HISTORY

It was here where Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington performed in the legendary “Badewanne”, David Bowie, Romy Haag and Lou Reed partied in the no less legendary “Dschungel”, and old UFA heroes and later television stars such as Günter Pfitzmann and Edith Hancke stood on the stage of the “Berlin Theatre”. The building on Nürnberger Straße 50-55 – transformed via loving detail work in 2007 into ELLINGTON HOTEL BERLIN – is an establishment with tradition.

The building known under the names “Haus Nürnberg”, “Femina or Tauentzien Palast” that emerged from 1928 to 1931 under the impression of the pioneering buildings by Berlin architect Erich Mendelsohn was designed by a very successful team of architects at that time, Richard Bielenberg and Josef Moser. They designed one of the longest, most conspicuous and perhaps also one of the most beautiful facades in Berlin: elongated ribbon windows across the continuous shop floor expose the four upper floors. The wall areas are clad with lavish travertine and framed by small ribbons of dark bricks below and above the strongly profiled windows. The 185 metre long façade is structured through staircase towers and oriel. The entrances and display windows of the shop front are framed in brass. This also contributes towards the elegant exterior of this commercial building.

But the domicile of the Ellington Hotel is not only listed because of the largely originally preserved façade. The entrance rooms, staircases and a few halls inside also preserve the charm of the late twenties and early thirties: in white and green wall tiles, brass staircase railings, stucco ornaments on the ceilings and gold-plated lettering on the walls.

The original property developer, Märkische Bau- und Grundstücksverwertung-AG, spared neither efforts nor expense. In 1932, the “Deutsche Bauhütte” magazine called the Femina Palast a “colossal capital attraction”. The Femina Palast was introduced to German architects as the “newest entertainment site in Berlin”. But this merely referred to a part of the building, namely the ground floor with the rearward, two-storey ballroom. Entertainment on the four upper floors of the front building may have been kept within limits in these economically turbulent times: spaces were rented as offices. The interior arrangement of the steel skeleton construction was flexibly adaptable to the tenant demand by means of lightweight stone walls. In 1932, an office space of about 100 square metres on the second floor, “including heating”, cost 270 Reichsmarks a month; a “small single office with waiting room” was available for a
monthly rent starting at 56 Reichsmarks. The Reichs Monopoly Administration for Spirits (RMV) occupied the offices in 1938.

The “Femina” was opened on 1 October 1929. “Berlin’s Ballroom” featured the self-assured sub-headlines on the poster which advertised 2,000 seats, “two huge bars and three bands”, “daily tea dance, 2.50 Marks cover charge” and “dance attractions”. It was a bold venture that enterprising hotelier and restaurant proprietor Heinrich Liemann got involved with, yet a whole slew of entertainment sites all around the Memorial Church competed for the patronage of dance-loving Berliners. His description of the dance palace was accordingly ostentatious: “Through a marble vestibule and a second anteroom, one enters a gentlemen’s bar where one can hear mood singers. From the cloakroom for more than 2,000 people, a lift that transports 16 people at the same time brings guests to the dance bar on the first floor, where twenty young ladies serve guests and a top rate dance orchestra performs. Opposite this bar is the main dance hall that rises up to the roof in two tiers. There are table telephones and tube mail with an exchange centre from which young girls in uniform deliver the notes. The dancing area can be completely or partially raised by half a metre in order to make shows generally visible. Elegant dancing couples, grotesque dancers and complete ballets will be shown there in the afternoons and evenings. First-rate bands have been engaged. The most modern lighting immerses the hall in dazzling light. Beverages and meals will be served at prices that accommodate any purse!”

The press criticised that the interior was very reminiscent of the “Palais am Zoo”, but points could be scored with the tube mail – which only one other Berlin ballroom had – and with the hydraulically opening roof. Ten years later, in May 1939, the programme copywriter made it very poetic: “The glass roof opens. A blue sky shines above the tables for the tea dance. The stars above the roofs of Berlin shine in at night. The pleasant freshness of the evening floods the dance floor. The pleasantness of sitting, chatting and dancing in the open air is combined here in such a beautiful, practical manner with the festive, luxurious setting of the Femina.” The press attested to “highest top class” of the bands. After all, “Tango King” Juan Llossas played there (“Whoever cannot forget their problems should listen to Juan Llossas”).

