

Hungarian Professor Engrossed in Learning Korean Language

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I first met Szego Andrea, sociology professor of the Budapest College of Management, at a preparatory meeting for the World Cultural Content Forum (WCCF) held in Sinchon, Seoul, toward the end of March. Im Seong-ho, senior researcher at the Institute for Study of Media Culture at Sogang University, invited me to the meeting. Professor Szego said she has been spending more than 10 hours a day studying Korean while staying at Sogang University's Gonzaga Hall. She introduced herself as the "inaugural president of the Korea-Hungary Society." Professor Szego looked special in my eyes when greeted me saying in Korean, "Annyeong haseyo. Bangapseumnia." (How are you? Nice to meet you.) I had a separate meeting with her at Sogang University and listened to her talking about her special love for Korea.

- How did you come to have such a deep interest in Korea?

"When I was young, I studied at British universities such as the University of Cambridge and the University of Birmingham, where I met a small number of Korean students, who studied at school libraries until they closed late at night. I thought that the motherland of those students who were studying so hard must have a great potential. Ever since that time I have had a constant interest in Korea."

- How did you get in touch with Koreans at first?

"I met Professor Ra Jong-yil at the University of Cambridge and then in Hungary back in the 1990s. Since then we have kept in touch and become friends. I had many opportunities to meet Koreans from the mid-1980s to the end of the decade. I visited Seoul to attend an international academic conference organized by Kyung Hee University through arrangements made by Professor Ra. As I learned that Koreans were diligent people, I came to build friendship with them and my interest in their country ever deepened. While Professor Ra was ambassador to the United Kingdom, I invited him to Hungary and arranged for him to give lectures at a few universities. Later I found there were no friendship organizations between our countries. I founded the Korea-Hungary Society in 2002 and became its president to serve in the post until now. Professor Ra and the Korean ambassador to Hungary were also involved in the launching of the society. My belief was that a private organization would be effective in promoting exchange between our two countries." (Professor Ra Jong-yil who had a

significant influence on her life is a graduate of the Department of Political Science, Seoul National University. He has served as a professor at Kyung Hee University and Korean ambassador to Britain and Japan, and is currently president of Woosuk University.)

- Tell us how Korea and Hungary came to establish diplomatic relations.

"Korea was actively pursuing North Policy under President Roh Tae-woo at the time. It was similar to Ostpolitik (Eastern Policy) of Willy Brandt, former chancellor of West Germany. At that time, with the Cold War regime nearing its demise, the countries of the former Soviet bloc were gradually opening up and approaching toward the West. Eastern European countries including Hungary had diplomatic relations with North Korea, but they were seeking a switch in their foreign policies to set up diplomatic ties with freer countries. As far as I know, the United States and the former Soviet Union made a secret agreement around 1985 (though not officially announced). The agreement said that Gorbachev would allow Eastern European countries to go their own ways. At the time, the Soviet Union could not afford to take care of Eastern European countries because it was already overwhelmed by its own problems. Foreign debts of Eastern European countries increased to worrisome degrees. Hungary and Poland were suffering from serious economic difficulties and countries of the Western world lent them dollars. I believe that President Roh understood the situations of Eastern European countries and felt that political changes were imminent in Eastern Europe. Korea chose Hungary as the first country with which to set up diplomatic ties in Eastern Europe. Thereafter, Korea expanded diplomatic relations with other Eastern European countries, including Poland." (Professor Szego explained that Korea expanded diplomatic relations with Eastern European countries in an impressive move comparable to a "domino phenomenon.")

- Tell us about the situation in Hungary at the time.

"Hungary was achieving institutional changes under the surface. My country was caught in a 'foreign debt trap' from the 1970s to the 80s. Foreign private banks offered huge loans to Hungary and in order to solve its debt problem, Hungary joined the International Monetary Fund in 1982. We became the most indebted country in Eastern Europe. Then, Western countries pressured Hungary to adopt a multiparty system using its foreign debt as a pretext. As such, Hungary's systemic change began under external influence in 1987. Private organizations raised their voices to demand political change. IMF played a pivotal role in the process of political reform. This is not well known."

