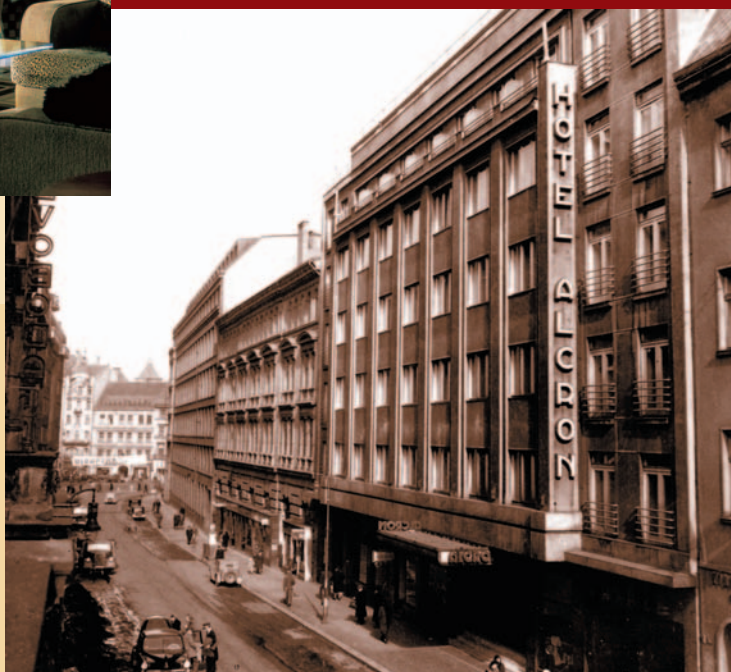




## Historic Tales of Adventure at the Alcron Hotel



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# Historic Tales of Adventure at the Alcron

*...an unsolved mystery surrounding a purloined guest register...bugged ashtrays...a beautiful prima ballerina remembered in a statue...Hollywood star evacuated by diplomats...Communist secret agents... These are just some of the fascinating tales that add to the charm and intrigue of one of the most historic hotels in Prague—the legendary Alcron. A daring, yet successful undertaking that brought the rich and famous to Prague and put the city on the map, the Alcron ultimately reflected the fame and the failures of the Czech nation and stood in mute witness to the rise, fall and re-birth of the country and its people during the Twentieth Century.*

The following stories represent a compilation of memories from old-timers, guests, historians, journalists, as well as former and current hotel employees. We would like to express our gratitude to everyone who contributed to these stories and provided details and insight into the missing chapters in the more than seventy-year history of the hotel.

## I. Birth of a Legend – The Alcron during the Interwar period, 1932 to 1939

The two following stories took place during the most famous period in the hotel's history. First, we provide a brief introduction of the man who designed, constructed and owned the original Alcron Hotel—Alois Krofta. The uniqueness of his concept not only encompassed the hotel's interior and exterior, but also greatly impacted the architectural development of Prague during the interwar period. The second story relates the interesting life of a famous prima ballerina, Yelizaveta Nikolska, who was the model for the statue on display in the hotel's La Rotonde Restaurant.

### Alois Krofta, Founder and Owner

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Alois Krofta started his career at the age of twenty-three when he became a building engineer and started working as an assistant with a building company. It wasn't long, however, before he started his own construction company. Initially, he did everything himself, but gradually took on other collaborators and began doing larger projects.

When Czechoslovakia was established in 1918, Krofta was among the first to recognize the enormous business opportunities available. Prior to 1918, Prague had been little more than a provincial town. Krofta, although still a young developer, realized that establishing and promoting Prague as a new and thriving capital city, should lure the many central authority agencies to Prague. If this migration were to take place, as he believed it would, then these officials and their entourages would need places to live and stores to shop in--basically an entirely new, inter-connected, infrastructure. His vision for Prague would require many building projects in a very short time.

Not surprisingly, such ideas in the midst of a post-war economic crisis, dominated by a general deficit and high prices, were not considered realistic by other builders. In fact, many thought Krofta was a lunatic and expected him to go bankrupt sooner rather than later. But Krofta did not give in to the naysayers and continued with his building projects.



Ing. Alois Krofta

Before long, large regional industrial companies, such as the Vítkovice ironworks, started to move their offices and employees to Prague. And, as Krofta predicted, these companies required accommodation, which, of course, he had at their disposal. Soon, housing associations started approaching the young developer with orders to build large apartment buildings. His buildings were more expensive than those of his competitors, but his were better built, and he used the latest technology in their construction. For instance Krofta was the first builder in Prague to use mobile tower cranes. In addition, he was not afraid to finance risky projects, even ones far from Prague's center. He also built residential palaces with a novel approach that focused on providing both services and entertainment. As a result, he significantly revived several Prague quarters, such as Flora.



*La Rotonde Restaurant in the 1930's*



*La Rotonde Restaurant today*

However, Krofta's biggest architectural achievement was yet to come. As he had envisioned, Prague became the capital of the most economically developed democracy in Central Europe. A growing number of foreigners, visitors and business people, continued to "discover" Prague, but unfortunately they were disappointed with the level of hotel accommodation available.

Despite its many advancements, Prague was still considered one of the most undesirable places to stay over-night. Consequently, some foreigners avoided the capital and, if they had to visit it, they preferred to come early in the morning and leave in the evening. Hotel staff in Vienna and Berlin even recommended that their guests go to Karlovy Vary (Karslbád) rather than stay in Prague over-night. Therefore, Krofta decided to give Prague a world-class hotel that would be in keeping with its international status. Overcoming numerous administrative and financial impediments, Krofta opened the Alcron Hotel in 1932. When creating the hotel's name, Krofta began by using his initials (AL-ois KRO-fta), but then was inspired by the ALCRON, a sailing vessel from Greek mythology. The ship eventually became the logo of the hotel and small replicas of the ship can still be seen today on the original fireplace grating located in the Alcron Restaurant.

In addition to the interesting architectural design and the very luxurious interior, the hotel featured state-of-the-art technology throughout. Much of the high-tech equipment was designed by Krofta himself. For example, in case of a power failure, the hotel had special electric generators and also incorporated the newest cooling devices as well as a special electric signal system for guests calling room service. The hotel even had a special water softener mechanism and, unique for the time, automatic fire-fighting devices with mechanical water sprinklers. Alois Krofta was very particular in ensuring that all technical details and especially guest services were the top of the line. As a result, the Hotel Alcron was in a class by itself.

