

Building a new life

Ivan Margolius pays tribute to the Czech engineer René Wiesner, who rebuilt his life in Great Britain in 1939

Structural engineers are often unacknowledged by architects but their contribution to building design is of enormous importance. One such case that cries out for reassessment is that of the Czech engineer René Wiesner (1904-1974). He deserves to be much better known.

René was the son of Adolf Wiesner (1871-1942), a prominent Czech painter, and Helena Wiesnerová née Brandejsová (1877-1975), the oldest daughter of Alexander Brandejs (1848-1901) the famous patron of young Czech artists, who lived in Suchdol near Roztoky on the northern outskirts of Prague. Brandejs invited his artist and architect friends, among them František Zeníšek, Václav Brožík, Josef Václav Myslbek, Mikoláš Aleš, Jakub Schikaneder, Jan Zeyer, Antonín Wiehl and many others to his manor house, supported them financially, bought their paintings and entertained them.

Aleš became a close friend and said of Brandejs that he was really happy to be in

Plzeň on 13 April 1904 to where Brandejs' family moved from Suchdol in the late 1890s.

René spent most of his childhood, being looked after by his aunt, Helena's sister Irma Kohnová-Kubínová (1882-1979). He went to schools in Germany and France. As a child René was interested in medicine. However, a lack of knowledge of Latin prevented him from pursuing the interest further. He also enjoyed playing with Meccano which prompted his parents to send him to Grenoble, France to study engineering.

On his return to Czechoslovakia, after graduation, René set up his structural engineering consultation practice in Prague firstly at his parents' apartment on Náplavní 7 and then renting an office on Karlovo náměstí 7, initially working together for several years with engineer Arnošt Ast. They specialised in glass block structure designs (sklobeton) using the products of Fischmann Sons of Zlatnická 10, Prague called Verlioth.

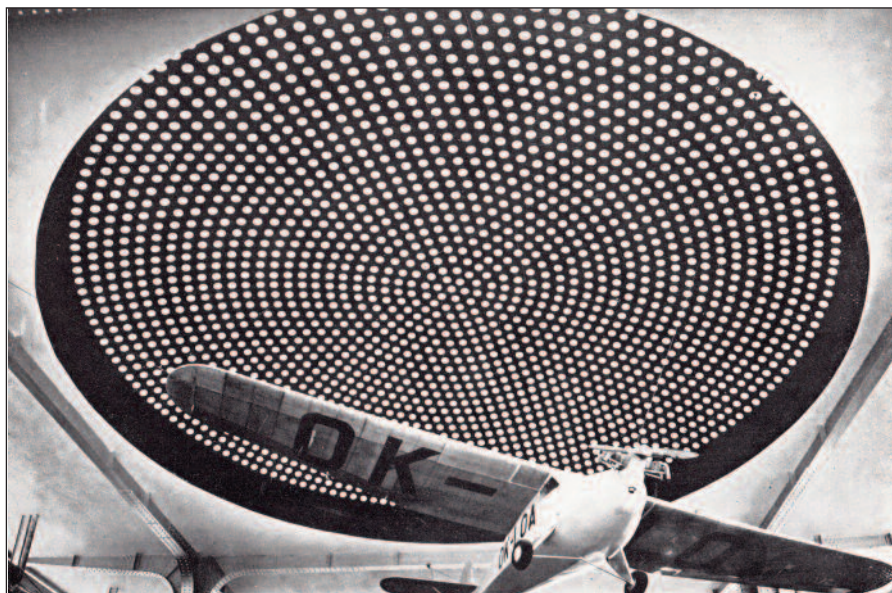
Wiesner's and Ast's most well-known design was for the glass blocks cupola for

René got to know Marie Sedmíková before he left Czechoslovakia and she, not being Jewish, was allowed to leave and soon followed him to London by the summer of 1939. They married and lived in Porchester Terrace, Bayswater, London, then moved to Kingston upon Thames and later to Surbiton.

In the meantime, René's parents were transported to Theresienstadt on the AAn transport from Prague on July 6 1942. His father Adolf died there in October 1942 but Helena survived. She was employed in Sonderwerkstätte, a Theresienstadt art and craft workshop, which supplied artworks to various factories in Germany.

Her painting skills, depicting flowers and plants, were admired by one of the German officers and as a reward she was put on a special transport train designated Ew carrying 1,200 prisoners to safety from Theresienstadt to Kreuzlingen in Switzerland in February 1945. Other transports from Theresienstadt carried on to Auschwitz, Treblinka and other extermination camps.

Unusually the train had standard passenger



the artists' company and behaved toward them with a charming, generous and affectionate attitude and they all came to visit him as if he were their brotherly friend, and his wife Johanka – Jenny (née Witz 1852-1937), was always an endearing hostess.

Adolf Wiesner married Helena Brandejsová towards the end of 1903 in Paris. Between 1900 and 1910 Adolf lived and painted in Paris on rue d'Armaillé and Helena arrived there to take lessons in painting with Achille Cesbron in the summer of 1903. They met first when Adolf visited Alexander Brandejs in Suchdol in 1896.

Their son, René Alexander, was born in his grandmother's house in Křimice near

the Czechoslovak Pavilion at the Arts et Techniques exposition, Paris 1937, located on the Seine quay on Champs-de-Mars by Pont d'Illéna under the Eiffel Tower, designed by Jaromír Krejcar, Zdeněk Kejř, Bohuslav Soumar and Ladislav Sutnar with the structural design by Jaroslav J Polívka.

