

David Černý

# SECRETS of Prague

Translated by David Livingstone











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**DAVID ČERNÝ  
SECRETS OF PRAGUE**

**Translated by David Livingstone**

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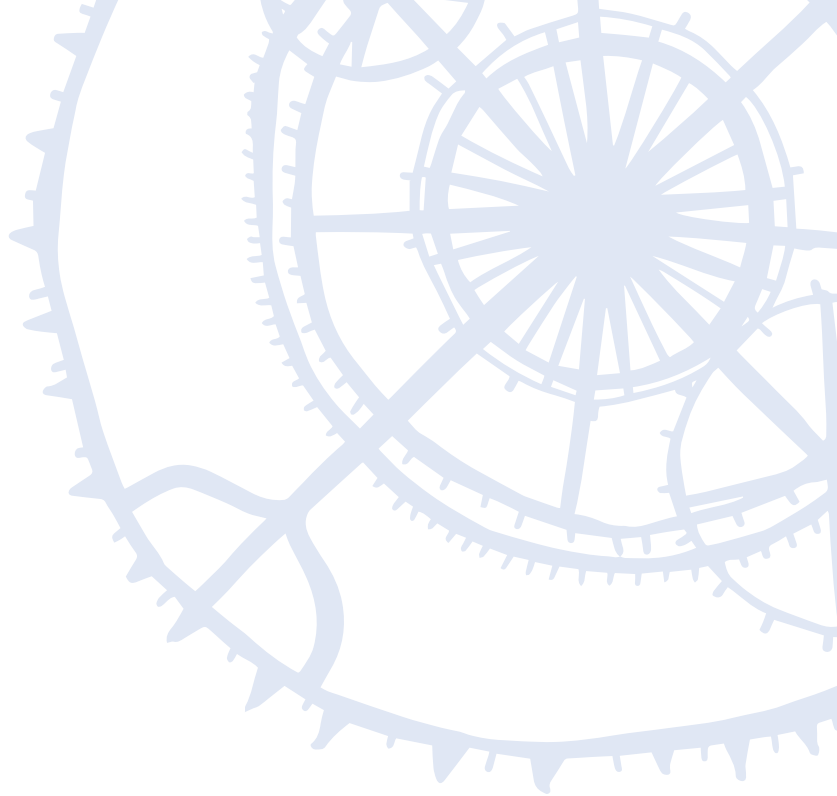
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Grada Publishing

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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<b>On the hedgehogs in the bell tower of the Church of Saint Peter (Petrská zvonice) .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>1. The mystery of the Lesser Town (Malostranský) graveyard .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>2. The statue of Bruncvík on Charles Bridge .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>3. The predecessor to Charles Bridge .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>4. The four spheres of the Old Town Bridge Tower .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>5. A Prague mystery .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>6. The balcony at Charles Bridge .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>7. The Old Town Weir .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>8. When Sigismund speaks out .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>9. The eel Pepa from the fountain of the insurance office .....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>10. The Devil's stones .....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>11. A stroll to the three Prague 'est' .....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>12. Where the oldest Prague traffic sign is located .....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>13. Loreta .....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>14. The Clementinum .....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>15. Pacifik .....</b>	<b>68</b>

<b>16. St. Nicholas Church .....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>17. Guard stones .....</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>18. The final living witness to the martyr's death of 14 Franciscans .....</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>19. Trees on Petřín hill .....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>20. When animals were bred at the Prague Castle .....</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>21. Churches of Charles IV in the Prague New Town.....</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>22. Hidden signs and legends of the Prague astronomical clock .....</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>23. Moving of the Saint Wenceslas column .....</b>	<b>106</b>
<b>24. Břetislavova Street .....</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>25. House at the Last Lantern on Zlatá ulička (Golden Lane) .....</b>	<b>112</b>
<b>26. The horse Ardo .....</b>	<b>116</b>
<b>27. The Pachtá z Rájova Palace .....</b>	<b>120</b>
<b>28. Marian column .....</b>	<b>124</b>
<b>29. House at the Green Frog (dům U Zelené žáby) .....</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>30. The mystery of the Faust House .....</b>	<b>130</b>

