

Transcript Video Podcast: Würzburg - a Place full of History

Cathedral

The construction of the Cathedral of Saint Kilian in Würzburg was probably started around the year 1040. It was rebuilt in 1133 and consecrated in 1187. After 1237, the east towers were enlarged during another round of reconstruction. The cathedral is a classic example of the Gothic style of architecture. In 1945, it was bombed and in 1946 it partially collapsed. Its reconstruction and restoration were completed in 1967.

The cathedral shows the remarkable architecture of the Middle Ages and is an outstanding religious building. Adjacent to the cathedral is the so-called Lusamgärtchen. In it, there is a cloister from the Hohenstaufen period, sixteen arcades long. Walther von der Vogelweide, the most important German poet of the Middle Ages, who died around the year 1230, is also said to be buried here.

“Marienplatz” with the “Marienkapelle”

The Marienplatz with the Marienkapelle – the Lady Chapel – is located in the center of the city. It is named after the Virgin Mary. On the square where the Lady Chapel is located today, there used to be a Jewish synagogue. During the pogroms in 1348/1349, the entire Jewish quarter was destroyed – and with it the synagogue. This was triggered by the Black Plague, the cause of which was not yet well known, and the Jews were among the scapegoats for it. A small church was built in the synagogue’s place. On May 16, 1377, this little church was demolished, and the construction of a new, larger church began. It was consecrated in 1392 and its tower was finished in 1479. In the following centuries, various repairs and changes were made to the church. It is a magnificent monument of late medieval architecture.

Würzburg Marketplace

The Würzburg marketplace once belonged to the Jewish quarter. In the Middle Ages, Jews lived where they were tolerated and mostly among their own kind. Over the course of time, the marketplace represented the center of trade in Würzburg, as the market was held here. It was also used for tournaments and other events. In 1697, the marketplace was paved.

“Falkenhaus”

Directly next to the Marienkapelle, on the Würzburg market square, is the Falkenhaus. In the Middle Ages, it was the residence of the cathedral’s priest. In 1735, the building became the property of the innkeeper Franz Thomas Meißner and in 1751 it was decorated with the striking rococo stucco. The house is one of the most beautiful rococo facades in southern Germany. Rococo is an 18th-century art style, which is characterized by graceful, winding shapes, delicate color tones, and bright rooms. In

1939, the building was bought by the city of Würzburg and during the air raids by the Royal Air Force on March 16, 1945, the Falkenhaus burned down completely, and parts of the facade collapsed. With the help of old photographs, the Falkenhaus was reconstructed and has since been home to the tourist information office and the city library since 1952.

Jewish Life and “Stumbling Stones”

As already described, the life of Jews in Germany was arduous for many years. They had to protect themselves from pogroms, to which many Jews fell victim. The Jewish community experienced the peak of oppression, exclusion, and persecution during the time of National Socialism. In memory of the victims, in 2005, the idea to put so-called Stolpersteine (stumbling stones) at the places in Würzburg where Jews were deported and killed during National Socialism, in order to make the victims visible, passed the city council. Stolpersteine are small commemorative brass plaques, which are put on a small concrete cuboid in the ground and contain the name as well as the years and places of birth and death of displaced and deported people. The project was started in July 2006 and since then 648 Stolpersteine have been laid out in thirty installations. In Germany, Stolpersteine have been laid since 1992, and in 2022 the 90,000th Stolperstein was laid out. This particular kind of monument has also started to appear in other countries during the last fifteen years. In addition to them, the Jewish Museum "Shalom Europa" is also located in Würzburg. It displays historical exhibits of Jewish life in past centuries, offers guided tours and visits to the synagogue, and organizes conferences and festivals.

Residenz

At the time of its establishment, the Würzburg Residenz was primarily perceived as the representative seat of government of the both ecclesiastical and secular prince-bishop. From there, he ruled the High Diocese of Würzburg with its more than 200,000 subjects. The members of the court resided in the Residenz.

After a total of twenty-four years of construction, the Baroque masterpiece was completed in 1744 and, in contrast to other buildings, stands out for its stylistic unity. After the secular rule of the bishop ended with secularization and Würzburg fell to Bavaria in 1814, the Residenz no longer functioned as a seat of government, but merely represented one of the Franconian castles of the Bavarian kings residing in Munich. More than 100 years later, when the monarchy was replaced in 1918, the formerly royal Bavarian palaces came under the care of the Bavarian Palace Department (*Bayerische Schlösserverwaltung*).

Due to numerous destructions during World War II, extensive reconstruction was carried out until the late 1980s. The magnificent baroque building was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1981 and

is thus an important historical sight. In addition, the residence has been open as a museum since 1921 and attracts numerous guests every year.

Juliusspital

The Juliusspital was founded in 1576 by prince-bishop Julius Echter von Mespelbrunn, the secular and ecclesiastical head of the High Diocese of Würzburg, who had the hospital built on an overgrown Jewish cemetery. As a foundation, it was dedicated to the care of the poor and sick and served as a temporary shelter for pilgrims and orphans. In 1920, a state-approved hospital school was established. Over the years, the hospital suffered numerous destructions, one of them due to the air raid in World War II, after which reconstruction continued until 1953. Today, the core tasks of the Juliusspital lie in the operation of its modern hospital and thus still relate to the care of the sick.

Juliuspromenade

The name of the Juliuspromenade can be traced back to Bishop Julius Echter von Mespelbrunn, responsible for the erection of the aforementioned Juliusspital. Since 1847, there has been a monument to Echter on the Juliuspromenade.

Until the middle of the previous century, the street was called "Grabenstraße" ("moat street"), as, until 1738, the first fortifications of the inner city with a moat passed by there. In addition to the Juliusspital, there were other historic houses, such as a penitentiary on the site of today's "Pleicher Schule". Likewise, the former "Seelhaus", a charitable foundation, existed in the street until the beginning of the 19th century. Today, the Juliuspromenade is known primarily for its numerous shopping opportunities and the variety of restaurants that can be found there.

Ringpark

In order to secure a larger area and, expand the city spatially, Würzburg was slowly but systematically defortified in the 1860s. Part of the cleared area was then to be transformed into a modern park, stretching around the city. For this, the glacis, the open area between the walls, was to be turned into an attractive and appealing recreational area for the citizens. A ring road in the outer area was to provide a quick connection around the core city, and individual spur roads through the glacis were to connect the city directly and conveniently with its surrounding countryside. Nowadays, the resulting Ringpark is considered a popular and irreplaceable recreational area for the citizens of Würzburg. Meanwhile, parts of the former fortifications can still be seen.

March 16, 1945

On the evening of March 16, 1945, the Royal Air Force flew a devastating bombing raid on Würzburg. Within seventeen minutes, between 9:25 and 9:42 PM, almost 1000 tons of explosive and incendiary bombs were dropped. About 5000 people fell victim to the attack. In addition, about 90% of the historic old town of Würzburg, with a city history of almost 1300 years, was destroyed in just a few minutes. Even today there are places in the cityscape where the attack is documented and commemorated by memorials or bullet holes that were deliberately left in place.