

*The Story of  
Stefania Palace*





The palace under construction\*

The Stefania Palace was built at the end of the 19th century in neo-baroque style and it was an aristocratic casino building in the 14th district of Budapest, on Stefania út. Since 1947, it is under the ownership of the Hungarian Defense Forces (before called Hungarian Peoples' Army) together with the neighboring Cultural Center of National Defense. They are called Stefania Palace - Cultural Center of National Defense as they are one institution.



The cultural centre under construction\*

## THE STORY OF STEFÁNIA PALACE

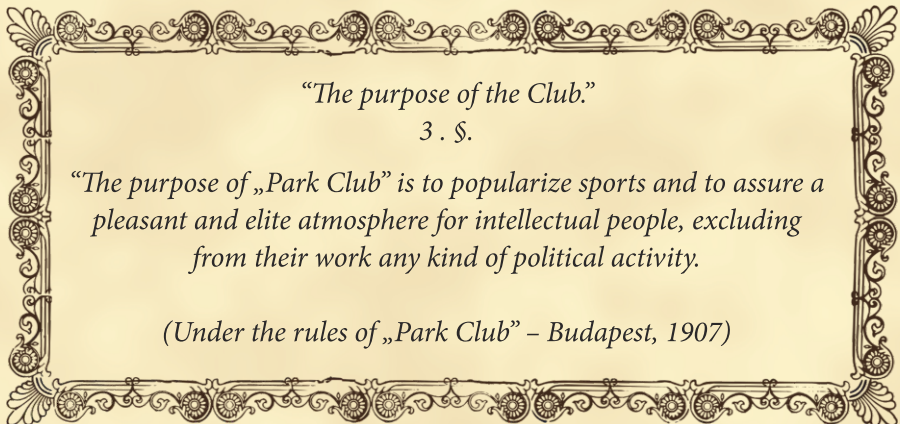


Inspired by the Casino of Pest (later National Casino), founded in the early 19th century by Count István Széchenyi, Béla Atzél, a curio-hunter baron has initiated the foundation of a similar club with the purpose of creating a place of amusement for nobility, where they can live social life at summer. The nobility of that time had only the Margaret Island as a place to meet and socialize and they were looking for a new place to have more opportunities for free time. Under the leadership of Duke Mihály Eszterházy, an association was established with the purpose to build the Summer Casino from a capital stock of half million forint. They started the construction in the close vicinity of the City Park in April 1893 based on the plans of Artúr Meining, a German architect. They chose Stefánia Way, the most elegant and most frequented place to build the new Casino.



Baron Béla Atzél\*

Finally, the building and its park were opened for the nobility on 1st of May, 1895 as Park Club, which was its original name. Since 1993, it has been holding the name Stefánia Palace.







Ball at the Park-Club\*



## THE PALACE



The club was built on a building plot of approximately 13.000 square meters. It is a storied building with large interiors, stairs and wide terraces. Considering its construction, it is similar to the famous royal summer palaces of Potsdam or Versailles and it fitted the taste of nobility in every aspects. They wanted to build a club, which tells us by its inner and outer appearance that the building itself meant to serve the comfort and amusement of the upper social class.

The main façade (street front) of the building faces Stefánia Way. The visitors walk beside arched walls and below an arcaded colonnade, which holds the main terrace to enter the building, reach the ante-room and find the central lounge. At the time of its construction this reception hall functioned as a central foyer.