Almost over-night, the elegant Alcron Hotel became the most exclusive facility of its kind during the interwar years, attracting many celebrities of the First Republic, including artists and politicians as well as Prague's aristocracy. Alois Krofta remained the hotel's owner and operator until the Communist take-over. However, his management of the hotel was "supervised" under the German occupation during the Second World War.

## Olga Krofta: A pianist, hotelier and ship-owner

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We have already recalled in the pages of this magazine many interesting stories about Alois Krofta, the Alcron Hotel's creator and owner; in particular how he used the first letters of his own name to create the word "Alcron." What has not been recounted before are some of the details and stories about the personal life of this world-renowned architect and those closest to him.

Ing. Alois Krofta was born on June 17, 1888, and died on May 30, 1958. His first wife was Olga Rapoportová. Born in 1913, in a small village in the Carpathians, she was interested in music as a young girl, especially the piano. When she was 18, she applied for a secretarial job, but was not accepted, so she packed her things and took a train to Prague to study music. Once in Prague, she found some inexpensive accommodation at the Hotel Flóra. This simple act was to change her life forever.

Was this luck? Was it fate? Perhaps, since it turned out that this hotel was built and owned by Alois Krofta. Blonde and beautiful, the young Olga soon attracted the interest of many men, primarily from Prague's "better class" gentlemen. The most persistent of these suitors was a solid looking man, who "cruised" the streets of Prague in an American Lincoln automobile with the tag number 47. "Everyone at the time knew that only important people had low tag numbers," Olga told *Xantypa Magazine* some years ago. Who was this man? None other than Alois Krofta, whom Olga described as "good looking and who appeared aristocratic."

Krofta wined and dined Olga, took her to the National Theatre where he had a private box and otherwise greatly impressed her. She was most impressed, however, when she discovered he had a plaque with his name at the luxurious Alcron Hotel. Olga recalled in her interview that she thought "Good, he's an architect," only to learn he was much more than that – he was also the builder and owner of the Alcron as well as the Hotel Flora and several other buildings in Prague."

Following their marriage, the pianist Olga was soon to become a hotelier. "A new hotel is a like car. You have to get it up and running. Krofta sent me to the Paris Ritz, to Dresden and the best hotels in Europe, so that I could learn about hotels and get new ideas." This idyllic life style ended when Czechoslovakia became a German Protectorate and the Alcron was taken over and managed by Nazis. With the changing times came a change in her husband. Krofta was depressed by the occupation of his famous hotel and apparently was a little bit afraid of his wife who had joined the Czech Resistance movement. She went from the American embassy to the British embassy and back again in order to get resistance information.

The Kroftas soon got divorced and Olga went to America with her daughter Alexandra (who was born in 1936). Once in America, she fell in love with the Norwegian yachtsman, Olympian and ship-owner Magnus Konow, whom she married. The fulfilment of the "American Dream" ultimately came true for this poor girl from the Carpathian Mountains when she and her new husband bought a spare tanker ship from the American army and went into business. Olga soon bought her own tanker – *Christopher* – and became the first female ship-owner in the world with a celebrated nickname – "Tank Olga." At the best of times, she had as many as 14 tankers and offices in Oslo and New York. Despite her success, she noted that "the problem is that when you have a lot of business you are so busy that you don't have the time to spend your money. And when you have time, it means you don't have any work." In 1992, Olga became Honorary Consul from what was then the Czechoslovak Federal Republic, to the principality of Monaco.

And what about Ing. Alois Krofta? He married two more times before his death. First to Jana Remešová, who subsequently died and then to Mirjana Pražáková, who is believed to have died in Peru.



## The Bitter Fate of a Prima Ballerina

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*She immediately attracts everyone's attention as soon as they enter the La Rotonde Restaurant and does not allow anyone to take their eyes off her. Her arms are raised as if invoking the fame and splendor of the place where prominent personalities of the First Republic used to meet. Standing on her tiptoes, she glorifies the easy life and playfulness that typified the avant-garde attitude of the 1920's and 1930's.*

Yelizaveta Nikolska, was a young, ambitious lady and when her father moved the family from the quiet, provincial city of Vladivostok to Odessa, she took advantage of the new opportunities open to her. She soon graduated from the conservatory led by piano virtuoso, Karl Loenwenstein, and at the same time, graduated from the L. Tittoni Italian ballet school. By the age of fifteen, she was performing as a solo dancer at the Odessa State Opera. There she met the ballet master, Remislav Remislavsky, and later a famous director of the St. Petersburg Theatre, Boris Romanov. While both men found the young ballerina charming and accomplished, her success did not last long because the political situation in Russia was getting worse day by day.

Eventually, as a consequence of the Bolshevik revolution, almost two million refugees left Russia. Most of them were the country's intellectual elite – the “white” Russians. Approximately thirty thousand of them chose Czechoslovakia as their new home. Yelizaveta, was one of them.

When Yelizaveta left Russia, she first went to Warsaw. While there, she received a contract offer from the Prague National Theatre and accepted it. There, she danced for the first time in the summer of 1922 as Odetta in Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake. She was only eighteen; however, her well-mastered modern ballet techniques, in combination with her perfect pirouettes and daring jumps enticed many classical ballet admirers to her performances.

Yelizaveta's opportunities dramatically increased when her old acquaintance, Remislavsky assumed the master's position at the National Theatre ballet in 1922. He cast Yelizaveta in many solo dance roles. But in 1925, she and Remislavsky parted company—not on the best of terms. Not only did she leave the National Theatre, but she also ended her marriage to the extravagant Félix Achilla de la Camaro, who had a special liking for esotericism and the occult. Yelizaveta then went abroad and improved her repertoire with renowned Russian ballet masters and made a tour of many European countries.



Her physical beauty attracted a number of artists, among them, Boettinger, Stretti and J. Šilhavý who made drawings and paintings of her. E. Kodet created the sculpture of her. Yelizaveta was proud of her perfectly built body and did not mind showing it off. She was totally naked in Rudolf Schneider Rohan's photographs—wearing only a veil as she danced at the Greek Acropolis. And, a small bolero did not cover her chest during her fast-paced moves doing the Maori dance, La Zambra. All of these rather exotic displays were a topic for the tabloids of the time.

