

# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 157, No. 108

Thursday, June 2, 2011

## Bohemian attorneys organization to celebrate its 100th year in Chicago

By Jerry Crimmins  
Law Bulletin staff writer

The Bohemian Lawyers Association of Chicago, considered to be the oldest ethnic bar association in Illinois and possibly in the U.S., is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year.

Founded in 1911, it has numbered among its members a governor and an attorney general of Illinois, a member of the Illinois Supreme Court, justices of the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, many Cook County judges, mayors in the Chicago area and other public officials.

The group has scheduled its centennial dinner for Sept. 30 at the Hilton Chicago hotel.

In its founding year of 1911, "there was a large concentration (of Bohemians) in the neighborhood now called Pilsen," said David C. Brezina, immediate past president of the group.

"They wanted to take a bigger part in society in Chicago, so the Bohemian Lawyers was formed."

There was no independent country called Bohemia, then, but "we had to call ourselves something," he said.

(Among Bohemian-Americans in Chicago, Brezina pointed out, was Anton Cermak, considered the father of the Chicago Democratic Machine. Cermak was president of the Cook County Board and then mayor of Chicago in the 1930s until he was shot to death in a failed assassination attempt on President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933.)

Bohemians come from what was once the Kingdom of Bohemia, Brezina said, a land that was conquered by Austria in 1620 and remained under Austrian control until the end of World War I. After the war, Czechoslovakia was formed from Bohemia, Slovakia and Moravia, said Brezina.

Otto Kerner Sr., who was state attorney

general and a justice of the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, was among the founders of the Bohemian Lawyers Association of Chicago. A later member was his son, Otto Kerner Jr., who became governor of Illinois and also a justice on the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

Another famous member was retired Illinois Supreme Court Justice S. Louis Rathje.

The group calls itself on its website the oldest ethnic bar association in Illinois.

Brezina said he believes it may be the oldest in the U.S.

For instance, some other ethnic bar associations that say on the Internet they are among the oldest are the Justinian Society of Italian-American lawyers formed in 1921 and the National Bar Association, made up predominantly of black lawyers, founded in 1925.

The Bohemian lawyers group originally met in Libuse Hall, 2039 W. Roosevelt Road, Chicago, later in the Bohemia Club House, 3659 W. Douglas Blvd., also in Chicago, and in the 1950s and 1960s at Old Prague Restaurant in Cicero.

Today, the group, which has about 60 members, meets at Klas Restaurant in Cicero.

Past President Joseph M. Dvorak III, 63, said, "It used to be the Cicero-Berwyn area was significantly of Bohemian descent." Today, he said that concentration has dissipated a bit and Bohemians are found in Riverside, Westchester, Oak Brook, Indian Head Park and other western suburbs.

"The thing I get most out of it is the friendship and comradery of the members," said the newest president of the group, Joseph M. Dvorak IV, 29, son of Joseph III.

"I would say these people are always there for me if I need help with a legal

matter or a personal matter. I can always count on our members," Joseph IV said.

"It was the first bar I joined," said Assistant Cook County Public Defender Marijane F. Placek, a former president.

"It's still the friendliest bar because for your dues you get a free meal at every meeting and all the beer you can drink." The dues do seem to cover this. Dues, according to the Dvoraks, are \$175 a year; there are seven meetings a year.

"Unfortunately, I'm not a beer drinker," Placek said, "so I'm looking to change the bylaws to bourbon."

Among the organization's accomplishments are the fact that it has given out more than \$90,000 in scholarships to law students in the greater Chicago area since 1999, said Joseph F. Vosicky, on the board of managers.

For the last three years, the group has given scholarships of \$2,000 each to seven law students who are of Czech, Moravian, Ruthenian, Silesian or Slovak ancestry.

The group has also sponsored an exchange program since 1993 between The John Marshall Law School and the law school at Masaryk University in the Czech Republic. "We have had 19 students that have come to Chicago for a semester at John Marshall," Vosicky said. "We give them a free scholarship and we find them a place to live, usually at somebody's house."

That exchange program "is a huge success story," Vosicky said.

All these scholarships are provided through donations from the members.

Joseph Dvorak IV said among his plans as president are a successful centennial celebration, also getting members involved in volunteer work as had been done in past years, such as advising people in need of legal help in home foreclosures and other community work, and to recruit more members.