



Russian Chapel

IRN 855

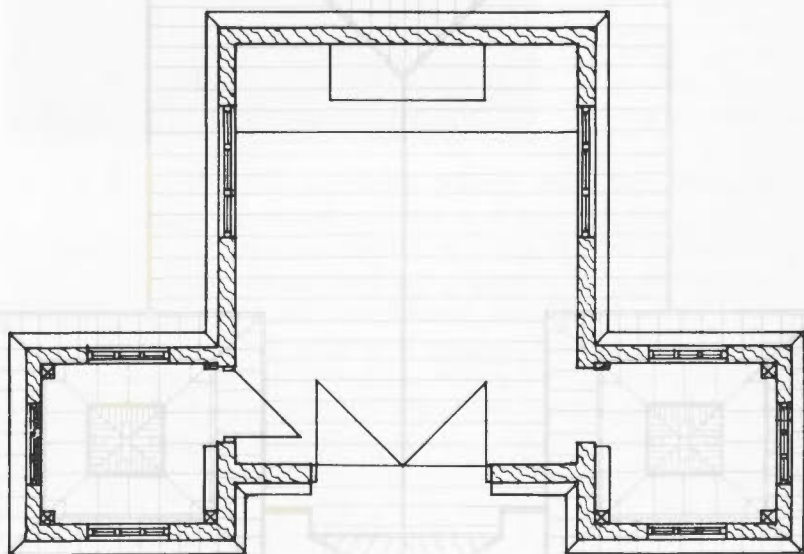
Location Vršič

Time of origin 1917

Time of restoration 1991–1996

Chief Conservator Renata Pamič

The First World War and the battles between the Italian and Austro-Hungarian troops on the Soča [Isonzo] front in the years between 1915 and 1917 demanded rapid manoeuvres and military communications between the front and the hinterland. Therefore the road from Kranjska Gora to the Trenta valley over the Vršič mountain pass was of great strategic importance. In 1915 the military command in Villach engaged over 10,000 Russian prisoners of war for the construction of the road. The construction was technically very demanding. The original stone-built buttresses, and drainage channels have been preserved to the present. According to the plan the road should have been opened by Archduke Eugene and it was also named after him. The entire area between Kranjska Gora and the Trenta valley was a building site with huts for prisoners. In spite of avalanche protection and warnings of the local population, the construction works continued. In March 1916 a snowslide occurred from the slope of the Mojstrovka mountain. It buried numerous prisoners and some Austrian guards. The



▲ Floor plan of the chapel (Scale: 18mm = 1m).

◀ Detail of the facade and window. "Whether to the north or south, every road leads to a destination..."

exact number of casualties was not known; the data in literature varied. The commonly established number of 272 was entrusted to the church warden by priest Andrej Krajec who was in office in Kranjska Gora between 1911 and 1920 and who buried the dead and thus had access to information.

A simple chapel with two bulbous towers in the Russian style and a tomb with a stone pyramid were constructed by the surviving prisoners in memory of their fellow comrades in 1917. A timber construction was erected on concrete founda-



Pogled na kapelico in grobtomb. "A simple chapel with two bulbous towers in the Russian style and the tomb with a stone pyramid were constructed by the surviving prisoners in memory of their fellow comrades in 1917..."

tions, and the walls were panelled with boards and bark. A photograph was preserved from that time depicting Russian prisoners and Austrian guards in front of the chapel. There was pasture around the chapel at that time, and the near-by woods were cut down for the construction of the road. The Russian society in Ljubljana strove to establish an alpine park by planting trees, by the prevention of pasture in the woods and by appropriate fences around the area. During the First World War the surrounding area was planted with larches, pine trees and tsugas. It was only in the fifties that the broader area was deliberately reforested.

