

Stories of the Stones

by carol jean smetana

This is the story of a brick building in Cicero, Illinois, and a granite marker at Bohemian National Cemetery. The building is familiar to many. The name on the marker, Julius Kinst, is not. But the legacy of Julius Kinst can be seen today in the T. G. Masaryk Czech School at 5701 West 22nd Place.



Opening day celebration at Thomas G. Masaryk Freethought School, September 4, 1921

(photo from Zlatá kniha,

Contemporaneous articles published in the *Denní Hlasatel*, Chicago's Czech-language newspaper, tell much of the story. The Bohemian Freethought School began offering Saturday Czech language classes in the Cicero public schools in 1912. But on October 23, 1919, the Cicero School Board voted to no longer allow the Saturday Czech classes in their schools, despite the fact that the population of Cicero at the time was reportedly 70% Czech. Three months later, in January 1920, Frank J. Petru, one of three ethnic Czechs on

the school board, offered a motion to reconsider the decision. It was defeated.

This led to two campaigns among the Czech-American community: a concerted effort to elect more Czechs to Cicero political offices including the school board; and a decision by the Bohemian Freethought School in Cicero to build their own facility so the teaching of the Czech language would not be subject to political vagaries.

By March 1920 fundraising was underway. When the Cicero School Board, now led by a new president Frank J. Petru (!), unanimously resolved to once

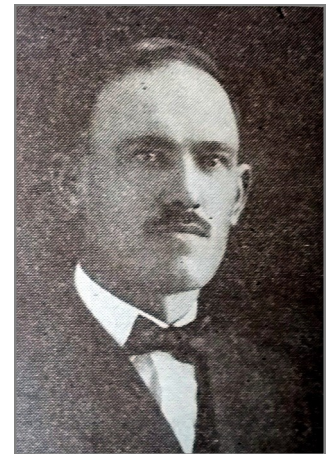
again allow the use of public schools for Saturday Czech classes in September, it didn't matter. The project would not be stopped.

The Bohemian National Cemetery Board made its first \$100 donation to the building fund in October. (The Board would make another donation of \$500 in April 1921, followed by annual donations of \$100 for several years running.)

By December 1920, a lot had been purchased at the southwest corner of 57th Avenue and 22nd Place. Karel Teplan, a compatriot

employed as an architectural draftsman by the Santa Fe Railroad in Chicago, donated his services. He designed a two-story building with three classrooms, small and large meeting halls, a three-room apartment for the janitor, two bathrooms, and a dining room in the basement. (Karel would die in 1932, and following his funeral at the Sokol Slavsky Hall in Berwyn, his body was cremated at Bohemian National Cemetery. There is no record of the disposition of his ashes.)

The contract for the construction of the school building was awarded to Julius Kinst. In addition to his

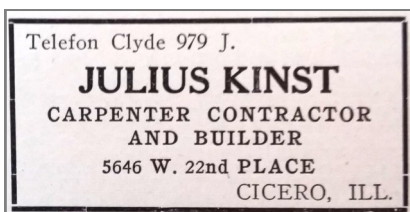


Julius Kinst photo from Zlatá kniha; the caption read "Builder, National Worker"

crew, he put out a call for carpenters and bricklayers willing to donate work on the building, and by early March 1921, construction had begun—there was less than eight inches of snow that winter of 1920-21!

On May 8, 1921, the

cornerstone was laid for what was already being called the Thomas G. Masaryk Free Thought School. The new president of Cicero's Board of Trustees, Joseph Z. Klenha, a second-generation Czech, attended the celebration.



The building was completed in August, and on September 4, 1921, the Thomas G. Masaryk Free Thought School was officially opened. The total cost, including interior furnishings and decoration, was \$35,399.

Julius Kinst, the general contractor for the project, was born in 1887 in the central Bohemian village of Pochvalov, 60 km west-northwest of Prague, the youngest of five boys. A year later his oldest brother Vaclav, at the age of 16, immigrated to Chicago. Vaclav would pay the passage for three of his brothers to join him: Vojtěch in 1904, Frantisek in 1905, and Julius in 1906. The next year Julius married Anna Sramek and in 1908 their son William was born.

The brothers' father and grandfather were carpenters in Bohemia, and the brothers carried on the family trade in the U.S. Within four years of his arrival, Julius learned English. In 1913 he began work as a self-employed contractor, and advertised his

business in the 1915 *Directory and Almanac of the Bohemian Population of Chicago (Adresář)*.

The contract to build the school capped three years of dramatic change in Julius's life. On March 9, 1917, when she was only 29 years old, his wife Anna died. The following year, on Christmas Eve 1918, Julius married Lillian Papp. In 1919 the family moved into a brand new bungalow at 2213 S. 59th Ave., most likely built by Julius himself, and on December 19th their daughter Violet was born.

The year after the Masaryk School was finished, Julius traveled alone to Czechoslovakia and spent two and a half months visiting family. He returned on July 8, 1922, just in time for the birth of his second daughter Olga on the 31st. One more daughter, Helen, was born three years later. William would be a carpenter like his father.

Active in the social life of the Czech-American community, Julius was a member of two IOOF lodges, chairman of the county committee of the Czechoslovak National Alliance of America. In 1927 he was elected the mayor of

Sokol Slavský.

That same year Julius developed an intestinal ulcer. After putting off surgery in the futile hope he would get better, he finally underwent an operation on January 23, 1928. For three weeks, he steadily improved, but suddenly Julius took a turn for the worse. His wife and son, and his brother Frank and his wife rushed to his bedside at Presbyterian Hospital, but Julius never



The Kinst monument: Julius Kinst's inscription is on the left, his wife Lillian's is to the right and her second husband's below hers.

regained consciousness and died on February 21 at 5 a.m.

Julius's funeral was held at Sokol Slavsky on 22nd Street, and he was buried at Bohemian National Cemetery. Anna later remarried; after their deaths, she and her second husband were buried in the lot with Julius.

(This article was first published in the spring 2018 issue of Heritage Happenings, Vol. XIV, No. 4, the quarterly newsletter of Friends of Bohemian National Cemetery and is used with permission.)