



Czech Ambassador Jaroslav Olsa poses with his country's equivalent of Mickey Mouse, a popular mole called Krtek. By Park Sun-young

Czech culture promoted by movie-mad diplomat

By Park Sun-young

If you caught the first part of an interview with Czech Ambassador to Korea Jaroslav Olsa in the JoongAng Daily last week, you already know that he took an active role in this year's Puchon International Fantastic Film Festival. Based on his background in science fiction, he came up with the special program "Czech-Imagination."

However, the currently underway PiFan, held in Bucheon, Gyeonggi, is just one of many film events that the Czech Embassy in Korea is engaged in, the ambassador said.

"Czech films have been shown at the Pusan International Film Festival practically since the beginning of the event, and every year a group of Czech filmmakers visit," Olsa said during a detailed account of the Czech Republic's connection with the Korean film industry.

"In addition to PIFF, there is the Busan International Kids' Film Festival, or BIKI, which is held in August ahead of PIFF in the same city. This year, the most famous and beloved Czech animation character, Krtek, will be featured in BIKI," the ambassador said.

BIKI first started up three years ago.

Krtek, a black mole, was created about 50 years ago and has appeared in 70 films and 25 books. He's the "Mickey Mouse of the Czech Republic," according to Olsa.

"The Krtek storybook has been translated into 40 languages around the world and is fairly famous in Japan and Taiwan because lots of films and books featuring this character have been published in Japanese and Chinese. Actually, two books were translated into Korean and published here a long time ago," Olsa added.

An exhibit dedicated to Krtek will be held in August at the Chungmu Art Hall in Seoul. Olsa expects that the exhibit and the character's presence at BIKI will create a renewed interest in

Krtek in Korea.

The Chungmuro International Film Festival in Seoul, scheduled for late August, is another venue where the Czech Republic will make its presence felt with a range of films selected by the ambassador himself.

The ambassador was named a guest programmer for the festival.

"As a guest programmer, I named the Czech film selection, 'Lions of Czech Film,' consisting of the 12 best Czech films, which range from a love story to World War II drama and from a retro musical film to animation," the ambassador explained.

Meanwhile, the Czech Embassy is gearing up its efforts to establish its own cultural center, similar to the ones its major European counterparts such as Britain, France, Germany and Italy have here.

While a full-scale cultural center is still in the pipeline, the Czech Embassy is planning something halfway there by joining with the local restaurant chain Castle Praha to start a regular program to promote Czech culture here.

"It is a joint operation, that is, the location will be provided by Castle Praha and we the Czech Embassy will bring the programs such as film screenings, lectures and exhibitions," Olsa said.

The "interim" Czech culture center is expected to open in October or November and, in line with its launch, will host several exhibitions and film festivals, Olsa added.

The ambassador, who claims that culture is one of his top priorities, is positive that cultural exchange can play a key role in enhancing relations between Korea and Europe, including his own country.

"I see the interest that Koreans have in European culture and I think it is one of the areas in which we can further our cooperation," Olsa said. "I hope we can bring a lot of Czech culture into Korea so that people can recognize us as a country rich in culture," he added.

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