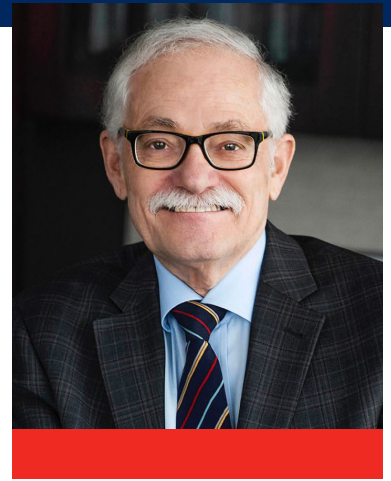


# Former geologist found his true calling in Canadian law



By Brian Cox

As the managing director of PKF Lawyers in Winnipeg, attorney Tom Frohlinger views himself as a “builder” – in addition to helping clients build their varied businesses, he has spent 25 years working to build the firm.

And he’s had a “blast” doing it.

“I have been incredibly privileged over the last 25 years to have the confidence of my partners and cohorts to build this firm into what it is today, and I’m very proud of that accomplishment,” he says.

When Frohlinger joined the firm in 2000, it had three lawyers. Today, the firm ranges between 35 to 40 attorneys, employs more than 80 people, and has six offices across Manitoba.

Frohlinger likes to tell people he “retired” in 1978 when he left being a geologist and went to law school, which he describes as among the best three years of his life.

“I had a ball in law school,” he says. “I was learning interesting stuff. I was learning it from people who were both my intellectual and chronological equivalents because the professors were all my age.”

The seeds of Frohlinger’s career switch were planted when he was a geologist for a mining company and experienced several flying mishaps and “unusual landings” while traveling to remote

sites in the field. One plane flew into powerlines. Another had its front gear collapse. After his third plane crash and a terrifying helicopter landing where he ended upside down in a river in the Canadian wilderness, Frohlinger decided he was ready to move up into management, where the job wasn’t as life-threatening.

He ended up in middle management and soon determined that if he wanted to advance higher into international mining management, he would need something other than his two science degrees.

He concluded that he needed either a law degree or an MBA.

“An MBA seemed boring,” he says, “so I decided to try my hand at law.”

The decision was also influenced by his encounters with lawyers through a program he was running for the Manitoba government that involved partnering with mining companies in major exploration and mining development.

“They spoke these wonderful words that meant absolutely nothing to me, but in terms of the practicalities, they knew diddly squat,” says Frohlinger. “I realized if these guys can do it, I can do it.”

After more than a decade as a geologist, Frohlinger enrolled at the Faculty of Law at the University of Manitoba, where he excelled, making the dean’s honor list in all three years of study and graduating second in his class. Many of his professors actually became close friends and Frohlinger says he ended up doing legal work for several of them in later years.

After he was called to the bar in 1982, Frohlinger joined Buchwald Asper Henteleff, a firm founded in 1960 by one of Winnipeg’s most prominent citizens, Israel Asper, who was a tax lawyer, media magnate, and one-time leader of the Liberal Party of Manitoba, who is also credited with the idea and vision to establish the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg.

“I cut my teeth with some of the greatest entrepreneurs in Manitoba,” says Frohlinger, adding that he was quickly given hands-on responsibility for clients. “The firm was a real incubator for business. It was fun and exciting, a real gas to solve problems.”

Solving problems is what gives Frohlinger a charge that he has never lost his love for. He finds joy in meeting people who have a vision of where they want to go in their lives or in their businesses



**As a young geologist, Frohlinger often traveled by plane and helicopter to sites in remote areas of the Canadian wilderness.**

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**Frohlinger's mother, Marta, was a shopkeeper in Budapest before fleeing Hungary with her young son in 1956. She became a hairstylist, owning her own salon and was a 'tour de force' in Frohlinger's life.**

and helping them solve the problems they encounter getting there.

Frohlinger stayed with Buchwald Asper Henteleff for almost 20 years. When he left in 2000, he was a member of the firm's managing group.

"I wanted an easier pace of life," he says of his decision to leave the firm. "Little did I realize that the pace of life wasn't dictated by where I was, but by who I was."

He joined Pullan Guld Kammerloch, a firm founded in 1924, in January of 2000. Six months later, the firm was renamed Pullan Kammerloch Frohlinger, becoming branded as PKF Lawyers in 2020.

Over the course of more than four decades as an attorney, Frohlinger has established a reputation for creative problem solving. A senior accountant that Frohlinger has worked with for 30 years once said, "There are people who think out of the box, but Tom doesn't even know where the box is."

"Many lawyers will tell a client seven ways why something cannot be done," says Frohlinger. "It's a rare lawyer who can tell the client the one way something can be done, and that's what we strive for as a firm and what I strive for in my practice."