Aside from her willingness to expose her body, her emphasis on technique—one of pure perfectionism—gradually was compared to the Russian prima ballerina Anna Pavlovova. Moreover, the dramatic character of her performances was compared to Sarah Bernhardt. Her dance interpretations were unique, ranging from classical ballet to pantomime to dancing grotesque in various performances.

Yelizaveta was committed to instilling the intricacies of method and movement to younger generations of ballet dancers. Although this required much time and energy, Yelizaveta did not mind and in 1922, she opened her first ballet school in Lucerna. She continued this tradition by starting another school with the Prague National Theatre in 1933. A large number of exceptional dancers developed under her tutelage, regardless of their economic background. Children from poor families paid only one third of the school fees. She was also willing to reduce fees for students whom she considered to be exceptionally talented.

In 1930, she accepted a contract offer to become the ballet master at the Cairo King Opera. While she was abroad, the National Theatre State Ballet (NTSB) was established in Prague. The theatre administration asked Yelizaveta to come back and offered her a lead position in the newly established ballet group. She returned to Prague and succeeded in reorganizing the NTSB and getting it to adopt a more modern approach. This approach proved effective and the NTSB was soon on a level equal to the rest of Europe and in 1933, the group was highly successful during its first American tour. As a result of these successes, Yelizaveta moved up within the National Theatre artistic hierarchy. She was officially appointed the prima ballerina and then became the ballet master. In 1940, she was named the head of ballet.

Yelizaveta's ballet art has been preserved, in part, due to the 1927 film in which she starred in the French film, *Revue of all Revues*, and also in Čáp's *Dancer*. In 1940 she danced in the film *Masked Lover*. Her last film performance was in the spring of 1945, when she appeared in O. Vávra's *Rozina Sebranec*.

In September 1944, the German occupation authorities closed all theaters. The paradox was that on April 1, 1945 these same authorities forced the National Theatre groups to restore their activities. The National Theatre, the only one that survived after Hitler's Reich collapsed, kept performing until May 4, 1945 at the Karlín stage of the Provisional theatre. Later Yelizaveta was criticized for taking part in these performances.

## **Fear of the NKVD**

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Shortly before the Red army arrived in Prague, Yelizaveta emigrated for the second time in her life. Given her past experience in Russia, she could hardly welcome the Soviet soldiers as liberators. With the help of the American repatriation administration, she and her aging mother, Julia Vilhemina, went to the United States. Simple human fear was the reason for this emigration.

She was not afraid of persecution by the post-revolutionary Czechoslovakian administration, although several of her colleagues from the film industry (including actors Vlasta Burian, Adina Mandlová and Lída Baarová) did experience it later. Rather, Yelizaveta Nikolska was afraid of a much more powerful organization – the Soviet Secret Service (NKVD). Already, by May 11, 1945, members of the NKVD had begun arresting Russian emigrants – most selected in advance. Out of the hundreds of unfortunates that were arrested, few survived Stalin's gulags, and if they did survive, they were sick and weak, mere shadows of their former selves upon release.

Yelizaveta eventually moved from the United States to Venezuela. In Caracas, she married her former dance partner, František Karhánek. They established a ballet school, which became famous throughout the South American continent. In 1955, the famous prima ballerina unexpectedly died at age 51. During her exile in South America, the communist rulers in Czechoslovakia had stopped talking and writing about her. Because she had been part of the White Russian emigration, this acclaimed artist, who led the NTSB in Prague for 25 years, never existed according to the new totalitarian regime. Her legacy as a prima ballerina was essentially erased by the Communists.

*(Translated and edited into English from Lidové noviny, 16 May 2002.)*

## II. The Hotel Alcron during the Second World War, 1939 – 1945

*After the German forces had occupied the country, Alois Krofta remained the Alcron's "formal" owner; however, he had to accept and be supervised by a hotel manager of German nationality. Jiří Pixa, a popular TV announcer in Czechoslovakia in the 1970's, offers some personal memories about the hotel during the wartime era. His life was briefly linked to the hotel during the German occupation—a time that ultimately heralded the end of a lustrous era for Prague, Krofta and the First Republic.*

In 1940, after the Czech universities were closed, the occupational authorities threatened to send Pixa and other young Czechs into forced labor in Germany. To avoid deportation, he had to find a job. Since his family was friends with Ing. Krofta, Pixa was hired personally by the hotel owner to work as a receptionist/waiter.

According to Pixa, "By 1940, there were several good hotels in Prague, but only the Alcron had a reputation for being the absolute, most luxurious and modern facility in the capital. For me as a very young man, it was a ticket to experience a completely different world." Pixa was excited to be moving among celebrities and famous people. In fact, he felt honored to show Hans Albers (Albers was a famous German actor and a favorite of Hitler, ed.), to his room on one occasion. Pixa also shared another interesting story about the time King Carol of Romania got stuck in the hotel elevator while on a non-official visit in Prague. "He was stuck there for half an hour, and then His Majesty had to be pulled out by his hands," Pixa recollects merrily.

However, working in such a top quality hotel was not always so glamorous, and more often than not, was just a lot of hard work and personal inconvenience. Pixa recalls that his shift ended at midnight every day, which was the time when all the trams stopped running. So he had to walk along the darkened streets of Prague to his home in Dejvice. More importantly, the reality of the war left its impact on the atmosphere in the hotel and the morale of the employees. The high quality pre-war service standards were deeply engrained in the staff; but, according to Pixa, "you could sense a change in the work ethic at the hotel that even included a tendency to sabotage the quality of hospitality provided to the occupants."

Although Mr. Pixa is no longer a young man, his memory is excellent, especially his ability to remember minor details such as the price of rooms at the time he worked at the hotel. For those of us who can't even remember our frequently used credit card PINs, we envy his sharp memory. In case you are interested, the price of a single room and double room in 1940 was CZK 140 and 210, respectively.

While Pixa's stay at the hotel was short, he has never forgotten the time he spent there. "When I visited the hotel in the 1950s and 1960s, I was overwhelmed by nostalgia and memories of its former fame. Despite all that had befallen the city and country, the Alcron Hotel had retained its standards; however, its previous famous fashionableness was declining and it was not competitive with the newly built hotels."



