

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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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