

# Czechs Backed March 1 Movement

By Jaroslav Olsa, Jr.

In a few weeks a Korean delegation will arrive in the Czech Republic, which will host the much awaited European Union-Republic of Korea summit. This and finalization of a free trade agreement between the 27-country EU and ROK will validate the specific relations Europe and Korea have had for years.

The Czech Republic is now holding its first EU presidency, so it stands at the forefront of EU relations with Korea. Many people feel the Czech Republic is a newcomer in Korean politics as it established relations with Seoul only 19 years ago, but this is not so.

Political contacts between the Czechs and Koreans began 90 years ago, in January 1919.

These were troubled times. The newly established Czechoslovak Republic had only 10 weeks since its independence, while its armed forces, the 60,000-strong Czechoslovak Legion, had already been fighting the Bolshevik forces in Siberia for months, far away from home.

The creation of new independent countries, including Czechoslovakia, would not have happened without U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, whose proclamation on self-determination of 1918 was a crucial signal for European politicians.

Even Asian leaders took this declaration at face value, more so after they had met Wilson's emissary Charles Crane in Shanghai in late 1918.

Crane was fighting for independence movements all over the world. He was also a close friend of Tomas G. Masaryk, the Czech leader, who fought during his U.S. exile for the creation of Czechoslovakia.

Thus, it was undoubtedly Crane, this trusted advisor of Wilson, who gave the advice to Korean politicians whom he met in Shanghai to approach the Vladivostok-based

Czechoslovak Legion, which was under Masaryk's guidance.

Only a few weeks after Crane's Shanghai visit, Yeo Un-hyeong, one of the most capable Korean politicians of his generation, but largely "forgotten" until recently, traveled to Vladivostok to talk with the Czechoslovak Legion's leader.

Only 33-years-old, Yeo found a sympathetic partner there — Radola Gajda, an ambitious soldier who due to his excellent abilities became the Legion's general, although being only 28!

Both men had a unique position: Yeo was the leading personality behind the pre-March 1 Independence Movement, and Gajda was the commander of a powerful army. We can only guess, if behind the warm welcome of Yeo there were personal sympathies of Gajda toward another young independence fighter only, or also the support of the new Czechoslovak leaders.

Masaryk, recently voted the first president of Czechoslovakia, undoubtedly knew about Crane's mission and was well informed about the situation in Korea, as he had traveled across the peninsula only a few months earlier.

When after the talks with the Czechoslovak Legion Yeo wanted to leave, general Gajda, worried about his safety, put at his disposal an armored train and sent another Czech — Josef Hanc — to accompany him back to Shanghai.

"Was it little or much?" asks Czech Koreanist Zdenka Kloslova, who studied both Czech and Korean sources. "Gajda's concrete arrangements to assure the security of an independence fighter can be evaluated as particularly generous," she assumes.

After an unsympathetic approach to Koreans at the Paris



## Times Forum

Peace Conference later that year, the Czechoslovak Legion's friendly attitude toward the Korean struggle, became even more evident.

Shortly after, not less than 16 Koreans worked in Gajda's armored train headquarters. One of them was even a commander of the legion's machine gun division.

A few months later General Gajda was leaving Asia. On his way back to Czechoslovakia, he stopped in Shanghai and, once more, found time to meet Yeo. An Chang-ho and other representatives of the new Korean Provisional Government.

The Dongnip Sinmun newspaper ran two articles about Gajda's support of the Korean case, and the general gave an interview to one of the journal's reporters, perhaps Yi Gwang-su.

Gajda's words were probably the most optimistic of all high-ranking European officials in those days. He mentioned that "the day when you achieve independence is not far" and spoke highly about the March 1 Movement.

Not surprisingly, Gajda was given a silver vase with an engraving from the Provisional Government, a unique gift to a foreigner at that time, and his contribution was mentioned in "A Bloody History of Korean Independence" by the future Provisional Government President Park Eun-sik.

The friendly approach toward the Korean independence struggle did not vanish after Gajda's departure; on the contrary it increased. The brutality of Japanese soldiers against Koreans in Vladivostok was seen with dismay.

This is well documented in numerous literary works written by Czech soldiers upon their return home. While Gajda's contacts with Koreans were mainly of a political nature, in early

1920 the delivery of arms and ammunition to the Korean forces started.

It seems that thousands of arms got to Korean hands from the Czechoslovak Legion. Probably the highest number was delivered to the Northern Route Military Command. Both Korean and Czech sources mention many deals, usually for very reasonable prices.

One of the Korean military commanders, Lee Boom-sok, mentioned that "piles of arms" were taken from the ammunition depots of the Czechoslovak Legion. It is almost certain these arms were the cutting edge that gave the Korean fighters enough power for victories, as at the battle of Cheongsanri in October 1920.

Unfortunately, with the withdrawal of the legion from the Far East, contacts between Korean and Czechoslovak officials stopped and it took many years for them to be reestablished.

Now, the Czech Republic's contacts with the ROK are going from strength to strength. Korean films became famous with Czech viewers, as well as Korean cars now entering the Czech market from the recently opened Hyundai manufacturing plant in the Czech city of Nosovice.

Similarly Korean visitors are enchanted by the historical beauty of the Czech capital Prague, and thousands of Seoul theatergoers enjoy Czech musicals, the most recent successes being Hamlet and Kleopatra. Contacts between our nations, which began almost a century ago, have now become firmly rooted.

Jaroslav Olsa, Jr. has been ambassador of the Czech Republic to the Republic of Korea since last September. He is also author of books on African history, literature and art, with the most recent being "Four Generations of Zimbabwean Sculptors" (2007) and "History of Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi" (2008).