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Thoughts of the Times

Celebrating Korea-Belgium friendship



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By Choe Chong-dae

Strong diplomatic ties between Korea and Belgium have existed since 1892, even before the two countries entered into a treaty of friendship in 1901. Accordingly, the first legation of Belgium was inaugurated in Korea in 1903.

Testament to this longstanding friendship is the unique Belgium Consulate building built in southern Seoul in 1905 and renovated in 1983. The building's classical ionic columns and fireplaces have been kept intact, allowing it to serve as a tool for studying classical architecture of the 1900s as well as modern art. It is now part of the protected Korean architectural heritage as No. 254.

With Japan annexing Korea in 1910, the majority of foreign missions were expelled closed its diplomatic post in Seoul in 1918 but became one of the first countries to as a sovereign nation after Korea gained independence and established a new gove

It was not until 1970 that Belgium re-established its legation in Seoul. A demonstration of Belgium's involvement with Korea during the Korea War (1950-1953) under 100 of these valiant Belgians sacrificed their lives

Commemorating the 110th anniversary of diplom concert and reception were held at KBS Hall in S Embassy in Korea and KBS, treated guests to the by Patrick Davin, as well as the unique flavor and beers hail from Belgium, which offers over 1,000



Most recently, Korean dignitaries were honored to welcome Her Royal Highness Princess Astrid of Belgium to Seoul as she led a 256-strong Belgian delegation on its 4th economic mission to Korea from June 10 to 17. Ever since King Philippe became king of Belgium, he has appointed Princess Astrid to lead Belgian economic missions abroad.

On this occasion, Princess Astrid travelled to Korea with a delegation including Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Didier Reynders and Secretary of State for Economic Affairs Pieter De Crem.

While in Korea, Princess Astrid was appointed an honorary citizen of Seoul. Another notable event during the mission was a visit to Panmunjom, a village in the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea called the "Joint Security Area," or JSA. The JSA was created after the 1953 armistice that ended the Korean War and is nowadays controlled by United Nations forces.

I was invited to attend the June 12 Korea-Belgium Friendship Concert and reception at the Kumho Art Hall in Seoul. The concert celebrated Korea's friendship with Belgium on the occasion of the Belgian Economic Mission to Korea. The guests in attendance were Princess Astrid and other distinguished figures included Ambassador of Belgium to Korea Adrien Theatre, and Yonsei University President Kim Yong-hak.

The Kumho Art Hall at Yonsei University offered the perfect venue for invited guests to enjoy a chamber music concert elegantly performed by exceptionally gifted musicians of the Elisabeth Music Chapel, which is under the honorary chairmanship of Her Majesty Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands.

Unlike other past receptions held by the Belgium Embassy, on that night I was unable to enjoy Belgium's variety of beer as only soft drinks were served at the reception for the Korea-Belgium Friendship Concert. Nevertheless, the melodious notes that filled the air lifted my spirits despite the lack of the other kind of spirits.

Exchanging greetings and shaking hands with Princess Astrid was a great honor for me. I was pleased that she showed much interest in Korean culture and media at the recent visit of Princess Astrid has paved the way for fruitful cooperation between Korea and Belgium.

Choe Chong-dae is a guest columnist of The Korea Times, a former Director of International Co., and Director of the Korean-South African Friendship Association. He can be reached at choecd@naver.com



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