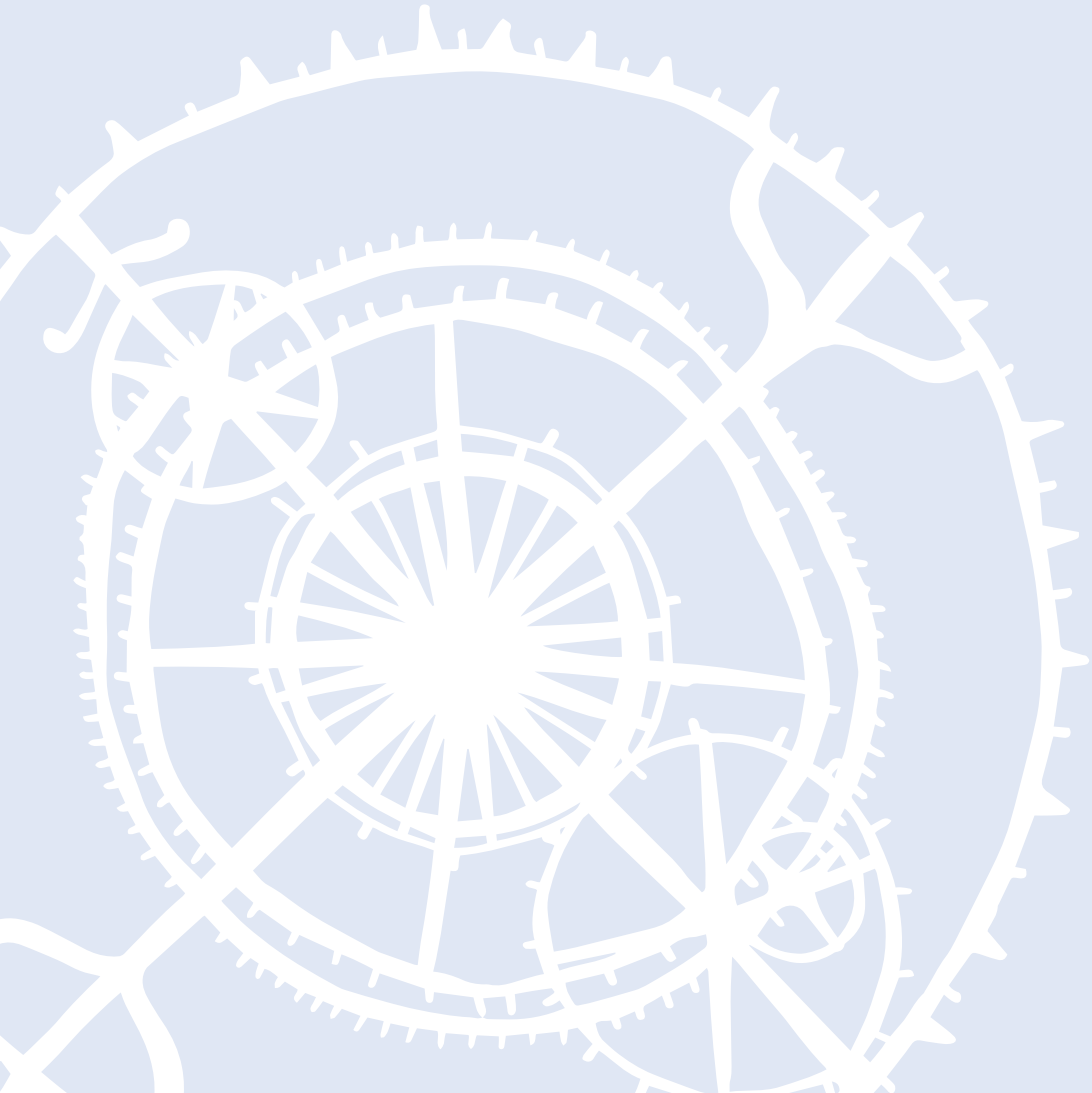






Photo: Karel Dobes

To my father  
who initiated me into  
the secrets of Prague





## On the hedgehogs in the bell tower of the Church of Saint Peter



Photo: Lenka Petruželová

### DAVID ČERNÝ

I feel fortunate to have come from an old Prague family. We used to be bakers in the quarter called *Petrská čtvrť* on the corner of *Samcova* and *Petrská* streets.

The bakery of the Černý family stood for centuries near the bell tower of the Church of Saint Peter (*Petrská zvonice*). The bell tower is a lovely ancient structure, adjoining one of the oldest churches in Prague. It is not all that usual for a church to be consecrated to the apostle Peter. Since the main basilica of the Catholic Church in Rome is consecrated to Peter, there was a tradition that this consecration should not be overused. Cathedrals of Saint Peter are therefore usually found in Britain in the Anglican Church, but churches of this consecration tend to be rare in the Catholic world. There are three bells still ringing in the tower of the church which has stood near the Prague locale called *Florenc* for almost 900 years: Peter from the year 1691, Paul from the year 1724 and the smallest death knell. There used to be another fourth bell, John the Baptist, but it was melted down during the war along with thousands of other bells.