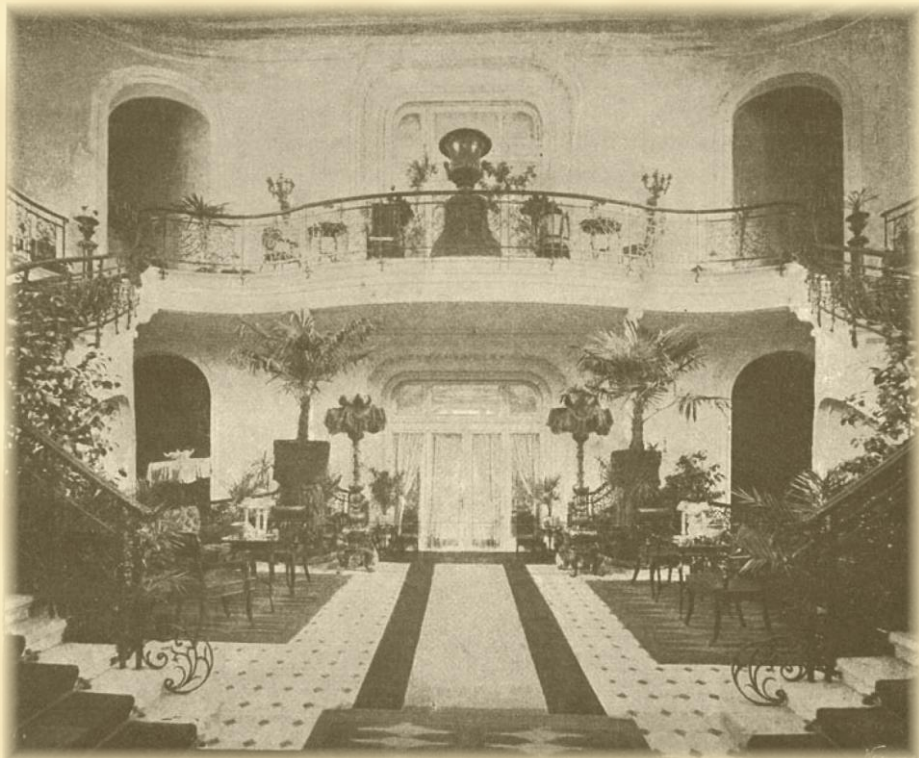
The terrace embraces the whole building and it spreads out on the sides creating spacious rooms to be on fresh air. On the side of Stefánia út, wide staircases - on both sides- are leading up to the terrace. The main lounge's special style is due to the 12 cast-iron columns with leaf ornamentation, which are holding the upper-ball room.

The dining rooms are placed in the right side wing of the building, the playing and reading rooms are in the left side wing. By walking up the lounge-like stairs, we reach the upper spacious ball room with 11 m height, the salons on both sides as well as the winter-garden. The entrance at Stefánia Way was created for foot-folks and the entrance at Géza Zichy utca (former Pálma utca) was created for those who came by carriage upon the semi-circle arched driveway.



Part of the staircase hall\*\*





Balcony of the staircase hall\*\*

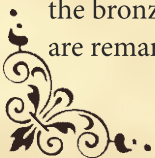


Nook in the staircase hall\*\*



The ceilings are decorated by gilded stuccoes in the style of the age of Louis XVI.

Each pieces of furniture, objects in the palace were selected by Baron Béla Atzél and imported from London. The baron – due to his special sense of arts - made a great selection of curtains, tapestry, marble consoles, sculptures, paintings, desks, chairs, sofas, vases and chandeliers to decorate the rooms of the building and make them more comfortable. The palace was furnished in empire style, which was very fashionable at that time, mixed with English modernity and invigorated with objects from India and China. The chairs were tapestried with brown, red or green goat leather and the majority of the joiner-work was made from mahogany tree. The salon walls were tapestried with reddish fabric; the floor was covered with blue coconut carpet with red patterns. There were homely and intimate green-rooms in the corners of the stairway with comfortable armchairs, sofas, openwork tables from India, Chinese and Japanese ornaments and vases. Besides the crystal chandeliers (some of them is still in the palace), the bronze busts of the royal couple are remarkable.



They were created by György Zala, one of the most famous sculptors of Hungary. The big malachite jug topping the staircase was a curiosity not only in Hungary, but worldwide.

The building was initially steam-heated and lighted by electricity, a new innovation which was very rare in these times.

