

by Duncan J. D. Smith

There is nothing special about Mechitaristengasse in the 7th District, indeed few people seem aware of its existence. But look again at the door at No. 4, adorned with a sculpted bishop's mitre. It marks the entrance to the Mekhitarist Armenian Monastery, one of Vienna's least-known places of worship.

Venice to Vienna

It's always tempting to push open intriguing doors – but this one is locked. Access on this occasion is by means of the monastery church around the corner, a curiously-proportioned building courtesy of Biedermeier maestro, Josef Kornhäusel. On Sunday mornings the Armenian sung liturgy fills this gloriously gilded space – but today you can hear a pin drop. A free leaflet at the entrance conveniently picks up the monastery's story.

The Mekhitarist Order was founded in Constantinople in 1701 by an Armenian Catholic monk, Mekhitar 'The Consoler'. Having converted from Eastern Orthodoxy he set about training monks to serve the spiritual and educational needs of his fellow Armenians. Fleeing Ottoman persecution the order relocated in 1715 to the Venetian island of Saint Lazzaro, and then a second monastery was established in Trieste. When that city was occupied by Napoleon in 1797 the monks were granted asylum in Vienna by the Habsburgs.

Useful diplomacy

Back in the present day, the reverie is broken gently by the arrival of Father Vahan Hovagimian. Giving refuge to the Mekhitarists, he

STONES OF VIENNA

Exploring the hidden monastery of a group of monks that fled Napoleon and were granted asylum in Vienna by the Habsburgs

Forgotten Armenian Treasures

explains, was less an act of Habsburg altruism and more of a commercial and political ploy, since the monks were both educated linguists and savvy merchants. Yet at that time in Vienna Armenians were often branded as spies, despite an Armenian trader, one Owanes Astouatzatur, having kick-started the city's coffeehouse revolution in the wake of the Turkish Siege of 1683.

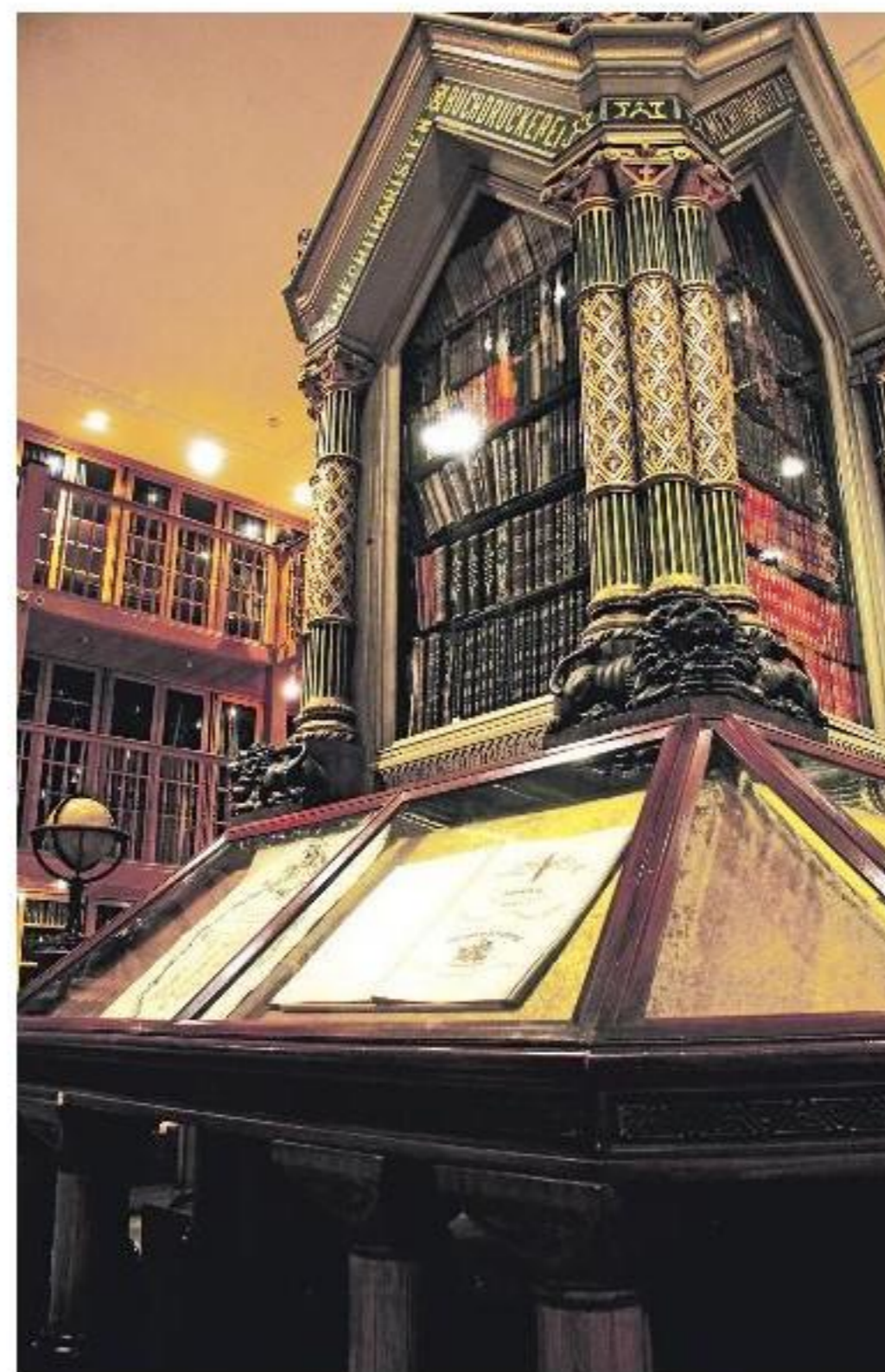
The Viennese preferred to bestow that particular honour erroneously on the Polish adventurer Jerzy Franciszek Kulczycki, who had helped repel the Ottoman Turks at the city gates.