A restless boy used to assist with the ringing in the tower – a student from the local parish school – the famous Czech Romantic poet Karel Hynek Mácha, who injured himself falling from

Painting by Václav Jansa, ca. 1890



*The well-known Prague painter Václav Jansa painted St. Peter's bell tower in the year 1890 with the hanging signboard of Jan Černý. The bakery of the great-great grandfather of the author of the book was located in a corner building. A shop, where the old Prague baking family sold bread and their famous rolls, was in the tower gate.*

a beam. He later hid the scars on his face under a thick beard in adulthood. Small Ignác – later Hynek Mácha – could also have been a fellow student of my great-great grandfather, a baker from Petřská quarter, who he could have met not only on the school benches, but also specifically in the bell tower, in the gate of which the family ran their store. Not long ago, my father showed me a niche in the masonry of the tower which served as a shelf. It was a strange feeling when I inserted my hand and caressed the stones, as if I was connecting with my ancestors through this stone. A family of hedgehogs also lived with our bakery family. This adorable animal is actually traditionally linked with bakers, as they would eat the ancient enemy of bakers, cockroaches. Generations of people and hedgehogs lived for centuries in mutual symbiosis up to the year 1951

when Communists took over the business, eventually closed the store, and finally even knocked down the whole building. I don't know where the hedgehogs disappeared, but I'm glad that at least the stories which my father told me have been preserved, which he knew from his baker grandfather. Although the story about hedgehogs and Karel Hynek Mácha is romantic and lovely, the thought of having to get up at two in the morning and bake bread rolls, day in and day out, scares me to be honest.

David Černý





Photo: David Černý





Photo: David Černý

*The tombstone by the sculptor Jan Max, which was paid for by an unknown nobleman from Velkopřevorské Square, continues to attract children up to the present day who believe the holy girl can provide assistance.*



# The mystery of the Lesser Town (Malostranský) graveyard

## The legend of the holy girl

The Lesser Town graveyard is a remarkable locale on the border of the neighbourhoods of Smíchov and Košíře. It is enclosed by two large, busy roads – Plzeňská and Vrchlického streets. It is not actually located in the Lesser Town, but far beyond its fortifications. People have not been buried here since the end of the nineteenth century and the graveyard faced extinction a number of times. It could have easily been partitioned up and built upon.

**T**he most frequently visited spot in the graveyard is the smallest of all of the graves – the tombstone of a girl named Anna Degenová, who died at the age of three. Her lovely and moving tombstone was commissioned in the year 1851 from the sculptor Jan Max by a certain Velkopřevorské Square nobleman.

One can read on the faded inscription: “Anna Degenová (1848–1851), daughter of the Imperial-Royal constable and warden.” Anna’s parents are buried in a grave slightly further on.

When souls were handed out in heaven for newly born children, a mistake was made according to a legend. The angels accidentally gave an angelic soul to Anna instead of a human one, and when the girl came into this world, a bright star shone in the heavens, the birds twittered with joy, all the flowers and trees from wide around came into bloom. It seemed

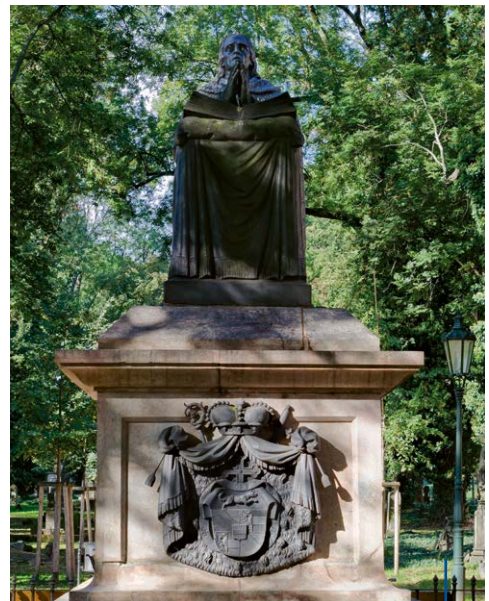


Photo: Tomáš Sysel

*The cast-iron tombstone of the kneeling Bishop Leopold Thun-Hohenstein is the most prominent feature of the entire graveyard.*





Photo: Tomáš Sysel



as if nature itself experienced joy from the arrival of this angelic child.

Young Anna was overflowing with goodness, inviting beggars and thieves to her home. She would give them everything she could all of the time. She would tell her parents that she felt an obligation to help deep in her heart.

According to legend, Anna understood the languages of animals and flowers. Earthly existence was, however, too great a burden for this angelic soul. People were unable to value her heavenly virtue and love.

One day when Anna was playing in a window with a cloth doll, a great gust of wind blew the toy from her hands. When she reached out for the rag doll, she fell from the third floor to the ground.

She was dead on the spot. God took mercy on her earthly suffering. He took her young angelic soul back to Him. "When she saw a sickly child suffering from hunger or lacking something, she would immediately, without hesitation, run to the nearest door and knock on it ... At times she would ask for flour, other times for fruit, other times for a warmer blanket or a pillow." Her neighbours did not even know why, but they always complied with Anna's requests. She received the nickname, the holy girl, due to how willingly she cared for others.