On account of the overgrown area the chapel began to deteriorate rapidly. The documentation of the existing conditions revealed that the construction was in a very bad state. Dilapidated timber in some parts of the towers and decayed shingles were the cause of the leaking of the roof. The lime plaster fell off the wooden panelling of the walls. Parts of the altar made of

round pieces of pine wood were moulded, humidity had destroyed most of the icon reproductions, the candlesticks and chandeliers were robbed of several original parts.

A plan of the chapel was prepared with a detailed list of inventory and necessary works for the building, its furnishings and the surroundings. A decision had to be reached concerning the inventory of the chapel. Visitors from all parts of the world had namely brought various souvenirs, pictures and other articles. They had to be selected and the furnishings ar-



View of the interior of the chapel. "Visitors from all parts of the world had brought various souvenirs, pictures and other articles..."

ranged. Apart from the original altar with the iconostasis, and the original chandeliers and candlesticks, there were only a few quality reproductions of icons and the photograph from 1917.

The notes of conservator Dr. France Stele from 1921 revealed that the icon of Mother of God from Chenstohova had disappeared on account of burglaries at the chapel. Unfortunately, there were more recent instances of the same nature that we know of. The door was broken several times and a valuable chandelier had disappeared. On account of crowds in the chapel the altar corner made of pine-wood was demolished. Pine from the surrounding woods was utilized for its reconstruction. Missing parts of the chandelier and candlesticks were made according to the preserved ones. They were cleaned and gilded. The chapel is locked, yet visitors can now still view it, write their names in the register, donate money and ring the bells. The wooden grate on the door was removed and placed on a special frame that can be opened. The door has remained

unchanged with respect to its shape.

The chapel was still exposed to humidity. In 1991 vertical insulation of the foundations and drainage were made. The rotting of the internal wooden panelling was prevented by this intervention. The replacement of wood and shingles on the towers followed including the covering of the roof with larch shingles. The roof was insulated first and the decayed borders were replaced. The shingles of various sizes for the bulbous towers had to be manufactured manually. The external walls were cleared of algae



Bell-tower of the chapel.
 "The shingles of various sizes for the bulbous towers had to be manufactured manually..."

and moss and coated with wood preservatives.

The tomb was protected from the treading of visitors by small metal posts. Apart from the chapel and the tomb the surrounding area had to be landscaped. The stone-built stairs were renovated, the grave of a Russian prisoner was rebuilt, the fence was mended, the bed of the brook was cleared and deepened, and wild bushes were cut down. Stone and wood from the surrounding area were utilized for the renovation.

The historical role and the international character of the monument demanded a proper presentation. Therefore a board was erected with a description of the events concerning the chapel in five languages.

The graves of Russian prisoners under the Erjavčeva hut were renovated on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the tragic events on Vršič. The graves were simple mounds with edge stones and a stone-built tombstone made of quarry stone. There were 63 prisoners buried in 9 graves in the lower burial

ground below the hut, and 3 graves in its upper part. The renovation dictated an unaggressive intervention on account of the coincidental arrangement of the graves and the preservation of indigenous vegetation in the surrounding area. The graves were therefore renovated with original materials and in their authentic forms. A wooden cross was erected on the renovated concrete foundation. Both burial grounds were enclosed in a wooden fence and marked with information boards. The selection of the colours, materials and forms of the boards conformed to the regulations of Triglav National Park.

The Russian cross by the road to Vršič was renovated, including the plaque with the verses of the Austrian writer Peter Rosegger:

“Whether to the north or south, every road leads to a destination.
Whether in war or in peace, God’s will prevails.”

The chapel and burial grounds were marked by the sign of the Hague Convention to emphasize the area of a monument of special historical significance. The registers kept by the Tourist Board of Kranjska Gora indicate that Vršič is a popular tourist destination offering possibilities for various educational and sports activities. The restored monuments on Vršič are an expression of reverence for the dead, yet their cultural and historical role transcends national borders. The annual memorial service attended by representatives of the Slovene and foreign church and political public testify to that.

RENATA PAMIĆ

Literature

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