

The History of the **8 Moniuszki** Building and Its Iconic Café Adria

*Translation of the original text by Jerzy S. Majewski
- varsavianist, columnist and art historian*

Adria, a large gastronomic and entertainment venue combining a dancing hall, night club, restaurant and café, had become a legend of Warsaw's high life even before the outbreak of the Second World War. After being destroyed during the war, it was revived in the 1970s, although by then it was only a shadow of its former glory.



Before Adria opened, the building at 10 Moniuszki Street had already been constructed. It was erected in the late 1920s for **Riunione Adriatica di Sicurtà**, an Italian insurance company from Trieste on the Adriatic Sea. The designer of the building was the Warsaw architect **Edward Zachariasz Eber**, whose work evolved from the ascetic early modernism to the more luxurious functionalism of the 1930s. Historical references were not foreign to him, and he used them in the façade of the building at Moniuszki. The architect employed classical forms popular in Poland during the 1920s: the solid structure was wrapped in a row of slender Ionic half-columns supporting a massive entablature. The building was guarded by two Venetian lions placed on either side of the façade on the second floor.

This was a multifunctional building with office space as well as a large area on the ground floor and in the basement intended for a gastronomic and entertainment venue. It was here that **Adria** was established. Its designers, alongside Eber, included **Jerzy Gelbard**, **Grzegorz** and **Roman Sigalin**, and **Edward Seydenbeutel**.

The opening of Adria in 1931 was not only a major social event, but also an artistic one. Its fame was propelled by an article published in the influential magazine *Wiadomości Literackie* titled “**Epidemia Adriatica**” (“The Adriatic Epidemic”). The author described crowds flocking to Adria, which attracted even larger crowds in the following weeks. And there was much to admire. At the entrance, visitors were greeted by a luminous neon cocktail glass. The vestibule featured glass and polished white metal details. The fashionable American-style bar was considered the very essence of modernity. Devoid of decorative elements, it relied on colour and materials: a rubber floor, buffets clad in marblite, marble accents, nickel bar installations and chromed tubular steel furniture inspired by the Bauhaus. The interiors were dominated by yellows, oranges and several shades of grey. The café walls were finished in terrazite and exotic wood panelling, with shelves lined with cactuses.

The most important space, however, was located below ground level — a **dancing hall** with a bar, buffet, open and private booths. The focal point was the stage, often occupied by a big-band orchestra, and the **finest revolving dance floor in Warsaw**, on which couples danced late into the night.



As early as 1934, Adria appeared in the feature film “**His Excellency, the Shop Assistant**”. In one of the scenes, the stars Eugeniusz Bodo and Ina Benita — the sex symbol of pre-war Polish cinema — sit together at a café table, sing and gaze into each other’s eyes. Film celebrities could often be spotted here, especially during the annual **Polish Film Balls**, attended by the biggest names in the industry. In 1939, the proceeds from one such ball were used to purchase an aircraft for the Polish army. Adria also hosted annual **Press Balls**, attracting the social elite, journalists and nearly the entire diplomatic corps. The elite frequented the venue daily: among them was **Bolesław Wieniawa-Długoszowski**, a general, writer and one of the most colourful figures of Poland’s interwar establishment. Many politicians, writers, artists and businessmen visited the venue regularly. The stage hosted performers such as **Hanna Ordonówna**, and the orchestras of **Jerzy Petersburski** and **Artur Gold**.

For many years, the main shareholder of Adria was **Franciszek Moszkowicz**, originally from Lwów - an energetic entrepreneur experienced in running cafés before 1914. He died only a few months before the outbreak of the war, in March 1939. It is said that anticipating his death, he ordered unpaid bills of certain regulars to be destroyed. After his passing, the venue was put up for sale at an exorbitant price, yet it was so profitable that buyers quickly came forward. Among the new shareholders was **Władysław Mikosz**, husband of **Tamara Wiszniewska**, one of the most beautiful Polish film stars of the era, who became a frequent guest.

After the outbreak of the Second World War and the brutal German occupation of Warsaw, Adria remained in the hands of the company co-owned by Mikosz. As early as 1940, the occupiers turned it into a venue “**nur für Deutsche**” (“for Germans only”). Despite the curfew, the neon sign glowed at night, and the interior was filled with German officers and civilians linked to the occupation administration. Orchestras performed, light entertainment shows took place, people danced and drank copious amounts of alcohol. Mikosz, who was allowed to move freely, proved to be a valuable informant for the Polish underground, passing on information he overheard in Adria.

One of the most dramatic events in the venue's history took place on **22 May 1943**, when Home Army soldier **Jan Kryst “Alan”** carried out a solo attack in Adria - full of German soldiers - as an act of retaliation for mass executions on the streets of Warsaw. Terminally ill, he received special permission from the Kedyw leadership to undertake what was essentially a suicide mission. He shot three Gestapo officers and a fourth SS-man (who later died in hospital), before being killed himself. His body was stolen from the morgue by underground soldiers and buried in the Wola Cemetery.



On 1 August 1944, the Warsaw Uprising broke out. Fighting quickly engulfed the entire city centre, and Marszałkowska Street remained a no-man's-land for weeks. The building at Moniuszki 10 was seized by the insurgents. It housed, among other units, the **Propaganda Department of the Home Army Headquarters**, while for a time the legendary "**Błyskawica**" insurgent radio station broadcast from inside Adria.

The building, however, proved less resistant to German shelling than hoped. The area was heavily bombarded due to its proximity to the Home Army command. Eventually, a shell split the building from the rear, although the front section with the façade survived almost intact.

The structure was rebuilt shortly afterwards for the state insurance company PZU, but **Adria** did not return to its former location until **1973**, after nine years of construction. This time it was a state-run enterprise. Its interiors were redesigned by a team of artists, including architects **Andrzej Darski**, **Hubert Dąbrowski** and **Mina Leśniowska**, and adorned with paintings and mosaics. Yet it was no longer the same venue as before the war. "Not being seen in Adria is a social faux pas," the press wrote at the time - though those who had already visited were disappointed: "Only the prices seem to match the pre-war Adria. Everything else is worse," claimed critics in 1973.

In the new Adria, expectations inflated by the legendary status of the pre-war dancing clashed with the austerity of the Polish People's Republic. Still, the venue displayed accents from another world - reminiscent of the newly created **Pewex** stores - with shelves lined with French cognacs and a Courvoisier sign above the bar featuring the silhouette of Napoleon. This, however, was not enough to bring back crowds. After an initial surge of curiosity, attendance steadily declined. School trips dined there, high school graduation balls were held, and the press joked that the "highlight" for graduates were the bold dance shows that had become a standard part of the programme.

In 1976, filmmakers returned to Adria once again. Director **Jerzy Gruza** shot a scene for the film "*Motylem jestem, czyli romans 40-latką*" ("I'm a Butterfly, or the Affair of a Forty-Year-Old"), featuring a lavish party. The film showcased well-known actors such as **Wojciech Pszoniak** and **Bohdan Łazuka**, and in the story, the protagonist Stefan Karwowski (played by **Andrzej Kopiczyński**) falls under the charm of singer **Irena Orska**, portrayed by the renowned Irena Jarocka.

A few years later, during martial law, Adria had lost the last traces of its former glamour. The venue was no longer profitable. More popular was a simple bar - converted from the former café section - serving modest but tasty meals at a time when shop shelves were empty.

The end came in the late 1980s. Adria was finally closed in 2005. In the last several years, the building served as an office property offering space for lease.