

## **ANTON J. CERMAK, POLITICIAN, MARTYR, FREEMASON**

**BY**

**IRA GILBERT, PM, PDDGM**

Anton Joseph Cermak was born on the 9<sup>th</sup> day of May in the year 1873. The location of his birth was Kladno, Bohemia, Austria-Hungary, now part of the Czech Republic. Anton Cermak grew up in Braidwood, Illinois, southwest of Chicago. He was married to Mary Horejs Cermak. He moved to Chicago where he became a participant in politics.

Cermak was a Democrat in his political philosophy. Before Cermak entered politics, the Chicago and Cook County political arena was run by those of the Irish community. Cermak found himself locked out of running for political office due to his ethnicity.

Cermak came from an immigrant family. His upbringing makes him cognizant of the problems facing the many immigrant communities that made up the Chicago and Cook County local. Cermak wanted to run for election as Mayor of Chicago. However, the Irish that ran Chicago politics refused him a place on the ticket.

Due to this lack of recognition, Cermak founded his own political party in order to get revenge. His ethnic background made him popular with the non-Irish population. Thus, his political party was made of non-Irish members of the population. He was able to bring together people from the Polish, Czech, Ukrainian, Italian, and Jewish population. Particularly notable was Cermak's efforts to bring those of the African American population into his political party.

In 1902, Cermak was elected to the Illinois House of Representatives. Seven years later, he was chosen as Alderman of the 12<sup>th</sup> Ward. He served in this position for several years. In 1922, Cermak was elected President of the Cook County Board of Commissioners. He became Chairman of the Cook County Democratic Party in 1928. Cermak ran for the United States Senate in 1928, but lost the election garnering 46% of the vote.

Anton Cermak was able to prevail on Franklin Delano Roosevelt to give him support on the National level. It was Roosevelt's support that enabled Cermak to bring the African American community into the Democratic Party and, in particular, his political organization.

In 1931, Cermak challenged "Big Bill" Thompson for Mayor of Chicago. After a bitter and vicious campaign, based mainly on many racial slurs, Cermak was elected Mayor, getting 58% of the vote. Cermak became the 44<sup>th</sup> Mayor of Chicago, serving from 1931 until his untimely death in 1933.

On February 15, 1933, Cermak went to Miami, Florida to be with President elect Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He was shaking hands with the President elect when an Italian immigrant named Giuseppe Zangara fired a shot, hitting Cermak in the chest. There is much controversy over whether Roosevelt or Cermak was the potential target.

After the shooting, Cermak's lung became infected, leading to his death on March 6, 1933. Cermak's personal physician gave a statement that Cermak might have survived the wound but he suffered with ulcerative colitis caused complications that were the actual cause of death. The fact that Cermak had a disease that would have shortly caused his death was a factor in his demise.

It is reported that Cermak's last words, whispered to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, were reported to be, "I'm glad it was me, instead of you".

Giuseppe Zangara was immediately arrested. He gave no defense to his heinous act. He admitted to his guilt in the attempted assassination, saying that the police had the gun and there were witnesses to his guilt. However, Zangara was not charged with murder until after Cermak's death. After a quick trial and short incarceration, Zangara was executed in Florida's electric chair on March 20, 1933.

Anton J. Cermak had many in his family that had significant achievements. His son-in-law was Masonic brother Otto Kerner, Jr. Kerner was the 33<sup>rd</sup> Governor of Illinois. He also served as a Federal Court judge. Unfortunately, Kerner was convicted of a felony, spending time in jail, and was expelled from Freemasonry.

Cermak's grandson was Frank J. Jirka. Jirka became a highly decorated member of the military. He was an underwater demolition technician who became a double amputee below the knee as the result of injuries received due to wounds suffered during the battle of Iwo Jima. After World War II, Jirka became a doctor. He eventually was elected as President of the American Medical Association.

Anton Joseph Cermak petitioned Arcana Lodge #717 on July 5, 1904. He was initiated as an Entered Apprentice on July 19, 1904, passed to the degree of Fellowcraft on November 7, 1905, and raised to the Sublime Degree of Master Mason on November 25, 1905.

Cermak demitted from Arcana Lodge and later affiliated with Lawndale Lodge #995 on October 11, 1916. Records from our Most Worshipful Grand Lodge indicate that Lawndale Lodge #995 became Westchester Lodge #995 sometime in 1980.

Anton Joseph Cermak was a just and upright member of the community, giving much during his political life. His martyrdom, taking a bullet possibly meant for our President elect, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, enabled Roosevelt to become the President that brought the United States out of the Depression and took our Nation to victory in World War II. He was not only a just and upright man, but also a just and upright Mason.