



# A VERY CULTURED AMBASSADOR

OUTGOING CZECH AMBASSADOR TO KOREA JAROSLAV OLŠA, JR. HAS BROUGHT KOREA AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC CLOSER THROUGH CULTURE

Written by Robert Koehler

A fixture of the Seoul diplomatic scene since 2008, the Czech ambassador to Korea, Jaroslav Olša, Jr., will soon be leaving Korea. “Well of course that’s very difficult,” he says about his departure. “Because when you stay somewhere five years, you have created a kind of bond with not only institutions but also persons. And I’m pretty sure that I will keep in contact with some of the people. And I will definitely keep dealing in a limited way with Korea in the future.”

## STAYING LONGER, BETTER BRANDING

Granted, Olša has been here longer than usual. Compared to most ambassadors, who stay just four years in a host nation, he’s been here for nearly six. “I feel that society has changed significantly in the 21st century and that longer terms for diplomats are better—better for the nation they serve and better for the host nation,” he says. “Traditional diplomacy said: you should be an observer and describe what you see to your headquarters. Now you should be an active participant of the daily life of the host country, because if you’re not participating in what’s going on, you can’t really do your job.”

It can be hard work representing a medium-sized nation in Seoul, where there were 107 embassies as of August. For Olša, nation branding is key to making a difference. “I don’t have to deal with big businesses so much, as Korea-Czech trade is already going well—we have big investments from Hyundai, Doosan, and GS Caltex, and they are well aware of our potential,” he says. “But when going to SMEs or universities, you must create a positive image of your country, and I think I’ve learned from the Korean side about branding and how to go into it strongly. I learned many things and used it to create a better Czech-Korean understanding.”

## A CHANGING NATION

As any long-term resident of Korea can tell you, this is a country that transforms quickly. “A gentleman I was talking with once told me that Seoul changes significantly every three years, and that somebody who hasn’t been here in the last three years has no idea what the city looks like,” Olša says, recalling just how much things have changed over his five and a half years. “Even coming in from Incheon International Airport, you see lots of changes on both sides of the highway before you enter Seoul, numerous new buildings,

plenty of new developments that were not there five years ago,” he says. “And that’s one of the things that surprised me, and which I don’t see in many other countries—that speed and zeal for change. It’s almost as if Koreans are living in a science fiction film, which may explain why they enjoy historical dramas so much—when you already live in the future, you’ve got to go back to the past to escape.”

## A SURPRISINGLY DEEP RELATIONSHIP

Officially speaking, Korean-Czech relations began in 1990, when the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Eastern European communism opened up a new diplomatic world for both nations. Unofficial contact between the Czech and Korean peoples, however, go back much, much further. As Czechs are traditionally travellers and traders with an interest in the wider world, they also came to Korea. Czechs have been involved in several of Korea’s critical moments in modern history, even if this involvement is not widely known in either Korea or the Czech Republic.

Olša retells one such incident. “I remember a couple of years ago, the Irish ambassador, who as he was leaving, spoke about the first Irishman who came to Korea,” he says. “And it was an unfortunate thing—he came with the Americans to Ganghwa-do [during the American raid on the island in 1871] and was killed there . . . A couple of years later I found that one of the men who had tried to save him, in the same battle, was Czech. And he received a Medal of Honor, the highest American



1. Korean collection of Czech literary classics, edited by Ambassador Olša  
2. Collection of Enrique Stanko Vráz’s photographs from 1901 visit to Seoul

military order.”

The first Westerner to die in Seoul was also a Czech, a Prague-born American journalist who died of smallpox soon after his arrival in Korea. Perhaps the most interesting point of early Korean-Czech interaction came in 1919, when the 60,000-strong Czechoslovak Legion in Russia passed much of its weaponry to Korean independence fighters. This came about through a meeting between Korean independence activist Lyuh Woon-hyung and Czechoslovak Legion General Radola Gaida. “There were two reasons: firstly, the Czechs had to give up their arms before leaving, and they didn’t know what to do with them,” he explains. “The second was that they were from a small nation (Czechoslovakia) newly independent from a bigger nation, so they had a feeling of togetherness with the smaller nation of Korea fighting against the bigger nation of



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Japan.” Czech machine guns and pistols were given to Koreans in Vladivostok, who smuggled the arms across the mountains into Manchuria. These weapons, in turn, were used during the Battle of Cheongsan-ri in October 1920, when Korean independence fighters defeated a much larger Japanese force. The Koreans left an impact on the Czech troops. “There are plenty of published memoirs from the Czechs in Vladivostok, and every book has at least one or two paragraphs about Koreans, how they were unhappy, how they were subjugated, and how the Japanese were harsh to them,” he says. “And even the photographs that we have from these 1919 soldiers, approximately 50 of them are of Koreans. There’s a funny photograph of a Korean wedding, and part of the wedding are two Czechoslovak soldiers standing with the bride and the groom. It’s kind of a confirmation of their close relationship.”