### III. The Alcron during the Socialist Era, 1948 – 1989

After the Communist putsch in 1948, the hotel was nationalized. The authorities temporarily allowed Mr. Krofta to manage the hotel; however, Mr. Pixa recalls that he briefly met Ing. Krofta after the war and he saw a broken man. Krofta died not long after the nationalization mania of the Communists destroyed his life's work. With the Communist in power, the character of the clients staying at the Alcron changed. Rather than the international celebrities and dignitaries of the past, most guests were undistinguished officials from the countries of the Soviet Bloc. From this period, we offer two stories. One recalls the role of the Alcron during the tragic Warsaw Pact invasion in August 1968. The second, provided by a former employee, Martin Coufal, takes us inside the hotel and gives us a first-hand account of what it was like to work at the Alcron Hotel during the 1970s and 1980s.

#### The Alcron during the August 1968 Invasion of Czechoslovakia

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The so-called Prague Spring was unquestionably the brightest period during the era of communist rule. A brief respite from the oppressive tyranny that had dominated Czechoslovakia since 1948, its swift and tragic end in August 1968 remains a painful memory for many Czechs. Few, however, know of the role the Alcron Hotel played in the sinister events of August 20th, the night when the tanks of the Warsaw Pact forces rolled into Prague.

Iva Drápalová, who is currently a correspondent for the Los Angeles Times, was a university student in Prague at the time of the invasion. Although she was not a witness to the events that took place at the Alcron that night, she knows the story well.

According to Drápalová, a position as a foreign correspondent in Prague was a dream job in the mid-1960s. The Czech capital was a boiling pot of political and cultural changes and every day offered endless subjects for news reports and articles. And, as was the case during the interwar period, the late 1960s again found the Alcron Hotel playing host to numerous local and foreign celebrities. The country was a bit more open to outsiders than during the past twenty years, and as a result, many prominent individuals, such as Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong visited Prague and spent a little time at the Alcron after a performance at the Lucerna concert hall. The noted Hollywood director Miloš Forman was a visitor as well, and mentioned the Alcron in his autobiography.

During this time, journalists from several influential foreign newspapers and press agencies took up residence in the Alcron. Not only was office space in short supply in Prague, but they also had to contend with the unwillingness of authorities to provide "hard-to-control" premises to journalists from capitalist countries. Consequently, the English-speaking media, including such prestigious newspapers and press agencies as the New York Times, the Boston Globe, the Chicago Tribune, and the Associated Press, set themselves up in the Alcron.

On the night of August 20, Drápalová recalls that these foreign correspondents were lounging around the bar at the Alcron sipping their drinks and debating current events as they did every day. As midnight

approached, they heard the sound of a great many airplanes flying over the city. Most of the correspondents concluded that the aircraft must be charter flights to Dubrovnik (a popular Croatian sea resort, ed.). However, Petr Rehak of the Associated Press did not accept that explanation and shortly left for his room where he (as one the few Czech-speaking journalists) listened to the chilling broadcast of the invasion on Czech radio. He immediately went down to the Teletype machine at the hotel's reception desk and sent a report to his editor saying that Warsaw Pact armies had invaded Czechoslovakia. Then he returned to his colleagues and passed on the news.

Thus, it was from the Alcron Hotel that the dismal news of the end of the attempt to reform the socialist regime was spread to the world. Vladimír Poštulka, currently a journalist and gourmet in Prague, claims that the British writer Graham Green was staying in the hotel and was awakened by sirens. The American actress Shirley Temple Black, was also staying at the hotel that night and was evacuated to Munich, Germany the next day by the American embassy. Interestingly enough, she became the U.S. Ambassador to Czechoslovakia in 1989. In memory of that momentous evening, Ms. Drápalová, adds that a "Charter Flight to Dubrovnik" dinner was held in the hotel bar on the 21st day of every month where a large gathering of foreign journalists met, dined and swapped stories.



Shortly after the August invasion, many foreign journalists were expelled and often their translators went with them. As a young linguist, Drápalová initially assumed one of the vacated translator positions, but soon became attracted to journalism and eventually became the head of the Prague Associated Press office between 1972 and 1988.

In conclusion, she passed along a few other interesting facts. After the State intelligence agency (StB) archives were declassified in the 1990s, Drápalová discovered that the StB had an 1160-page file on her! In addition, it turns out that many of the hotel employees during the communist era were under constant pressure from the StB to provide private information on hotel guests. In fact, it was no secret that some hotel employees were active associates (agents) of the state intelligence agency. Also, to help them collect information in hotels, the StB even invented a special "bugged" ashtray with the model name "Alcron"!

## My 18 Years at the Alcron Hotel

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The alarm clock shrilly sounded its wake-up call. It was four o'clock in the morning of September 12, 1971. Surprisingly fast, I jumped out of my feather bed and then quickly drank a big cup of black coffee. A slightly pinching feeling around my stomach told me that it would be impossible to swallow even a morsel of food. I snatched up my suitcase with its carefully folded uniform and hurried through the chilly fog to catch the first bus. I had only one thing on my mind: "At eight I, Martin Caufal, have to be in Alcron!"

The trip from Melník to Prague took less than one hour at that time, but I wanted to make certain I wouldn't be late!

At half past five, carefully dressed in starched white overalls, soaped and combed, I reported to the headwaiter of the French restaurant, Mr. Hejhal. "Well, we have never had anything like this here before—an apprentice who should come at eight but who is here in time for a morning shift! What night club

have you just come from?" he joked. "You know what? Since you are here, you can help with the orders." I was so excited. It was just too wonderful that on the first day of my apprenticeship, I would be allowed to 'wait on a guest'! I soon realized how wrong I was.

My job consisted of taking a waiter's hand-written order and delivering it to the kitchen (PC cash desks with printed orders were something from a dream world!). This procedure was followed by carrying the ordered dishes to the restaurant, taking new orders, delivering the orders to the kitchen, then again making 'a trip to the floor' with a heavy tray full of delicacies and then just round and round again. It was the same during the noon shift. It was just 22 well-worn steps from the restaurant to the kitchen (and of course the other way around as well), but once my friends and I calculated that during a really busy morning shift, an apprentice walked approximately twice to the very top of the Eiffel Tower and ran down back to the Champ de Mars.

"So it has started for me today," I said to myself in the cloakroom at three p.m. as I was bandaging the blisters on my feet! Of course, it did not occur to me then that I had just finished my first working day out of what became a fun and colorful eighteen years of service at the Alcron Hotel.

