

Historic admiration fosters growing relations

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For the Czech Republic, Japan is a natural and close partner with which we share identical fundamental values. We highly appreciate our excellent relations with Japan that have been developing successfully in many fields.

We are also pleased by the growing number of high-level visits between our countries. Last year, then-Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka of the Czech Republic visited Japan and we hope we will have the honor to reciprocally welcome Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Prague in the coming years.

In the last two years, our embassy decided to concentrate its efforts each year on one particular field of relations. In

2017, we started with the Year of Czech Culture in Japan, as the Czech culture is cherished by many Japanese. As Japan is one of our largest business partners in Asia and the second-largest foreign investor in the Czech Republic, we declared 2018 the Year of the Czech Business in Japan. And finally, with the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo approaching, 2019 will become the Year of Czech Sport in Japan.

I could dwell much longer on these facts that can be searched out very easily. I would, however, like to stress one aspect of the Czech-Japanese relations that the Japanese are usually not fully aware of. The thing is that Czechs generally love Japan. We admire Japanese culture, art, martial arts, cuisine and technology. For us, Japan has become a synonym for quality, reliability, punctuality and diligence. This is not very different from how Japan is perceived in other countries, but I dare say there are three factors that are rather specific for Czechs.

Beginnings of the Czech fascination

with Japan can be seen in art inspired by Japan, so-called Japonism, which peaked in the late 19th and early 20th century. Japonism influenced many forms of Czech art, fashion and even architecture. At one point, it was almost a must for an aristocratic family to have a dedicated room in Japanese style in their residence. A number of Czech travelers visited Japan, at that time a distant and exotic country, published their experiences in articles and novels that usually tended to slightly romanticize Japan, and woke up a strong wave of interest in Japanese culture.

For my generation, which grew up in the '70s and '80s, Japan was mostly incarnated in famous brands such as Sony, Panasonic and many others. I still vividly remember how our hands trembled when we were opening boxes boasting the revered "Made in Japan" sticker and containing top-class home electronics.

Enthusiastic about sports, Czechs have also been attracted to Japanese martial arts. Any Czech youngster knows the meaning of words such as judo, karate,

aikido and kendo. Historically, Japan means for us three Olympic Games and some of the biggest successes ever achieved by Czech athletes. The 1964 Olympic Games are inseparably connected with the name of gymnast Vera Caslavská. She won the first three out of her seven gold Olympic medals in Tokyo. Forty-six years later, she was awarded the Order of the Rising Sun by the Emperor of Japan. Ice hockey is our second-most popular sport. I will never forget Nagano in 1998 and the famous triumph of the Czech ice-hockey team in that Olympic tournament.

In 2020, we will celebrate the 100th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations between then Czechoslovakia and Japan. Our relations have never been better and I am looking forward to their further enhancement in the future.

This content was compiled in collaboration with the embassy. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the newspaper.