



## GOLDEN LANE IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Thus, by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the residents had long been aware of the business opportunities presented by the picturesque lane. They could not help noticing the artists, who regularly set up their easels at the mouth of the alleyway to capture the never-changing view for the blossoming tourist industry. The Golden Lane became one of the Golden City's central motifs. Hundreds, and then thousands, of watercolours and charcoal drawings found their way into salons and living rooms near and far. Even renowned artists succumbed to the charm of the place. The oil paintings of the lane by Antonín Slaviček became very well known. The German-Austrian genre painter Wilhelm Gause created a detailed masterpiece when he painted the Alchemists' Alley in 1914, probably during a stopover in Prague.

Photographers were carrying their equipment up the "Stone Moat" [Na Opyši] to the lane ever more often, to snap the doll's house architecture and capture scenes of everyday life there for posterity. Elderly ladies in long skirts and aprons look up at us from the pictures and old postcards, old men sit pensively on low stools, surrounded by stout women with washtubs and children who crouch at

the edge of the alleyway, playing with dolls. The sharp photographic light of days past reveals more and more façade details, long since removed: enamel signs, wooden beams, skylights, along with what was then the familiar stuff of life in the alley: baskets, washtubs and ladders for airing laundry. The romantic beholder may even find beauty in the weeds sprouting from the cobbled ground in many a yellowed photo.

Authors and poets followed hot on the heels of the painters before the First World War, the most famous of them being one Franz Kafka, who set up shop here for a few months. The cottage at no. 6, on the right of the alley, no longer exists, but it was linked to the Czech poet Jaroslav Seifert, who wrote his poetry collections *Osm dní* [Eight Days] and *Světlem oděná* [Robed in Light] here before the World War. Gustav Meyrink, who had a weakness for the occult and any kind of mystery, found the place incredibly alluring. His masterpiece *Walpurgis Night* celebrates the atmosphere of the lane, redolent with myth, and anyone who has read his great novel *The Golem* will know of the House at the Last Lantern: "According to an old legend, there's a house up there on the Alchemists' Lane which can

Wilhelm Gause, *The Alchemists' Little Houses at the Prague Hradschin*, 1914. An extremely valuable and detailed painting shows Golden Lane two years before Franz Kafka came and went from here. The Kafka house is often depicted as green, but here it is shown with a coat of sky-blue paint. The entrances on the right-hand side were later removed. In those days, the house mark at no. 23 was not of a guardian angel but featured a Madonna with the Christ Child.



## THE EMPEROR'S ALCHEMISTS

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. They claimed that a red mass, known as the philosopher's stone, would enable them to turn base metal into gold. The alchemists were firmly convinced that one substance could

be transformed into another through secret knowledge. Thus, it stood to reason that gold could also be created artificially, especially as the word "gold" was on everybody's lips, and spirits were running high thanks to rumours of fabulous goldmines being found in the New World. Such exaggerated claims were only one aspect of alchemy, though. Its disciples also saw themselves as students of nature, and had various proud achievements to their names. Master distillers had succeeded in transforming metal in almost miraculous ways, and had thus (re)invented porcelain. Only much later could modern



TOP LEFT: alchemical symbols and secret signs. • TOP RIGHT: Joseph Léopold Ratinckx, *The Alchemist*, 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century. • OPPOSITE PAGE: Jan Matejko, *The Alchemist Sendivogius*, 1867. Sendivogius, a physician, philosopher and naturalist also worked at the court of Rudolph II in Prague, where he was said to have transmuted a silver coin into gold in the emperor's presence in 1604.



## GOLDEN LANE NO. 22 (20)

**No. 47**  
**Wolff Ginderman (oder Gunderman)**  
**1 stubl**

The character of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century cottage was considerably changed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. A new wall created a hallway and a window was added looking out over the lane. A classical double door gives access to the main room, which has a view of the Stag Moat, and where there was a stove facing

number 21 next door. Behind the door to the left of the entrance, wooden stairs lead up to a tiny attic, lit in Kafka's time by a dormer window. From here you could reach the chimney via a simple platform. Another door and steep stone steps lead to the cellar, that arches into the late-Gothic blind arcade. In around 1916, the house was the property of lithographer Bohumil Michl, a widower who married the widow Františka Roubalová, née Šofrová, in 1910. Like its neighbours, this cottage also witnessed tragedies, such as the death on 1 October 1914 of Bohumila, the couple's daughter together, at the age of two. After her husband passed away



Zde žil Franz Kafka



OPPOSITE PAGE: little house no. 22 – now a bookshop dedicated to Franz Kafka. The inscription below reads “Franz Kafka lived here” [Zde žil Franz Kafka]. On the right Franz Kafka, circa 1916.



THIS PAGE, ABOVE LEFT: the attic in Kafka's little house at no. 22. • BELOW LEFT: steps and the cellar vault at no. 22 • RIGHT: Kafka and his sister Ottla, circa 1914.

*“At times, Ottla seems to me all I'd wish for in a mother in the distance: pure, truthful, honest, consistent, humility and pride, susceptibility and distance, devotion and independence, reserve and courage in infallible balance.”*

Franz Kafka to his fiancée Felice, on 19<sup>th</sup> October 1916.