When one of the manuscripts is unfurled a distinct aroma fills the air: the Armenian monks of old used ink mixed with garlic to deter the moths.

Moths and manuscripts

From the church, it's quite a walk past the monks' refectory up several flights of stairs to the monastery library. The monastery has grown enormously since the monks first arrived in Vienna, and today the buildings run almost the full length of Mechitaristengasse. The casual passer-by would never realise this from the street.

The library itself leaves little doubt that Vienna's Armenians could do much more than



The library of the monastery holds a unique and beautiful cultural archive Photo: Duncan Smith

just roast coffee beans. Father Vahan opens the door with a flourish to reveal a breath-taking room. The walls are lined floor-to-ceiling with books, indeed this is one of the world's finest collections of Armenian books and manuscripts. When one of the manuscripts is unfurled a distinct aroma fills the air: the monks of old used ink mixed with garlic to deter the moths!

Books and bottles

The Armenian Church has long condoned dissection, and so the Mechitarist monks amassed an enviable knowledge of medicine, hence the library's many fascinating medical treatises. The monks also published their own books and periodicals, which until recently were printed in the monastery's printing works. An old-fashioned advertising board still hangs outside the former works at the top end of Mechitaristengasse, where former Austrian President Franz Jonas (1965-1974) once worked as a typesetter.

Although today only a handful of monks occupy the monastery they certainly keep themselves busy. As well as continuing to preserve Armenian culture, and spreading the word with monastery tours, they also distil a potent herbal liqueur called Mekhitarine. Based on a secret recipe dating back to 1680 – and boasting the inclusion of no less than 42 herbs – it is available in the monastery shop at Neustiftgasse 19. This author can vouchsafe that it's a very memorable tipple. ♦

The Mekhitarist Armenian Monastery can be visited by appointment (01) 523 6417, sung Mass on Sun., 11:00; the monastery shop is open Mon.-Fri. 9:00-12:00, 13:00-17:00

Duncan J. D. Smith is the author of Only in Vienna (Christian Brandstätter Verlag) www.onlyinguides.com