Anna continued with her help, however, even after her death. It is said that she saved the inhabitants of the orphanage Under Petřín (Pod Petřínem). One of the orphan girls once ran off to the Lesser Town graveyard in order to ask the holy girl for healing. The other

girls and nun governesses set off to find her, only for a bolt of lightning to hit the orphanage. If the children and their governesses had remained in the building, they would have perished.

Children have not forgotten about the girl. They still bring toys, holy pictures and flowers to her tombstone to this day and ask Anna for help. Her tombstone is always covered with candles and flowers on All Souls' Day.

## Who lies in the graveyard

The picturesque Lesser Town cemetery is located not far from the busy Anděl interchange where the Prague neighbourhoods Smíchov and Košíře meet. Although currently enclosed by two busy roads (Plzeňská and Vrchlického streets), it consists of an oasis of calm in the midst of the big city. Renowned figures of the Enlightenment and the National Revival rest in the shade of its trees including Ignác Cornova, Jakub Tandler, Gustav Pflieger Moravský or Václav Pešina z Čechorodu, important architects, sculptors and painters, such as the Dietzenhofers, the Platzer brothers, Antonín and Václav Mánes, Adolf Kosárek and Vincenc Morstadt, or generations of friends and admirers of the work of W. A. Mozart: František X. Dušek and Josefína Dušková, Jan Vítěšek or Václav Tomášek.

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*People have not been buried in the Lesser Town graveyard since the end of the nineteenth century.*

## The statue of Bruncvík on Charles Bridge

### A border post between the Old Town and the Lesser Town

The statue of Bruncvík on Charles Bridge has a privileged position. It is not located on the stone balusters, but somewhat to the side on a bridge pillar, which was built on the actual edge of Kampa. It's actually the final pillar on the Lesser Town end.

It is no coincidence that this knight from romantic legend stands specifically here. In contrast to all of the other statues on Charles Bridge, it serves an additional function. It's actually a border stone, a kind of post which defines the border between the Old Town and the Lesser Town. Bruncvík is holding a shield in his left hand, which rests on the ground, in the form of the coat-of-arms of the Prague Old Town, which is visible from the Lesser Town. It serves in similar fashion as a sign, these days by the highway, indicating the beginning of a town, district, region or country. Bruncvík also gazes out at the bridge in order to guard the border on the bridge between both Prague towns.

It should be pointed out that for many years Prague was composed of four completely independent towns: the Old Town and the New Town on the right bank and the Lesser Town and Hradčany

(the Castle district) on the left bank of the river Vltava. These towns had their own administration and their own legal codes and even, long ago, different measurement units. And there was of course a great deal of bickering between the Prague towns. The inhabitants would frequently even take up arms against one another. There was an ancient quarrel understandably as to who the river belonged to. The current of the Vltava was an important source of energy, which was used for turning mills and hammer mills. After extensive quarrels, the Vltava fell under the authority of the Old Town, which marked its property with the border column on the edge of Kampa on the bridge pillar.

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*Bruncvík is holding in his left hand a shield with the coat-of-arms of Old Town Prague. His gaze, across the golden sword, guards the border between the Prague towns.*





Photo: Tomáš Sysel

## Bruncvík's miraculous sword

The knight from the romantic legend saved a lion from an enormous dragon. The symbol of this celebrated victory became the two-tailed lion in the national coat-of-arms of the Lands of the Bohemian Crown. According to legend, Bruncvík received the miraculous sword from King Olibrus. This weapon could chop off the heads of all enemies upon command. Bruncvík is holding a sword of this kind on Charles Bridge, but according to legend it was lost after his death. It is either walled up in a pillar on Charles Bridge or was thrown into the river. The miraculous sword will appear when the Czech Lands will be in deepest need. Blaník Mountain will open up and knights, led by Saint Wenceslas, will ride out. Upon crossing the Vltava across Charles Bridge, the Saint's white horse will trip and the miraculous sword will fall out of the bridge. Saint Wenceslas will take hold of the newly found Bruncvík's weapon, lead an attack with it and chop off the heads of all the enemies of the Czech Lands. According to a legend about King Ottokar II of Bohemia, the Czech ruler threw the sword into the Vltava River after a victory over the Hungarian king. He who holds the sword, which will be brought to the surface by a pike, will become King, and with the help of the sword, will proceed from victory to victory.

The nearby Old Town weir is therefore not straight, but slanted in order to drive as much water as possible to the Old Town mills. The Old Town also used the statue of the knight to publicly declare its right to collect a toll on Charles Bridge, which had been granted to them by King George of Poděbrady in the year 1459 and was consequently confirmed by King Vladislaus II.

The current appearance of the statue is not the original one. It was created

