



ein museum der **wien**holding

Espresso at last! The Café Arabia on Kohlmarkt

Starting on May 25, 2022, the Jewish Museum Vienna will bring the forgotten history of Café Arabia and its founder Alfred Weiss (1890–1973) back into the city’s consciousness at Museum Judenplatz.

Italian espresso culture vs. coffee house owners’ metropolis

On March 10, 1951, the entrepreneur Alfred Weiss and the restaurateur Alfred Peysar opened the Espresso Arabia with an impressive fashion show at Kohlmarkt 5, in the middle of Vienna’s city center, at that time the International Zone. Planned by Oswald Haerdtl, the restaurant was a total work of art that infused Italian flair into devastated and dreary postwar Vienna. Although not the first place where one could have an espresso in Vienna, it was the first to model itself after an Italian bar in functionality and style. Not everyone welcomed this attention-grabbing innovation. The traditional coffee house proprietors fretted about this new trend and some saw it as the death of the Viennese coffee house.

The Arabia coffee brand and the Weiss family

“Arabia” was the name of the coffee and tea import company that Weiss took over after the First World War and turned it into a successful and popular brand in the interwar period. The well-known graphic artist and friend of Alfred Weiss, Joseph Binder (creator of the Meinl logo, among others), designed one of the first corporate identities for him, with the distinctive capital “A.”

In 1938, the company was “Aryanized,” and the Weiss family had to flee. The daughters survived in England, Alfred and his wife Lucie in Rome following an odyssey through Europe. After the Second World War they returned to Vienna. From Italy they took along what they had seen blossoming there: the new technique for preparing espresso coffee. Weiss managed to get his import company back. The Arabia name became one of the major coffee brands again in the postwar decades.

Weiss commissioned the architect Oswald Haerdtl with the design of the espresso café, which Haerdtl realized as a Gesamtkunstwerk. Weiss then acquired Palais Auersperg in 1953 and made it – also based on Haerdtl’s drafts – into the company headquarters “Haus Arabia” and a lively event center. Thanks to his energy and fearlessness, Weiss did not shy

away from facing the unreasonableness and contradictions in postwar Austria. He associated with the leaders of domestic politics in the Second Republic and worked both with Haerdtl, who had collaborated with the National Socialists during the war, and with the graphic artist Heinrich Sussmann, who had survived Auschwitz. For many years the visible center of his work was and remained Café Arabia and the Arabia brand.

In 1999, Café Arabia closed its doors forever. Nothing remains of the groundbreaking architecture of the 1950s. The Arabia brand, which was so much more than just coffee, and the eventful life of Alfred Weiss are now being brought back into the public eye. Andrew Demmer, a grandson of Alfred Weiss, continues the entrepreneurial tradition with his tea house chain.

Espresso at last! The Café Arabia on Kohlmarkt

can be seen from May 25, 2022 to March 19, 2023 at the Museum Judenplatz, a Wien Holding museum. Curated by Sabine Apostolo and Michael Freund, and designed by Fuhrer, Wien, the exhibition is accompanied by a self-published German/English catalog that costs €24.90. The Museum Judenplatz, Judenplatz 8, 1010 Vienna, is open Sunday to Thursday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. (wintertime), respectively 5 p.m. (summertime). The Jewish Museum Vienna, Dorotheergasse 11, 1010 Vienna, is open Sunday to Friday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Further information can be found at www.jmw.at or info@jmw.at.

Queries

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Photos and press material for the current exhibitions are available on the Jewish Museum Vienna website at www.jmw.at/en/press.