In the early 1970s, the Alcron was still a renowned synonym of luxury, noted for its fine cuisine and its unique hotel culture, which was based on the exemplary care given its guests. The director of the hotel, Miroslav Hříbek, was a strict adherent to the fundamentals of professional service. A leader of top professionals, he had achieved numerous accomplishments, many of which were associated with world expositions, including EXPO 58 in Brussels and EXPO 67 in Montreal. He and his associates became my first teachers--teachers who were uncompromisingly strict in their professionalism, but always fair and ready to give advice. At the same time, they were also tolerant of beginner's mistakes, even if they didn't show it too much. Even after all these years, I can still feel the steely grip of the headwaiter, Miroslav Dvořák' fingers on my elbow. He frequently used this painful, almost police-like touch with a kind smile as he elegantly lead the offender away from the guests' field of view. Once "behind the scenes," Dvořák reminded us "sinners" (those who had somehow trespassed his strict rules), in very strong terms, of the fundamentals of proper professionalism. Usually, he only had to remind us just once—it was enough for a lifetime!

I remember with affection, the well-built Mr. František Banseth who governed the famous Pilsen restaurant, which everyone just called "Lidovka." Every day for twelve hours, he tapped hectoliter after hectoliter of the best Pilsen beer in Prague. A passionate member of the Peter's (fisherman's) guild, Banseth presided with his pleasing baritone over the "fishing club," a group of barflies that surrounded the beer tap every day, sipping their beer while munching on granny's little coffins with whipped cream!

I can see a smiling Miloslav Korn in front of me as though it were yesterday. He was the head floorwalker, who, without exception, called every colleague 'Snow-white!' and no one ever bothered him with any problems. It was a boon to your soul and a valued lesson of life to work with the wise Mr. Korn. I always remember his smile whenever I see his son, Jiří Korn, a famous Czech singer and dancer performing.

I also like to think back on Mrs. Božena Bedrníčková, a legend in her time, and the queen of Czech cold meat cuisine. From time to time, she used to treat us enthusiastic apprentices with a sample of something very delicious. It was also not unusual for us to here the hushed singing of arias throughout the day. The singing was from Theodor Knapp, the elevator operator. He was warming up his vocal cords in the padded elevator before his evening performance in the chorus of the Karlín theater.

Time was passing quickly for me. Mr. Karel 'Charlie' Kroupa, the top Alcron barman with a great deal of

experience abroad, replaced Mr. Hříbek as the hotel director. Unfortunately, I did not have any direct association with Mr. Kroupa because I passed my apprenticeship exams shortly before he took over as director and left to study at a hotel school. After I finished at the school, I dressed in a green uniform and fulfilled my military service. When I returned from military service, I met with my former colleagues from the hotel and discovered that the new director had successfully upheld the traditions of the directors before him. All was well at the Alcron.

After 'Charlie' Kroupa retired, Ing. Ivana Nejdlová became the director of the hotel. She had started her professional career at the Hotel Pupp in Carlsbad. This hotel compared favorably with the Alcron in terms of its traditions, philosophy and high-quality services. Under her leadership, the Alcron soon acquired a more international approach. It was a nice change for the hotel employees. One example of her new direction—and a very successful one, was the 'Days of Finnish Cuisine,' where chefs from the Hotel Vaakuna in Helsinki came to Prague to exhibit their craftsmanship. Following the Finnish cuisine event, reservations for the hotel restaurant were being made two months in advance! Shortly after, chefs from the Alcron went to Helsinki for a week and discovered that the Finnish were really very interested in Czech cuisine. Other cuisine exchanges were successfully organized with the Mövenpick hotel chain in the former West Germany and in Switzerland.

Mrs. Nejdlová brought many other new ideas to the Alcron. One program she advanced offered the younger staff an opportunity to prove their skills in middle and higher management levels. As a result, the management staff at the Alcron became markedly younger during my tenure.

Unfortunately, the ravages of time were starting to take their toll on the hotel and the need for refurbishment was becoming increasingly more visible. Under Nejdlová, a partial reconstruction of the restaurant, reception area, hotel rooms and kitchen was undertaken. In addition, serious thought was being given to closing the hotel in order to carry out a complete reconstruction.

Thus, it was not the best of times for the hotel. Not only did the building need major work, but directors were changing often and employees were coming and going. However, despite all this, the hotel guests remained. At the beginning of my apprenticeship, and even long after it, I still waited on the businessmen and the representatives of companies that had come to the Alcron in the early 1950s! They still required "their" rooms, the same table in the restaurant and they were disappointed if "their" waiter was not on duty. On one occasion, an elderly businessman introduced us to his son who was gradually taking over the business—the son later became our regular guest.

At this point in time, we could only dream of taking courses in management theory, of verbal and non-verbal communication training, of positive psychological approach training or of intensive courses in foreign languages instructed by native speakers. In the absence of such training opportunities, our guests provided an excellent educational alternative. They were, without exception, very exacting, but the great majority of them had a soft spot in their heart for us as well. They were tolerant of the fact that our cooks did not have fresh salmon, artichokes or live lobsters available. But they would not have forgiven us if we had not been accurate, reliable, fair, and ready to please them in a professional manner. Moreover, they also expected us to anticipate their needs and desires and do our absolute best to satisfy them. They forced us to learn their likes and dislikes and to communicate in their language. What a great life experience!

I left the Alcron as an assistant manager in April 1989. It definitely was not easy to leave, but the offer to cooperate in the revitalization and functional reorganization of the Hotel Palace in Prague was so attractive, that I just had to accept it. However, I brought to my new job all that I had learned in a very exceptional school—the Hotel Alcron!



## “Guests Are Never Just a Room Number”

### *Josef Dundr Remembers the Original Alcron Hotel*

On a recent day when he visited the hotel for our interview, Josef (Pepe) Dundr quickly passed by the reception area and headed for the lobby, just as if he knew the way instinctively. That's not a surprise, since Josef used to walk that path every day for almost a quarter of a century. To be more specific, he spent the 1960s thru the 1980s as a waiter in the Alcron Hotel lobby. While many political and social changes took place outside the hotel's revolving door during Dundr's tenure, he says that most guests



left the world behind them when they entered the luxurious sanctity of the Alcron. Thus, this famous hotel not only maintained its image and popularity among the rich and famous, but its unique ambience and superior service was a welcome constant within a changing world.