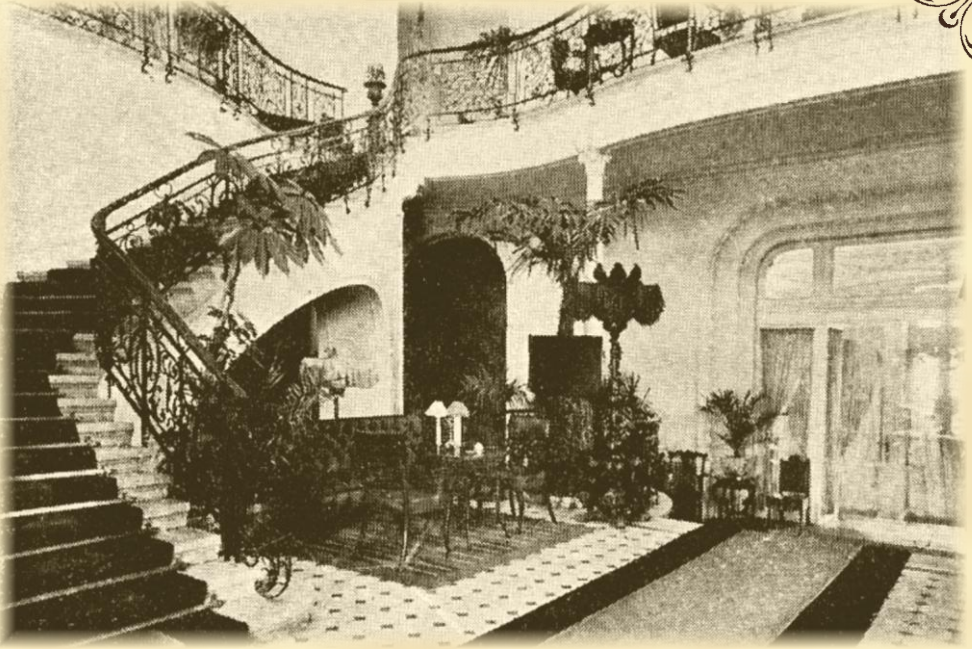
The library was well equipped with antique classics, with all of the local and foreign magazines and the most fashionable novels of that time.

There was a baronial park on the six acres building plot with a 500 m<sup>2</sup> lake, close to the palace. In the middle of the lake, there was an island. The park was the miniature replica of Parc Monceau Paris, which added extra charm to the palace. The main attraction of the garden was an artificial stalactite cave with a waterfall. This artificial waterfall supplied the lake with water, on which people were boating in summer and skating in winter. In the middle of the lake there was an artificial island, as well. The garden was meant to be a place not only for walking, but for playing lawn tennis, bowling and target shooting under the shade of trees as sport life became brisk after the turn of the century.





Artificial grotto with waterfall\*



The main staircase of the Park Club\*



Interior of the Park Club\*

When the Park Club was established, it had members from both the gentry and the aristocracy, but after the turn of the century it became an exclusive place for aristocrats. Between the stately walls of the palace, there were organized mardi gras evenings, concerts and balls. Accordingly to its original purpose, the Park Club was a place for spring and summer amusement. There was an exclusive lawn tennis championship organized each year, on which have participated some of the members of the Habsburg family. The most successful events were the spring balls and the mardi gras afternoon tea-parties.







## FAMOUS HISTORICAL FIGURES IN THE PARK CLUB

The Stefánia Palace was a unique building with unique members of the club. It was visited by the descendants of great noble families like Andrásy, Esterházy, Festetics, Károlyi and Széchenyi. It was the favourite place of the political elite: István Bethlen, Kálmán Széll, István Tisza and Sándor Wekerle, were all members of the club, as well. The club was proud of having lots of female members (about one third), because at that time living club life was mostly the privilege of men. The Park Club was a pioneer with an independent female division.