- How would you compare Hungary with Korea?

"Korea and Hungary have many things in common. Particularly, both nations are located at geographical intersections. Hungary, a lesser power, has been invaded by powerful nations from the east and the west. Germany, the former Soviet Union and Turkey have all invaded Hungary. Korea also has been invaded many times by its neighbors. From cultural viewpoints, Hungary has been influenced by the Western culture, but its root lies in Asia. It can be said that Hungary has played a crucial role in transportation between the East and the West. But Hungary is not divided while Korea is. During the Cold War, we also experienced separation from our relatives in Western Europe and America. But the problem of division has been resolved. In view of all these similarities between our two nations, it is natural that we are interested in Korea. We are more interested in Korea's success stories than those of Japan. Hungarians have confidence that they can catch up with advanced nations. Korea is a good model of successful modernization for Hungary."

- Why do you study the Korean language and culture with so much enthusiasm?

"It's not surprising that the president of the Korea-Hungary Society is learning Korean. I am trying to fulfill the minimum moral obligations to show my respect for the Korean people. Learning Korean in Korea helps me a great deal to understand the people and culture. I am supposed to speak Korean only in my Korean class and Korean volunteer students visit me once a week so I can practice my Korean with them. I have been studying Korean nearly for half a year. I think I will never be able to get Koreans open their hearts toward me without learning their language. I started to learn Chinese characters some time ago. Korea is my second homeland."

- Do you think Koreans have much interest in Hungary?

"I want to strongly criticize Koreans residing in Hungary. They can afford to send their children to international schools charging expensive tuition fees, but they don't try to learn

simple Hungarian expressions while living there for three or four years. They live in isolation within Hungary, ignoring the golden opportunities to learn the language and culture of Hungary. They will eventually impoverish their own culture through such behavior. For Koreans, although they may speak English, the genuine internationalization should be making friends with people in other regions like Hungary.”

- Is there any event to celebrate the 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Korea and Hungary?

"Looking ahead to the 20th anniversary which falls on June 9, the Korean Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and some other organizations are jointly preparing a commemorative event. It will highlight *bibimbap* (rice mixed with vegetables and meat). "A Bibimbap Story," a 15-page piece written by Professor Ra will be translated into 13 different languages including Hungarian, Armenian and Russian by students from various countries who are learning Korean here on Korea Foundation scholarships. Students from many countries have agreed to translate the story into their own languages to pay respect to Korea. The event has significance in that it will convey Korea's message to the world as well as showcase Korean food culture.”

While talking with Professor Szego, I was able to reconfirm the linguistic similarities between Hungarian and Korean. Both languages belong to the Ural-Altai language group. Unlike English, Hungarian gives a date in the order of "year, month and day," and has words corresponding to "elder brother, younger brother, elder sister and younger sister" in Korean. In writing an address, larger areas come ahead of smaller ones like city, district, street and house number in that order. In people's name, family name comes first and then first name follows. Accordingly, if we call her in the Hungarian way, her name is "Szego Andrea." However, Hungarian differs from Korean in that it uses Roman alphabet, while Korean is written in its own script, Hangeul. Professor Szego said, "We eat garlic and pepper just like Koreans.”

Who is Szego Andrea?

Professor Szego Andrea, 64, obtained BA in philosophy from Lorand Eotvos University in Budapest, Ph.D. in sociology from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and MSc in European studies from the Budapest University of Economics. She undertook postgraduate studies at the University of Birmingham in Britain, and Stanford University, Rutgers University and Harvard University in the United States. She formerly served as professor at the Department of Social Policy and Sociology, Pecs University, and chair of the Department of Social Studies at the Budapest College of Management. She is presently professor at the Department of Social Studies, Budapest College of Management. She has visited Korea at the invitation of Kyung Hee University, and has been invited to the European Union, the General Assembly of the International Labor Organization (ILO) of the United Nations, and the OECD Business and Industry Advisory Committee. She is currently staying in Seoul on the Korea Foundation's fellowship for Korean language training program. She will return to Budapest in two days (May 23) to organize commemorative events for the 20th anniversary of diplomatic ties between Korea and Hungary.

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