Despite everything, the Femina Palast did not run smoothly. The operating company changed several times. The Grand Café, which was located on the ground floor right underneath the ballroom, was converted into Willi Schaeffer’s “Cabaret für Alle” in 1931. A grill restaurant and a beer cellar came into
being a bit later in the basement. Yet none of this helped. The Nationalzeitung wrote the following on 13 April 1933: “As the ‘lady dinner partners’ in mink and Doberman rushed in front of the portals of the Femina yesterday evening, they found the windows of the great dance hall were dark. No jazz syncopation rang out through the night. The musicians stood melancholically in the doorway with their violin cases. Femina will no longer be opening its doors. The creditors had all the chairs picked up by the bailiff at noon.”

Life only returned to the hangout two and a half years later: the Texas Bar had become a “cosy” drinking parlour, whereas the “Cabaret für Alle” had become the hearty Bavarian-style “Siechenbräu”. The new operators were not embarrassed to concede to the spirit of the times. “Alternating bands should provide concerts here for the Wehrmacht, SA and SS, National Socialist Motor Corps (NSKK) and pilots”. Yet the success was limited. Instead of listening to nationalistic brass band music, the Femina guests wanted to dance the Swing. The building on Nürnberger Straße with the large ballroom and its numerous side bars and restaurants evolved in Berlin’s most popular Swing palace.

Teddy Stauffer, Heinz Wehner and other famous “bandmasters” performed here with their dance orchestras. The ballroom was closed during the war, but people continued to dance in the remaining localities — up to the bitter end.

While the front building survived the war fairly intact, the rearward ballroom was heavily damaged in the war. Only the outer walls remained standing. The “Ulenspiegel” cabaret, in which Werner Finck celebrated his return to Berlin and Gustaf Gründgens his return to cabaret, opened on the ground floor in June 1946. The hall was converted into a cinema in 1948. In 1951 it became the venue of the privately financed “Berlin Theatre”, whose list of performers reads like a who’s who of German boulevard theatre. Many of the old UFA stars, from Lil Dagover to Olga Tschechowa and Grethe Weise as well as younger stars such as Günter Pfitzmann and Edith Hancke were to be seen here, and Wolfgang Spier – still active in Ku’damm theatres – learned how to enact comedies on this stage. The young Klaus Kinski caused a sensation here in 1959 as he recited Villon, Rimbaud, Oscar Wilde and Gerhart Hauptmann on ten days in succession.

The former “Pusztastube” in the basement became the “Badewanne” in 1949. Initiated by a group of painters as a rustic artists’ club, the basement club soon evolved into Berlin’s most important jazz site.
But the club was always also available for other razzmatazz such as rock & roll prize dances or Marlon Brando lookalike contests. In addition to beer, Coca Cola was the most popular drink, and numerous American GIs mingled with the audience to hear celebrities such as Lionel Hampton, Count Basie or Dizzy Gillespie live. People veered to pop songs and disco in the seventies. The venue was reopened as the “Sugar Shack” discotheque in 1978. But the novelty wore off, and the successor venue “Garage” plodded along poorly. In contrast, things were really happening one door down. The stylish, chic “Dschungel” became the scene discotheque par excellence, a Berlin counterpart to New York’s “Studio 54” (at Nürnberger Straße 53!), with the advent of the New Wave era at the end of the seventies. Whoever was inside belonged there and with a bit of luck was able to experience Rio Reiser as DJ or the intermittent Berliner Nick Cave at the next table.

Frank Zappa, Mick Jagger or David Bowie had wild parties after their concerts, Prince and Boy George spent their nights in Berlin here. However, the in-disco became marginalised with the fall of the Berlin Wall and techno music. It had to close in 1993. And even its successor, the noble restaurant “Dschungel”, was never really successful.

At the end of the 90s, the venue finally fell into a deep sleep and was only rarely awakened by revival parties. The fun in the old ballroom had already faded in 1973.

The former cabaret, cinema and theatre hall became the staff canteen for the Berlin Financial Administration, which had procured the office floors in 1964. The Berlin Administrative Academy also provided instruction at Haus Nürnberg. Incidentally, the hall where the finance senators gave their press conferences is preserved. It is located on the upper floor of a second rearward part of the building.

In the meantime, the mustiness from decades of use by authorities and years of vacancy has been thoroughly cast out of the building on Nürnberger Straße. But the charm has been retained. Tradition obligates and inspires. A modern event room is now located in the walls of the old Femina Hall, and nowadays the ELLINGTON HOTEL guests eat their breakfast where the cabaret and theatre stars of the post-war era stood on the stage. Unfortunately, only the paternoster lift, with which the finance senators rode up to their offices daily, no longer exists. The building authorities found it too dangerous for a hotel enterprise.