involve the surrounding buildings, thereby half the block-area of the one-time Hungaria Bath — would be developed. The investment schedule plan was complete by January 1987.

References

Books

1. Description of the Free Royal Borough Pest.* Edited by József PATACSICH, expéditor at the Clerical Office of Free Royal Borough Pest. Pest, 1831.
2. Buda-Pest, Capital of Hungarians, Description of All the Sights and Scenic Spots in this Sister Town.* Pest, 1845.
3. LENGYEL, D. of Przemysl: Handbook of Baths.* Pest, 1853.
4. GERLÓCZY, ZS.—HANKÓ, V.: Baths and Thermal Springs in Budapest.* Budapest, 1891.
5. HOFBAUER, F.: "Hungarian Baedeker". The only Free Guide to Bath and Thermal Springs in this Country.* Budapest, 1899.
6. LIBER, E.: Development of Budapest as a Bathing Resort, with a View on the Municipal Bath Policy.* Budapest, 1936.

Periodicals, Newspapers

7. A New Bath in the Capital.* Pesti Hírlap, November 4, 1898, No. 305.
8. WEINBERGER, M.: On Public Baths.* Gyógyászat, 1905.
9. A Metropolitan Bath.* Ország-Világ, May 23, 1909.
10. The New Hungaria Bath.* Építő Ipar, May 23, 1909.
11. A Centennial Bath in Pest Shuts Down.* Magyarország, March 14, 1929.
12. A Vanishing Remnant of the Old, Reveller Budapest. The Hammam and its Visitors.* Az Újság, March 21, 1929.

* In Hungarian

Archivalia

Archives of Budapest (BFL)

Documents of the Council Department IV. 1407/6

13. BFL III. 1929/03

14. BFL III. 5326/11

15. BFL III. 7400/13

16. BFL XIII. 245/19

17. BFL III. 608/27

18. Register of addresses and dwellings in Budapest 1888—1899.

Marianne SIMON H-1521, Budapest