Olša has been particularly fascinated with Han Hung-su, a 20th-century Korean scholar who, while largely unknown in his homeland, helped launch Korean studies in Europe in the 1940s. “He was the first translator of Korean literature into German and Czech,” he says. “He wrote the very first history of Korea published in a Western language aimed at Central Europeans. He wrote it in German, but due to war it was never published in German, just translated into Czech and published in 1949.” A trained historian, Olša has worked to focus attention on Han’s contributions. “I published a very short article in the Royal Asiatic Society’s journal *Transactions* with my friend who is a professor at Vienna University, and we are now in the process of writing a 80–100 page concise history of Han and his writings,” he says. “And we also collated more than 1,000 pages of his writings, many of them found in manuscript form in German in a contemporary 1940s text, which were kept by his friend in Czechoslovakia. And this shows a man who is forgotten, a man who did something incredible for the knowledge of Korea inside Europe, but nobody in Korea knows much about him and his life and work in Europe.”

### PROMOTING KOREA-CZECH EXCHANGE

If you had to sum up Olša in one word, it would be “cultured.” He is a former journalist, coeditor of the Czech science fiction magazine *Ikarie*, and author of the Czech-language *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction Literature* in 1995. Much of his effort in Korea has gone to promoting cultural exchanges between Korea and the

Czech Republic. His endeavors—including the donation of old Czech historical materials about Korea—led him to be named an honorary citizen of Seoul in 2012. “When I was coming to Korea I knew that the presence of Czech culture in Korea was really big,” he said. “What amazed me when I arrived was that it was significantly bigger than I imagined. As I’m a former journalist and a lover of culture, I said to myself, Yes, culture is one of the ways, one of the vehicles I can make a difference with.”

What Olša found was that while Czech culture had a profound presence in Korea, said presence was not always identified with the Czech Republic. “When I arrived here the Czech Republic was understood as first, a place of great music, because Dvořák, Smetana, and Janáček were on the market and everybody who knew classical music knew them; as a beautiful tourist destination; and as a good investment opportunity,” he explains. “But Czech musicals like *Three Musketeers* were played but not very connected to other Czech-related things. People were drinking Czech beer, but it was not very visible. Milan Kundera and Franz Kafka were well-known, but Kafka was connected with Prague yet not ‘Czech,’ and Kundera was understood more as a French writer.” Olša’s job was to bring it all together. “Our aim is create a new image and also to create a wider image,” he says. “That means, yes, Milan Kundera is a French writer, but of Czech origin. I have no problem with that (laughs). And I know that half of his works were written in Czech, not French.”

The literary exchange has been particularly fascinating. While major Czech writers such as Kundera, Kafka, and Čapek are naturally available in Korean translation, so too are lesser-known works such as *Flesh* by Martin Harníček. Meanwhile, a great number of Korean writers have been translated into Czech. “When I did a bibliography of all the Korean writers in Czech translation, the number came to about 160.” One important tie concluded under Olša’s watch is an agreement between the Literature Translation Institute of Korea and leading Czech publishing house Argo to start a Korean contemporary literature series in Czech translation with the first book to be published in October.

Korean-Czech cultural exchanges extend into many other sectors, too. Olša has written a book on the relationships that exist between the Korean and Czech film industries that will soon be published in Korea; in it, he notes that the first Czech film played in Seoul in the 1930s. Korean films have been



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1. Opening of the Czech Center Seoul in the Hongdae district.  
2. Czech and Slovak photos at the Seoul International Photo & Imaging Industry Show 2011  
3. Ambassador Olša meets with famed Korean novelist Kim Young-ha.

a constant presence at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, one of Europe’s major film events, with the first major retrospective of Korean film held in 2001. Korean filmmakers make frequent use of Czech locations and studios for filming and Czech musicians for soundtracks. Olša himself has sat on the jury of the Puchon International Fantastic Film Festival (PIFAN), Korea’s second biggest film festivals.

The importance the Czech Republic has placed on exchange with Korea can be ascertained from the fact that there are only four Czech cultural centers outside of Europe: New York, Tel Aviv, Tokyo, and Seoul. “Korea is really a question of the last decade,” he says. “We have direct daily flights between our capitals, which is something that few other European countries can do, except for the big ones. And with Czech Airlines—in cooperation with Korean Air—making Prague airport its European hub, our cooperation will rise even more.”