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John Marshall exchange with Czech Republic promotes the rule of law

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For 18 years with the help of the Bohemian Lawyers Association of Chicago, students and faculty from the law school at Masaryk University in the Czech Republic and from The John Marshall Law School have made visits back and forth to promote the rule of law.

As part of the same exchange, about 100 Chicago lawyers and judges traveled to the Czech Republic to lecture and to hear lectures, said attorney Joseph F. Vosicky Jr., a member of the Bohemian Lawyers Association who has been involved with the program.

During those years, the Czech Republic has been transformed from “a dark time” under communism to a market economy, a new constitution and a new court system, said Vosicky and John Marshall’s professor Michael P. Seng.

The exchange program — guided all along by Seng — has been so important that Vosicky said a justice on the Czech Constitutional Court once commented:

“It has provided the single most consistent, continuous contribution to the rule of law in the Czech Republic.”

This exchange program will be celebrated Sept. 30 at the 100th anniversary dinner of The Bohemian Lawyers Association in the Hilton Chicago Hotel, 720 S. Michigan Ave.

Two students from the law school known as the Faculty of Law at Masaryk University are studying at John Marshall this semester. They are Brian Fait, 22, and Marketa Filipova, 24.

“You can study U.S. law anywhere in the world in this age,” Fait said. “But I think if you want to really get into it, you have to experience American life and meet American people.”

“Chicago is amazing,” Filipova said. “It’s huge and it’s beautiful and very cosmopolitan.

“Going to America is still something very extraordinary in the Czech Republic. It’s a great opportunity for me and for Brian, too. When I go back to Europe, it will increase my job opportunities very much.”

John Marshall waives tuition for the Masaryk students to study for a semester here. Today, the Czech Ministry of Education provides their air fare. And the Bohemian Lawyers Association has over the years provided living expenses and a place to live here.

This year, Fait is staying with a John Marshall law professor, and Filipova is staying with retired Cook County Circuit Court Judge Sheila M. Murphy and her husband.

Fait is studying contracts law and intellectual property law. Filipova is studying among other things, “the American system of criminal law and how it’s done here and plea bargaining.”

“We don’t have plea bargaining in the Czech Republic,” she said, “but we are proposed to have it in a few years. I want to do research about it and write my diploma thesis about it.

“My dream job is to be a criminal judge or public prosecutor.”

Vosicky said John Marshall Professor Ann M. Lousin led a Chicago delegation to Prague in 1993, four years after the Berlin Wall fell, to witness the start of the transfer from a command economy to the market system. Vosicky went with that group.

Then in 1994, a conversation between Seng and the late Justice Vojtech Cepl of the Czech Constitutional Court, one of the drafters of the modern Czech constitution, “sparked a legal exchange” that still continues, Vosicky said.

Seng said he has gone every year to the Czech Republic since 1994. He and two other members of the Bohemian Lawyers Association choose the next candidate or candidates from Masaryk who will come to John Marshall.

Twenty-one students from Masaryk in Brno have studied for a semester at John Marshall since 1994.

“All have returned, graduated from Masaryk and are gainfully employed,” Vosicky said.

They all state “that what really opened the door was the fact that they had the opportunity to study here. They had that credential,” Seng said.

Other Masaryk students and faculty have come to John Marshall for short two-week visits.

And now that Masaryk University has introduced courses taught in English to appeal to students from other European countries, Seng said, some John Marshall students have gone to Masaryk to study for a semester.

“We have a student over there this semester, Patrick O’Brien,” Seng said. “He’s from Chicago.”

Through the same exchange, Chicago attorney Judith W. Munson, who specializes in public health law and is an adjunct professor at John Marshall, has set up a network between the U.S. and Czech Republic “in preparation for an emergency response to a pandemic,” Vosicky said.

“The interesting thing is, we are basically in touch with all the people that have been involved since 1993 or 1994, all the professors and all the students,” Vosicky said. “In fact, we get e-mails regularly.”