### **A Memorable 25 Years**

After working for 25 years at the Alcron, Dundr is a gold mine of interesting stories and memories. His job at the Alcron was his first after completing school, and before starting his compulsory military service. According to Dundr, his first day at work was a very memorable one. “I remember my first day clearly. I started working as a bus-boy in the hotel's French restaurant, La Rotonde. My first task was

to clean up a table from 50 elderly American ladies. My co-workers mischievously left that big job to me, the rookie. To my great surprise, I found a dollar bill underneath every saucer. Just add that up – it was a lot of money at that time and I thought to myself – very natively, it turns out: ‘Boy, you’ve made a pretty good choice.’ I, of course, hoped that something like that would happen to me every day; but, I couldn’t have been more wrong.”

After his military service, Dundr returned to the Alcron and was in placed in charge of waiting on guests in the hotel lobby, and later as a waiter/cashier. “What interesting guests we used to have,” he says with enthusiasm. “Even though every decade brought slightly different types of guests, the basic clientele was always the same – the rich and famous.” In Dundr's opinion, the Alcron has always been synonymous with the highest-quality of service and a spirit of refinement and sophistication, which was something that most other establishments lacked during his time at the hotel. “We served international businessmen, and we knew them personally. For those of us who served the guests, they were never just a room number, but always a person. Obviously, there were limits to the hotel's personal approach that could not be crossed, but, we were always aware of that.”

Apart from the hotel's business clientele, Dundr also remembers the cultural and entertainment celebrities who used to frequent Alcron. “It was because the Lucerna Palace was so close.”

RESTAURANT ALCRON RESTAURANT DE LUXE	
<b>APERITIVES</b>	
Cinzano Bianco, Rosso, Bitter	Vodka SSR
Marini dry Cocktail	Slivovica 3 years old
Campari Aperitivo	Becherovka
<b>HORS D'OEUVRE</b>	
Lobster Cocktail	Roasted Roastbeef with Asparagus
Egg Alcron	Roasted Ham Praha Style
Chicken Galantine	Ham Cornet with Horseradish Cream
<b>SOUPS</b>	
Bouillon Colbert	Chicken Cream Mac Mahon
Bouillon Ohio with Cheese Sticks	Fine Chicken Cream Soup
Bohemian Onion Soup	Tomato Cream Andalous
<b>CREAM SOUPS</b>	
Ragout Opera with Chicken Liver	Spaghetti Milanese, garnished
Ham Gratinated with Champignons, garnished	
<b>ENTRÉES</b>	
Egg Maria Louise Style	Egg Bohemian Style
Omelet with Asparagus	Omelet with Ham
<b>EGG DISHES</b>	
Bombay with Chicken Meat and 4 eggs	Prague Butcher's Style
New Goring, garnished	Indian Style, garnished
<b>RISOTTOS</b>	
Fried Carp	Fish
Carp Třeboň Style with Garlic	Boiled Trout with Butter
<b>POULTRY</b>	
Roast Chicken	Trout Millet Style (According to the weight)
Chicken Bombay Style	Stuffed Chicken Interschout
Fried Chicken	Duck „Palac“ with Apples
<b>INTERNATIONAL COOKING</b>	
Sauté Stroganoff	Rumpsteak Vienna Style
Fillet of Beef Hungarian Style	Cordon Bleu, garnished
Rumpsteak Maître d'Hôtel	Pot-au-feu, Szechuan Specialty
Rumpsteak Portugal Style	Sauy-tchou-geou
<b>CZECH SPECIALITIES</b>	
Roast Duck, Dumplings, Cabbage	Fillet of Beef in Cream Sauce Dumplings
Roast Pork, Dumplings, Cabbage	Beef Goulash Stephen Style Dumplings
Pork Cutlet Prague Butcher's Style	Beefsteak Zlatochovice
Pork Steak Perlin Style	Tokati Bratislava Style
<b>A LA CARTE</b>	
Beefsteak from Grill, garnished	Fillet of Pork Oriskani garnished
Chateaubriand (for two persons)	with Spaghetti, garnished
Alcron Dish (for two persons)	Pork Cutlet from Grill
Veal Steak Praha Style	Pork Cutlet Zingens Style
Fillet of veal Liège Style	Pork Cutlet Interhotel Praha

Previous Alcron menu



Lucerna was the place where almost all concerts, balls, and many other gala events took place back then. Josef clearly remembers Gilbert Bécaud, the famous French chanson singer. "He gave me his picture with the inscription: 'Bonjour, Pepék,' but unfortunately, my mother threw the picture away a long time ago." The list of those who crossed Pepe's path at the Alcron is seemingly endless. In addition to foreign stars, there were many regular local guests such as Karel Gott, Ladislav Štáidl, Jiří Suchý, Jitka Molavcová – and the list goes on and on. Jan Werich, a popular Czech actor, frequently came to the Alcron for his favorite Pilsner beer and was served by Josef.

### Some Memories of the Original Alcron

Although the lobby area was somewhat larger in Josef's time, the fare is pretty much the same today as then: mainly sandwiches, beverages, coffee and pastries. But, Josef fondly remembers the apple strudel made by the pastry chef, Mr. Kohout. He admits that "not even my mother used to make apple strudel that delicious!" He also points out that "you could have two slices for 2.20 Czechoslovak Crowns," the monetary unit of the communist era. From today's perspective, he acknowledges that "all the prices back then seem to be from another world ... the price for an espresso was 3.60 and mineral water was only eighty hellers."

Josef Dunder, who will celebrate his sixtieth birthday on April 1, remembers other specific details of his time at the Alcron. For example, he has never forgotten the number of floors and steps he walked during one shift. "It was necessary to make the round trip down to the kitchen for absolutely everything: to order, to pick-up, and to adjust orders." During a full day's work, Josef estimates that his trips up and down the stairs equaled walking about twenty or thirty floors of twenty-four steps every day. While it was possible to order by phone, he says that "nobody ever picked up in the kitchen." During his career, Josef met two of the wives of the founder and creator of the hotel, the architect Alois Krofta. Josef acknowledges that he has "always admired Krofta's work and considers it timeless, especially the fact that the Alcron hotel was a pioneer in underground garages in downtown Prague." Dunder is probably one of only a few who still remember that there used to be a gas station in the garage.

