

'Culture, Commerce Equally Important'

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Interview With Foreign Envoy

The Czech ambassador to Korea has a bookshelf in his office filled with Korean books: some Korean ones translated into Czech; some Czech literature translated into Korean; and various books by Czech authors on Korea. Some, he found in second-hand bookstores in the Czech Republic when he was appointed ambassador.

Some date as far back as the early 1900s.

The ambassador does not claim to be an expert on Korea, but hopes that his bookshelf will be one day completely filled with such books to give him a better understanding of the culture here.

"I understand ambassadors usually speak about the importance of trade and investment. But, it is also important not to forget the cultural ties between nations. It is my personal priority to create and support cultural exchanges," Ambassador Jaroslav Olsa, Jr. said in an interview.

As part of these efforts, Olsa took a trip to Andong in North Gyeongsang Province and Jeju Island just this past weekend.

"Korea is not a completely unknown country in Czech, but little is known about it there, and the Czech Republic is not much known in Korea as well — maybe except for the country being a popular tourist destination among Koreans or Czech beer," the ambassador said.

The same applies to literature. It is not that there's no Czech literature translated into Korean, or Korean literature into Czech, there is, but Olsa thinks there is a lot more to be shared and exchanged.

One Czech writer known to Korean readers is Karel Capek.



Czech Ambassador Jaroslav Olsa, Jr.

Three works by him — "Ordinary Life," "Hordubal" and "Meteor" — were published in Korea.

The ambassador praised him for the quality of his work, worth a Nobel Prize in literature, if he could have prolonged his life a little longer. He died in 1938 at the age of 48.

But what is unknown about Capek is the fact that he was the one who introduced the word "robot" to the world. The word first appeared in his play "Rossum's Universal Robots" which premiered in 1921. It stemmed from the Czech lan-

guage "robota," which literally means forced labor, and robot was a modified version.

"Czech people know this, but outside, people hardly know about him, the inventor of the word," he said.

To better promote Czech literature in Korea he plans to take part in the Seoul International Book Fair and to match translators and publishers in both countries.

For Korean literature, Korean comic books are what create hurrahs in the Czech Republic.

"There is now a big boom of comic books in Czech. It was

three-four years ago when the first Korean comic book was translated into the Czech language. Czech publishers and readers are interested in Korean comic books." A total of 15 Korean comic books have been published in Czech, the ambassador added.

His drive for literature exchange is propelled from a personal connection with literature. He was an editor and a writer, with an interest in science fiction, and still writes from time to time.

During the 1990s, he founded a literary magazine named,

"Ikarie Science Fiction Monthly," in Prague where he worked as editor-in-chief.

Olsa entered the Czech diplomatic service in 1992. He worked in departments dealing with Middle Eastern and African affairs for almost 15 years and from 2000, served as ambassador to Zimbabwe, overseeing Zambia, Mozambique, Angola, Malawi and Sao Tome et Principe.

During his six years there, he was involved in writing three books, one on the modern history of Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi and two on Zimbabwean modern art.

With a long background in education and knowing the culture and language, it was an easy decision to write a book. He did Arabic, Asian and African studies in Prague and Arabic language in Tunis, Tunisia.

He said, "I might write short contributing articles for Czech magazines as a means of filing information about Korea, but nothing like a book."

About Korea, he has so little knowledge to begin with. Plus, language barriers and a limited time span would obstruct his research, he said. Yet, he was interested in publishing a coffee-table book on Korea and Czech, offering a glimpse into the Korea-Czech connection.

Czech Republic's diplomatic relations with Korea run back only to 1990 when it was still the former Czechoslovakia.

He has also saw a niche in promoting Czech films, especially animations, and is going to spend a busy second month in Busan, where the Busan International Film Festival will take place. He expressed excitement about getting out of the concrete jungle of Seoul.

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