In 2004 and 2018, Frohlinger was nominated as Ernst and Young's Entrepreneur of the Year in the professional services category for Western Canada in recognition of his stewardship of the firm, which practices in the areas of entrepreneurial and commercial law, administrative law and civil litigation.

Not long ago, Frohlinger was lecturing to a gathering of young lawyers and asked them how they ultimately wanted their clients to think of them.

"I got all sorts of answers, all of which made sense from their perspective, but the reality is that what you're striving for is to be your clients' trusted advisor," says Frohlinger. "And if you reach that goal, you will have been very successful as a lawyer, and you will

continue to get a great deal of joy out of your practice."

Frohlinger outlines three key elements to attaining the goal of becoming a client's trusted advisor. One, an attorney should like his clients.

"People work with people they like," he explains. "There will be chemistry with some clients and no chemistry with others. Strive for the clients with chemistry."

Two, attorneys should take a direct interest in their client's business and learn as much as they can about it. He never passes up an opportunity to visit a client's place of business rather than having them come to the law office.

"It never ceases to amaze me how proud and delighted these very accomplished people are to take the time to show you around, show you the nuts and bolts and where the 'secret sauce' is," says Frohlinger.

And three, deliver excellent service.

"There's no substitute for excellent service," he says simply. "Communication and service delivery are critical."

Born in Hungary, Frohlinger was 11 when he and his mother fled Budapest in the aftermath of the Soviet tank invasion during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. His father died that same year. Two years later, Frohlinger and his mother arrived as refugees in Montreal where she secured a job as a shampoo girl at a salon that less than a year later, she would then own.

Frohlinger has two photographs of his mother on his desk. In one she is 30 and the other she is 80 – her indefatigable spirit is evident in both. He describes her as a tour de force.

His mother, Martha, eventually re-married. Louie Frohlinger, a farmer who had also emigrated from Hungary, became Frohlinger's stepfather. Louie and Martha couldn't have been more different, says Frohlinger. She was an intellectual and he was more pragmatic.

Frohlinger sees himself as a synthesis of the two.

"I got my work ethic from my dad, who was up at 4 o'clock in the morning and didn't go to bed until the work was done and, by gum, I had to do the same thing," says Frohlinger. "I learned problem solving from him. He was a guy who used to straighten nails because he didn't want to throw them away, they could be used again."

From his mother, he inherited an entrepreneurial streak.

While securing his geology degree at McGill University, Frohlinger spent time with mining companies across Canada doing geological exploration, line cutting, surveying, diamond drilling, mapping, and prospecting. In 1969, he joined Manitoba's Department of Mines Resources and Environmental Management and became the head of the province's mineral administration after five years.

Those early career years developed Frohlinger's taste for Canada's north, which launched him into the commercial tourism

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business. He bought a fishing and hunting lodge in Northwestern Ontario. As owner-operator, he learned lessons in the realities of environment, fisheries, tourism, and crown lands bureaucracies.

Frohlinger has always preached the importance of lawyers giving back to their profession and community. He has helped guide many organizations and sat on several boards. He is the Honorary Consul of Hungary in Manitoba and was recently presented with the Knight's Cross of the Order of Merit of Hungary for his continuing exemplary contribution to and advancement of the economic, political, and cultural interests of Hungary in Canada. His name has been enrolled in the Registry of Hungarian Knights.

In 2023, Frohlinger was appointed King's Counsel in recognition of outstanding contributions to the practice of law. A year previously, he was awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee Medal. The medal commemorates the 70th anniversary of Queen Elizabeth's accession to the throne in 1952.

"If my mother was still around, she would think this is pretty good," says Frohlinger. "I think it was the law that opened these doors for me. It has allowed me to have a pulpit and a louder voice than I might have had as a scientist."

Frohlinger and his wife, Heather, met in law school and have been married 44 years. They have three grown children. Their eldest daughter, Alexandra, is an actress in New York and a graduate of the Boston Conservatory at Berklee. Their son, Joseph, is a computer engineer living in Seattle, and their youngest daughter is Rebecca, after 10 years as an actress and performer, is now in her first year of law school at the University of Toronto.



**Before becoming an attorney in 1982, Frohlinger worked for mining companies across Canada doing geological exploration, line cutting, surveying, diamond drilling, mapping, and prospecting.**

Frohlinger's stepfather once said to him, "Some people work to live, others live to work. My son, you are the latter."

No truer statement could have been made.

"It's been a great ride," says Frohlinger. "I'm energized every morning to come into work and I'm always having trouble parting at the end of the day because I have so many interesting things on my desk and people to talk to, and that keeps me young."