### Back to His Family's Business

Following the fall of the Communist regime, Josef was able to reclaim his family's property, the hotel, U tří pštrosů, located below Charles Bridge on the Mala Strana side. He used his experience from his time at the Alcron to manage the restituted hotel; however, he soon decided to pass on management of the hotel to his son, Martin. Josef proudly says that he has always tried to transfer the high standard of services, for which the Alcron was and is famous, to his family's hotel.

#### De LUXE category

<b>COLD HORS-D'OEUVRES</b>	
„Liptov“ delight	10,80
Goose liver with apples	23,10
Smoked tongue „Očová“	11,90
Ham mousse in aspic	16,-
<b>SOUPS</b>	
Cabbage soup with sausage	4,80
Slovak sour mushroom soup	5,90
<b>WARM HORS-D'OEUVRES</b>	
Braised smoked sheep cheese, Tartar sauce	19,60
„Upland“ toast	21,20
<b>FISH</b>	
„Piešťany“ trout, buttered potatoes	35,90
Carp „à la squire“, boiled potatoes	28,20
<b>READY DISHES</b>	
„Bratislava“ rump steak, bread dumplings	37,50
Brigands' rolled meat, roast potatoes	30,10
Veal paprika, dumplings	25,-
„Stupava“ pork loin, cabbage dumplings	29,80
Roast lamb loin, shollet	27,70
„Cífer“ roast duck, red cabbage in wine, pancakes	45,-
<b>DISHES MADE TO ORDER</b>	
Brigands' sword, ½ rice, ½ fried potatoes, Tartar sauce	72,30
Foil-roast mixture „zhivanska“	42,20
Tinker's pouch, roast potatoes	49,80
„Važec“ delight	46,-
Turkey breast fillet UNIGAL, steamed rice	54,90
„Červený Kameň“ Beefsteak, fried potatoes	73,10
<b>PASTRY DISHES</b>	
Dumplings with soft sheep cheese „brindza“	11,10
Potato dumplings with poppy-seeds	10,10
Wagonner's dumplings	14,60
Cottage-cheese balls with fruit and whipped cream	23,-
Apple and butter strudel	6,70
„Bratislava“ croissants	3,-

Menu from August 1985

## The Loves of a Blond

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The Alcron has witnessed many events and personal stories over its long history, but none are quite as sad as the bitter sweet story of a young girl who very much wished to be a movie star....



During the filming of the movie, *Lásky jedné plavovlásky/The Loves of a Blond*, in the city of Zruč, Czechoslovakia, the world-famous director Milos Forman, picked a very beautiful blonde from the city to play a prominent role in his movie.

During the course of the filming, this lady fell in love with one of the lighting engineers. She was young, good-hearted and naive, yet eager to experience life. The handsome lighting engineer led her on, somehow forgetting to mention that he had a wife and a child in Prague. Thus, during those several weeks of shooting in Zruč, they carried on a torrid love affair. When the shooting was over, the lighting engineer returned to Prague. But, before he left, he told the blonde from Zruč to wait for him-- that he would send for her soon. So she waited and waited. In the end she headed for Prague by herself. Once there, she found out that the lighting engineer had a family and he refused to even acknowledge that he knew her. Sadly, she realized that she had few options in Prague, or elsewhere. But, she was very beautiful, and so she decided to take advantage of her beauty and became a lady of the night.

She was particular, however, and so her favourite place to meet men was in the small bar at the Hotel Alcron and Hotel Jalta. She was also very discerning, and required her clients to pay her in the hard currency of the time. She was basically biding her time, waiting for a screen test that would make her a part of the film industry again.

Unfortunately, at that time the biggest pimp in Czechoslovakia was the State. All prostitutes were supposed to provide the police with information about their "dates." In turn, the police, if they chose to, would use this information to blackmail foreigners. However, the blond girl of Zruč did not want to blow the whistle on her "escorts." She was not into the spying game. As a consequence, she was put in jail for several weeks and when she returned to the Alcron bar after her release, she was soon imprisoned again. Essentially, that was the life of prostitutes—in and out of jail.

Milos Forman eventually heard the tales of woe about the blonde from Zruč and



*Milos Forman accepting Oscar*

was dismayed enough to go search for her. He related the following. "One evening I went to the Alcron but the blond of Zruč was not there. One of her colleagues told me that she was 'inside' (jailed) again." At that time, the State was making the laws and so could violate them as they chose—and no one could argue against them. So eventually the StB (state secret police) "found" something on the blonde from Zruč, and for several months she was not seen or heard from.

Forman finally did meet up with her, and according to him, "she seemed to be almost moved by seeing me again. Then I noticed her hiding her hand from me. I grabbed the hand and there was a scar on her wrist gaping at me." She pulled her arm away and sadly explained to him. "I did not know what else to do. I was held for a long time in investigatory custody where the regime was even harsher to me than usual after the verdict. The jail cell was small and only a tiny tip of the sky filtered in through a little window near the ceiling." Totally alone and depressed, the blonde of Zruč decided to end her life. However, committing suicide in jail was not easy. "But," she proudly told Forman, "I was clever." She said that she told the warden she was an actress and that she had to take care for her face, and therefore, needed her toilet bag. "The warden," she continued, "never left me alone, but one day I managed to take out and hide a small mirror that I attempted to use that night to end my life." The blonde of Zruč lost consciousness, but did not die. Instead, she woke up in a hospital where the doctors had saved her life.

In 1968, after the Warsaw Pact armies invaded Czechoslovakia, the country's borders opened for a while and the blond of Zruč disappeared from Prague and the Alcron bar forever.

*This article is an excerpt from the book, Co já vím?/What Do I Know?, by Milos Forman and Jan Novák, published by Atlantis in 1994.*

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published by: Villard Books, Random House Inc., New York, 1994, Random House of Canada Ltd., Toronto 1994.

