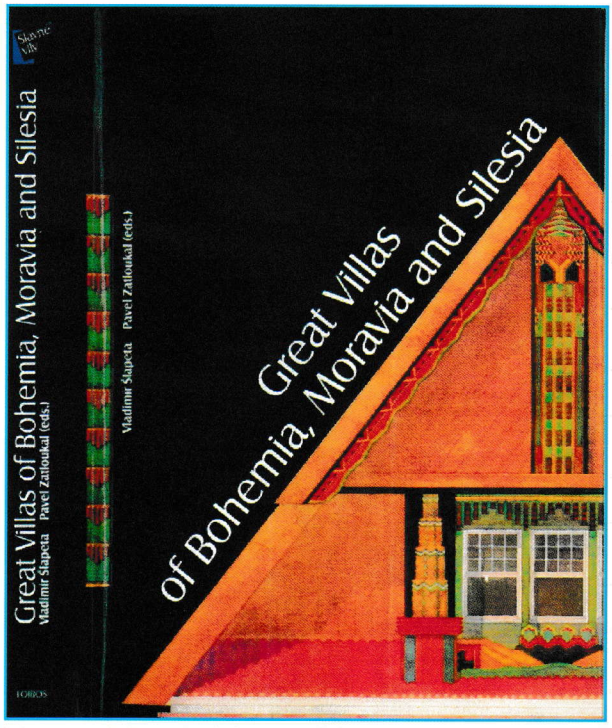
Great villas for a golden age and a modern democracy

by Michael J E Ivory



Top, Muller Vila 1928-30 in Prague 6 following the 2000 restoration and right, the summer dining room. They were designed by architects Adolf Loos and Karel Lhota

The Modernist architecture of the First Czechoslovak Republic achieved international renown; the Prague Pensions Institute (1934) still appears in standard histories of 20th century architecture, while the delightful Zelená Žába swimming complex (1937) in Slovakia's Trenčiánské Teplice showed that contemporary building could be fun as well as Functionalist.

Slavné vily/Great Villas, a series of beautifully produced books published by Foibos of Prague, demonstrates how architects, builders and patrons worked together in this period to create an unrivalled array of private dwellings more than matching anything in the public sphere.

Prague's Müller Villa and Baba villa colony are world-famous, as is Brno's Tugendhat House, but the Foibos books, which deal in their Czech-language versions with the republic's heritage of villas region by region, reveal an impressive total of villas designed by, and built for people confident in contemporary architecture's progressive ethos and its role in the newly-founded democratic republic.

The book's scope, however, goes far beyond an account of this heroic age of modern building. It traces the evolution of the villa in the Czech lands and Slovakia from its very beginnings, through the sometimes grotesque historicism of the 19th century, the elegance of Art Nouveau, the crystalline exuberance of architectural Cubism, to the oddity of Rondocubism, which functioned briefly as the First Republic's "national" style, before giving way to the varieties of interwar Modernism. We see how villa architecture then had the briefest of revivals at the end of World War II, then suffering almost total demise under Communism, which considered it an "extinct architectural typology", before reviving again after 1989, with many of today's architects paying tribute in their designs to the interwar "Golden Age".

Complemented by useful contextual essays, the books give full descriptions of the buildings themselves, their design and their present state. Taken together, they amount to a kind of architectural history of the Czech lands, not least because virtually every talented architect turned his – rarely her – hand to villa design.

They also go into fascinating detail about their owners, evoking the world of a certain class of wealthy and enlightened patron, a world almost totally eliminated by the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century; many clients and their architects were Jewish, others Bohemian Germans or Slovak Hungarians. Cosmopolitanism is a recurrent theme, with architects and patrons shown to have been fully aware of Europe-wide trends: of Arts and Crafts in Britain, of the Werkbund in Germany, and perhaps more than anything else, the influential work of the Franco-Swiss Corbusier.

The regional volumes describe a total of no fewer than 800 villas, 120 of which are gathered together in *Great Villas of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia*. The books are lavishly illustrated, with contemporary and recent photographs, plans and drawings (even including caricatures of some of the architects), and function both as miniature coffee-table treasures and as useful guidebooks, not least because of their clear location maps.

As well as the volume cited above covering the whole of the Czech Republic, several others have been published in English (*Prague, Prague 5, Prague 6, Brno, Central Bohemia, and Slovakia*). The translations are generally of a high standard, apart from the general Prague volume, which suffers from the kind of tortured language sometimes only comprehensible by referring to the original version.

With an appropriate home in Prague's Trmalova vila, designed by Jan Kotěra, Foibos plan further volumes, covering the villas of Poland, Hungary and Slovenia.