Then René Wiesner had a lucky escape. Just before the Third Reich's occupation of the remnant of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 René was invited to Britain by one of his cousins with an offer to start a food vending machine business. René, whose parents were Jewish, was not aware of any danger to him till the occupation but with the new situation developing in Central Europe he had decided wisely to stay in Britain.

While still in Prague René Wiesner and his engineering partner Arnošt Ast co-operated with most of the Czech and foreign modernist avant-garde artists and architects. Those collaborations include:

□ with Ludvík Kysela and Jan Jarolím on U Stýblů and Alfa mall roof (1927-29) on Václavské náměstí 28, Prague
 □ with Oldřich Tyl on Černa růže mall vaulted roof (1929-33) on Na Příkopě 12, Prague

□ with František Kubelka on Hussite Congregational Church apse (1935-37) in clear and blue glass blocks in Prague Holešovice on Farského 3

□ with František Zelenka on the glass block façade of a retail and apartment building (1937) in Prague on Palackého 9

□ with Eugene Rosenberg on a solar shading device on Hanak apartment and retail building (1937) in Prague Letná on Milady Horákové 56

□ with Bohumír Kozák and Antonín Černý on Assicurazioni Generali & Moldavia Generali building and Broadway mall roof (1936-38) on Na Příkopě 31, Prague

□ with František Albert Libra and Jiří Kan on Masaryk Tuberculosis Sanatorium (1933-38) at Vyšné Hágy, Slovakia

□ with Czesław Przybylski and Andrzej Pszenicki and on the Warsaw Main Railway Station (1932-39) in Warsaw Śródmieście (the building was partly destroyed in 1939 by fire and later during the Warsaw Uprising).



coaches as opposed to the more usual goods wagons, the journey taking two days. Surprisingly the prisoners, who were not aware of their final destination, were asked to remove the yellow Judensterns from their coats and were given proper suitcases and food for the journey the women passengers even getting make-up sets.

This extraordinary transport seems to have been arranged by Swiss Jewish organisations and the International Red Cross in an attempt to rescue some of the European Jews. Subsequently Helena came to Britain to live with her son, his wife and grandchildren.

In London, René managed to obtain employment at Lenscrete Ltd, at 66 Queens Circus, Battersea Park, London SW8, which was a similar establishment to Fischmann Sons who were also involved in glass block structures. He worked there from November 1941 to October 1943.

Then he was employed at James Clark & Eaton Ltd, based at Scoresby House, Glasshill Street, Blackfriars, London SE1, which also supplied glass block units. At the

same time his wife worked as a secretary at the Czechoslovak Embassy then located at 8 Grosvenor Place, London SW1.

However, this type of work was not sufficient for his family needs so in 1946 René, with the help of Alfred Foulks, established Novolor Ltd. The company was involved in the manufacture of photo-printed advertising on clear and silvered glass and souvenir mirrors, paper weights and display tablets, plain mirrors, flat, convex and concave, bevelled glass, photo-printing on plastics, glass silvering and rear-view mirrors for motorcars.

The company also supplied special glass spinning wheels used in the manufacture of nylon, and glass shelving and dividers for Woolworth stores. René took advantage of business grants offered to enterprises to set up in Wales and moved to Bridgend, Glamorgan, where Novolor was established at Bennett Street Trading Estate.

The company prospered, employing more than 100 people. In 1964 René sold the company to Brunning Group but remained as

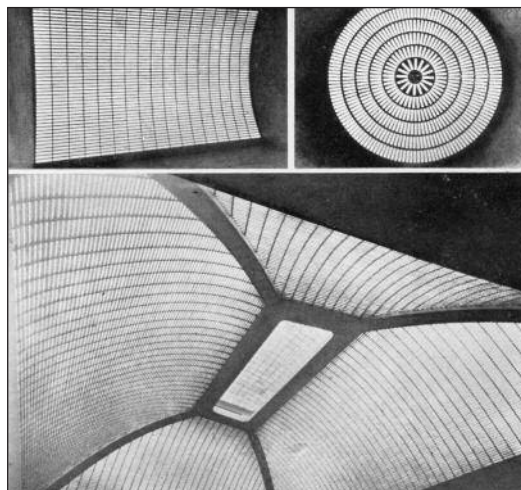
managing director till 1969 when he retired. He was well respected by the local community becoming president of the Rotary Club of Bridgend for the 1972-73 season.

In the 1950s he applied for patents relating to 'Improvements in or relating to drilling machines' and 'Improvements in or relating to collapsible racks and the like'.

René Wiesner's lasting legacy is the daring glass blocks structures located in many notable buildings in the Czech Republic and Slovakia but also his efforts in successfully establishing specialised glass products manufactured in Wales between the 1940s and 1970s and boosting the local economy and employment.

It is regrettable when one considers how many more fruit of his structural designs we could have enjoyed had there not been the tragedy of the World War II. ©

■ The author wishes to thank René Wiesner's children Ian René, Helena Maria and Joanna Dagmar for supplying information from the family archive.



Opposite page: Czechoslovak Pavillon, Paris, 1937, glass block cupola designed by René Wiesner

Above: Hussite Congregation Church, Holešovice, Prague, 1935-37, glass block apse designed by René Wiesner

Far left: René Wiesner by Adolf Wiesner, c.1935, private collection

Left: Assicurazioni Generali & Moldavia Generali building and Broadway mall roof details, 1936-38 designed by René Wiesner