**Milos Forman ranks among the world's most famous directors, due to such acclaimed films as, *Vlasy/Hair*; *Přelet nad kukaččím hnízdem/One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*; *Amadeus*; *Lid vs. Larry Flint/The People vs. Larry Flint*, *Muž na měsíci/Man and the Moon*, among others.**

**His movie, *Lásky jedné plavovlásky/The Loves of a Blond*, is one of the Czech films that is most often shown abroad. It is a story of a naive girl who lives in a small town where ten women fall in love with the same man. The heroine of the story simply longs for "a trifle of human love."**



## IV. The Phoenix Arises from the Ashes – The Alcron since 1989



After the political, economic and social changes that occurred in Czechoslovakia in the early 1990s, the descendants of Alois Krofta made restitution claims for the Alcron Hotel. In the several years it took to reconstitute the hotel, the building fell into total disrepair, exhibiting no hint of its former elegance and grandeur. The descendants sold the premises to the company, Crown WSF, which immediately started the costly reconstruction.

The architect's intention was to preserve the original hotel style and thus revive its famous tradition. The fact that the building is situated in the old center and is

protected by the Prague Heritage Association played an important role in the reconstruction plans. The hotel's Art Deco renovation resulted in a treasure hunt since many art pieces from the original hotel had to be tracked down in Prague's antique shops. In many cases, copies of the original furniture also had to be created. The present Alcron retains many unique and valued pieces of interwar Czech Art Deco.

The entire hotel was refurbished under the direction of the Czech architect Ivo Nahálka and his company Archina. The interior was designed and developed by the Greek interior designer, Maria Katsarou-Vafiadis, who was at that time Director of G. A. Design International Ltd. She preserved several historic pieces of the original interior, including the Secession fireplace that separates the lobby from the Alcron Seafood Restaurant, and the lobby's most remarkable feature, the marble staircase with copper railings. The columns were reproduced according to the original design using green "Verde Guatemala" marble. The floor in the lobby is an exact replica of the original Alcron's square



pattern using white and green marble.



Crown WSF's success in reconstructing the Hotel Alcron to its former glory, was rewarded when the hotel won an award for Best Interior Design of a Refurbishment of an Existing Hotel - Luxury Category, at the HotelSpec European Hotel Design & Development Awards '99.

Today, as a part of the Radisson Blu group, the hotel has reclaimed its former status as one of the most splendid 5-star Hotels in Prague. Since its re-opening in August 1998, many world-famous celebrities have stayed in the Alcron, including: John Malkovich, Gerard Depardier, Pierre Richard, Nick Cave, Maceo Parker, Lou Reed, Mike Oldfield, Cher, Iron Maiden, Marilyn Manson, Manic Street Preachers, David Coulthard, Michael Johnson, the Judas Priest Band, Garry Kasparov, Her Majesty Maria Teresa

and Henry, Duke of Luxembourg, Silvio Berlusconi and Anders Fogl Rasmussen.

## V. The Case of the Purloined Guest Register

In a city of living history, artifacts can turn up almost anywhere. Consider the case of the lost celebrity guest register at the Alcron Hotel. When it opened in 1932 under the stewardship of owner and architect Alois Krofta, the Alcron was the only luxury-class hotel in the city. Over the next seven years, it played host to a dazzling retinue of international screen celebrities, athletes and political figures. Many were asked to sign their names in a special guest book, a stately bound volume befitting the inscriptions of maharajas and movie stars. As the clouds of war gathered, the book's tone darkened as well, with diplomatic and military signatures suddenly filling the pages. The chronology stopped abruptly in June 1939, resuming in April 1948 with a sharply different focus. Celebrity signatures were rare, crowded by foreign dignitaries, Soviet officials and long lists of dinner guests attending state functions. Czechoslovak president Klement Gottwald came to the hotel to hand out achievement awards to "worker teams." The Central Council Labor Union played host to delegates from the Soviet Union. Even the ink seemed to degrade, bleeding purple through the cream-colored pages. With a final, scrawled Russian signature on Sept. 24, 1951, the book disappeared. Whether it was stolen, hidden or sold remains a mystery. What's certain is that someone made off with it, and for three decades it seemed irretrievably lost. Then, in 1983, the register was discovered in an antique bookstore in Prague and returned to the hotel. Time had wrought serious damage. About 25 pages had been sliced out and the signatures cut into strips, as if an autograph dealer were preparing them for sale. Fortunately, many of the strips were still in an envelope tucked inside the cover. By matching page colors and tapping the memories of former hotel employees, the Alcron staff was able to piece together a partial but illuminating chapter of local history. "The book is a treasured exhibit for Radisson SAS [current hotel management company, ed.] and a microcosm of the city of Prague," says [former] General Manager Stefan Buchs. "For years, the Alcron was a social point of the city, the place where kings, ministers and actors alike stayed. Like the city, the hotel suffered through dark days. The register book reflects this, and is really a historical archive."

The parade of potentates from across the globe – Pakistan, India, Australia, Colombia, Brazil, Mexico and Egypt and nearly every major country in Europe – is stunning, a heady mix of bureaucrats, diplomats and royalty. There are ministries of every stripe – transportation, commerce, and military affairs – arriving from points as disparate as Poland and Uruguay. Members of Parliament signed in from London and Delhi, India. A Vatican delegate sits cheek-by-jowl with the chargé d'affaires from Argentina. And nobility arrives in elaborate, sweeping swirls: Baron Stein from Germany, Prince Eugen of Sweden, Princess Yrena from Greece and Denmark, His Highness Sir Ibrahim and other assorted rajas and sultans. But the reasons for their visits, their speech, manner and motivations are all left unrecorded. And other signatures in the book will always remain a mystery, either indecipherable or too obscure to trace. In that sense, the registry reads like an unfinished novel, teeming with interesting characters, leaving the imagination free to fill in details of international intrigue.



(Reprinted from an article in the Prague Post written by Frank Kuznik.)



## **VI. Brief chronology of the Alcron Hotel's History**

1929	Construction work started
1930	Construction work completed
1932	Hotel opened for business
1948	Hotel nationalized
1992	Krofta family made restitution claims
1995	CROWN WSF Co., bought the property and started reconstruction
1996	RADISSON SAS signed a management agreement with CROWN WSF Co.
1998	Reconstruction completed and the hotel reopened under the name of RADISSON SAS HOTEL PRAHA
2000	CROWN WSF gained the legal right to use the name "Alcron" – since then till 2009 the hotel has been called the RADISSON SAS ALCRON HOTEL
2009	The hotel changed its name to RADISSON BLU ALCRON HOTEL following the withdrawal of SAS from the partnership with Rezidor Hotel Group