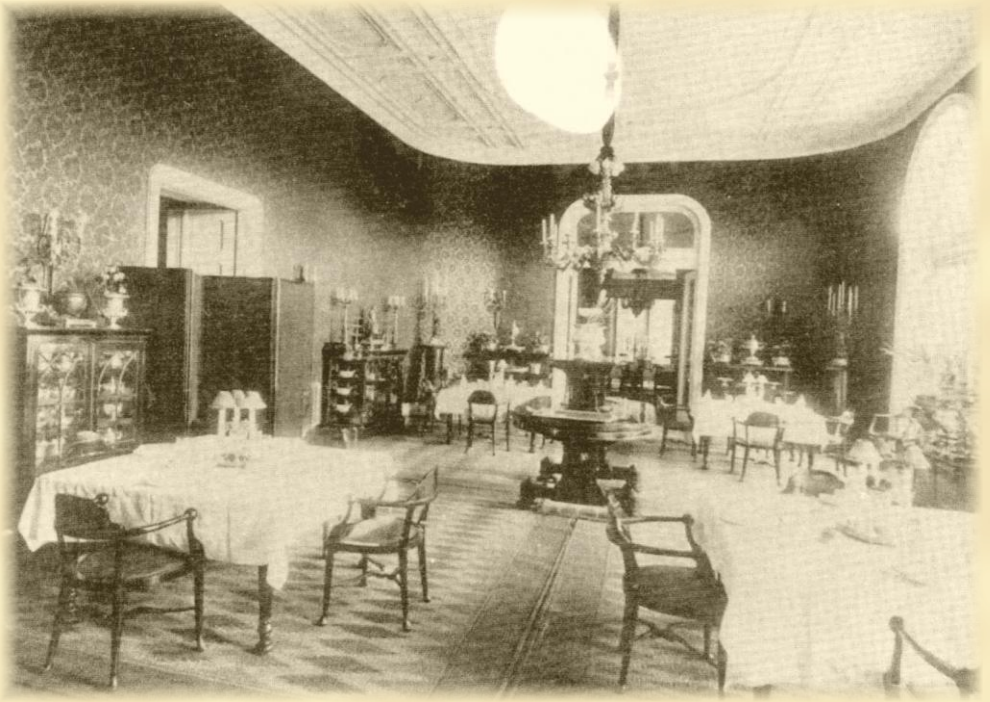
The building on Stefánia way was often visited by royal people: for example Queen Elizabeth has visited the palace with Ida Ferenczy several times. Emperor Franz Joseph mostly appeared on salons and during lunches at the club. The building was also visited by Vilhelm – German emperor, Alfonso – later the Spanish king - Mozzafer-ed-Din – Persian shah, Michael – Russian grand duke, Mór Jókai, Kálmán Mikszáth, Árpád Feszty, József Törley, and Nansen, the famous polar explorer.



Kaiser Franz Josef I. und Kaiserin Elisabeth von Oesterreich. Ein Jubiläumskunstblatt.







One of the dining rooms and the card room\*



## THE MEMBERSHIP OF THE CLUB

The most important sources of the club's history are: "Vasárnapi Újság" (Sunday Journal), "Pesti Hírlap" (The Newspaper of Pest), the nominal roll of the club members and the found statements yearbooks. The club had 681 members in 1895, right after formation and in 1923 it reached the highest number of 1090 members. 90% of the members were people from aristocratic families. Over time, the club had directors like Géza Andrásy, Lajos Apponyi, Béla Széchenyi, Pál Teleki and Sándor Wekerle.

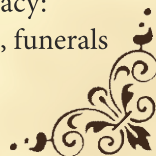


Corner in one of the upstairs salon\*\*



The parlour\*\*

The first director of the club was Baron Béla Atzél. After the Baron's death, Count Pál Szapáry became the new director. Under his leadership, the club was flourishing for the second time. In 1905, on the 10th anniversary of the club, there was a large celebration, series of events and a tennis competition. The building was totally renovated (inside and outside) at that time. Until 1914, the club's official paper was the "Salon Újság" (Salon Journal). Between 1914 and 1944 their paper was called "Társaság" (Association), which gave a weekly account of the life of aristocracy: tours, balls, weddings, births, funerals and anniversaries.



## FROM 1947 TO PRESENT



During the Second World War, the building was damaged several times and from 1947, it was under the control of the Ministry of Defense. From 1948, it became the summer building of the officers of the Hungarian Peoples' Army, assuring a great location for living social life and organizing important events. In the 1950's the park had the most beautiful outdoor stage and film theatre of the capital. The building was totally renovated only in 1965. A significant part of the world class furnishings was perished, so the building was newly furnished with neo-baroque period furniture pieces. After the war the park encircling the building was still in a good condition with more than 100 of species of trees and bushes, making a wonderful scene from early spring to late fall. In 1978, the former ball room – with the terrace attached to it - was converted to a theater.

