

4 An alchemist in his vault, trying to manufacture gold, undated.



SUCH eminent astronomers as Johannes Kepler and Tycho de Brahe worked at the court of Emperor Rudolph II in Prague. Alongside these learned men, however, the place also thronged with astrologers, magicians, alchemists and charlatans of every stripe. Many of these wise souls knew exactly what to promise as a means of extracting money from the Emperor's purse. A golden potion, the elixir of life, was said to extend earthly existence by many years.

10 I like so much to look on the
weathered brow of the old castle;
even a child's eye climbs
up there.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Larenopfer*

Ferdinand Engelmüller, *Prague Castle*, 1908.



ALL strangers visiting the antiquities of Prague are astonished on entering a small, quite curious little dead-end alley up at the Prague Castle. Tiny, bizarre-looking little cottages, almost like gingerbread houses in a child's fairy tale, stand there, and each contains no more than two little rooms.

Rudolf Illovy

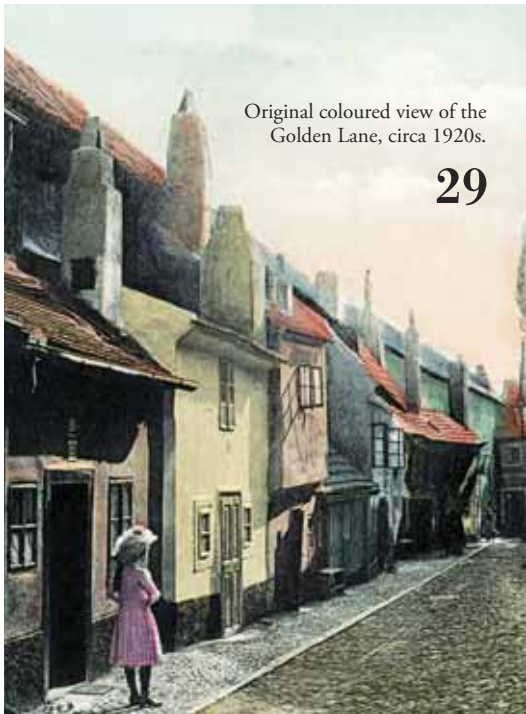


Václav Jansa, *The Golden Lane*, 1897. **18**

THE ground on which the little houses stood belonged to the imperial estate, yet the properties were not passed on only by inheritance or marriage; they were also frequently sold by the original castle marksmen and their descendants. By 1871, the lane was already so well-known that even a newspaper in distant Graz reported: "Someone in Prague recently came cheaply by a house. At the executors' sale held on 23 November, a house on Golden Lane at the Hradschin was bought for 11 fl. 20 cr."

Original coloured view of the
Golden Lane, circa 1920s.

29



OTTLA Kafka had rented the cottage (no. 22) without her family's knowledge. She had it white-washed, put clothes hooks up in the hallway, and provided cane seats. Kafka later remarked that he knew of no more comfortable chairs than these. As the house was still standing empty, Ottla was happy to let her brother use it when he asked if he could spend a few days writing in the quiet room.

52 True peace could soon only be found in the evening hours, or early mornings before the tourist groups arrived; and of course, if the lane was closed, for a state visit, say, or repair work.

The Golden Lane at night.



FIVE years after the Velvet Revolution, the long-closed guard's walkway was reopened to the public. More comprehensive reconstruction was undertaken in 2010 and 2011, including archaeological digs, and new drains, while the structure of the cottages was also secured. Some of the properties were set up as displays, in keeping with the old museum idea, featuring reconstructed scenes from the history of the lane, while others house small shops.