The building of the Park Club has got the name of Stefánia Palace in 1993. The main purpose of the building is to assure location for the high-level events of the Ministry of Defence of Hungary and the Hungarian Defence Forces.

The palace is one of the most favorite and representative scenes of Budapest for organizing parties, conferences, balls and weddings. The two-story building with interconnecting rooms have a capacity of accommodating 500 seated guests and 800 people during buffet-dinner receptions.

In 2011, during the period of Hungary's EU presidency, the Stefánia Palace was the location of significant European Union conferences.

In the same year, the Budapest Garrison Officers' Casino was established in one of the salons of the palace, which was the spiritual heritage of the National Officers' Casino having its former place - from 1899 on - in Váci Street Officer' Clubhouse. From 2012, there is a monthly General's Club in the palace, which is a social gathering of the generals serving in the Hungarian Defence Forces, usually an event with dinner and presentations.



The fountains of the palace\*\*\*







The hall



Queen Elisabeth hall



Part of the staircase



The Winter garden



Baron Béla Atzél hall



Duke Mihály Eszterházy hall



Aradi parlor



Stefánia art gallery

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Sources of the images

\* National Széchényi Library Digital Image Archive

\*\* Electronic Periodicals Archive of the National Széchényi

\*\*\* Stefánia Palace Image Archive

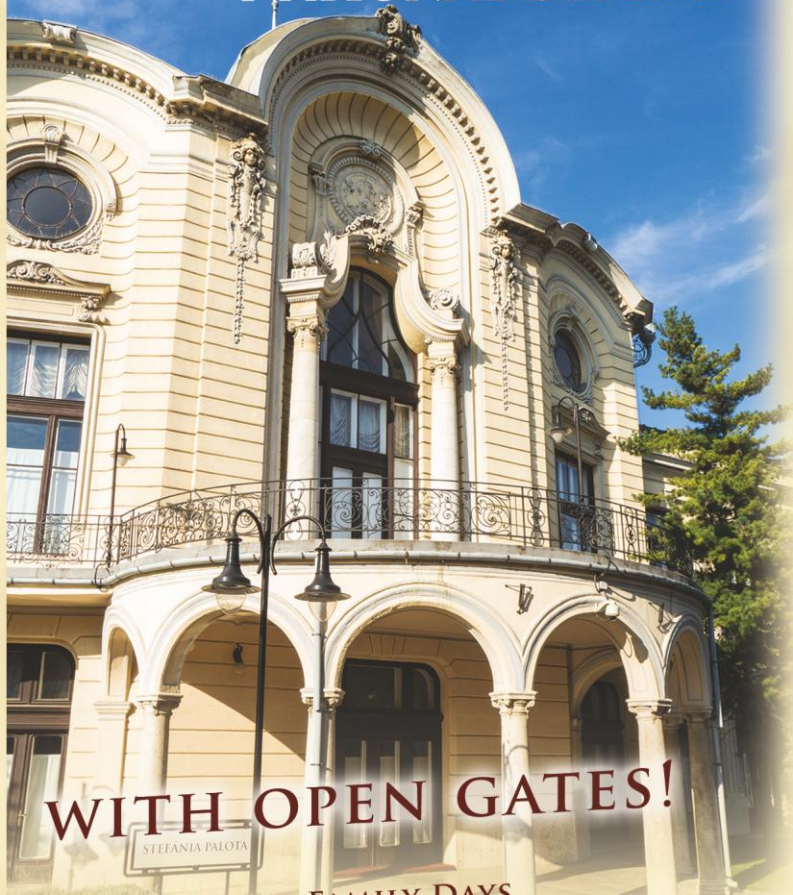




Vitéz Szurmay Sándor  
 Budapest Garrison Brigade, HDF  
 1143 Budapest, Stefánia st. 34-36.  
 Tel.: 36 1 383-4958 | [www.bphkk.hu](http://www.bphkk.hu)  
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