

Koreans in Europe

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The history of Koreans in Europe actually goes back 400 years ago when a Korean man named Antonio Corea came to the continent. Born around 1578, Antonio Corea arrived in Japan in 1597 as one of tens of thousands of Korean prisoners-of-war who were brought to the country in connection with the Japanese invasions of Korea between 1592-98. In Japan, the young man was bought by Francesco Carletti, a Florentine salesman, together with four other Korean boys. Carletti first took them to the Portuguese colony of Goa in India where he freed all but one who had learned Italian the fastest. Converted and baptised Antonio Corea, in 1606 he was brought to Europe and naturally caused a lot of commotion as he is believed to have been the model for one of Ruben's paintings. Eventually he settled down in the Italian town of Albi where he passed away in 1626 after having become the progenitor of the still existing Corea family.

After Antonio Corea, it took 300 years until any Korean visited Europe again as the country closed itself to foreigners until it was opened up by force at the end of the 19th century and in the end fell under Japanese colonial rule. During this period a few Koreans belonging to the independence movement visited Europe. In 1907, emperor Kojong dispatched Yi Sang-sol, Yi Wi-jong and Yi Chun to the World Peace Conference in Hague. However the mission was unsuccessful as the Koreans were not permitted to participate in the conference, and beset by despair Yi Chun became ill and died, and was buried in the Dutch city. Another delegation of Koreans was present at the World Socialist Conference in Stockholm in 1917, as well as the famous Kim Kyu-sik at the Peace Conference in Paris in 1919. Finally in 1927, the Korean crown prince Yi Un and his Japanese wife princess Masako paid a visit to several European countries including France, England, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Germany, Italy and Switzerland.

When the Asia Pacific war intensified, Korea again became a closed country as a Japanese colony, and it wasn't until after the Korean War in 1950-53 that meaningful contacts with the outer world were resumed. Right after the war, a small number of Koreans started to arrive in Europe as interpreters, students and wives of returning European officers and soldiers who had participated in the war. Many were academics who played a role in initiating the study of Korea and its language and culture, Korean Studies, at various European universities. In 1956 and 1957, the first adopted children from Korea arrived in Norway and Sweden respectively, which together with the third Scandinavian country Denmark, were to become the most important countries in Europe adopting Korean children.

In 1961, the military strongman Park Chung Hee came to power through a coup d'état, and very soon he initiated an emigration program to countries in need of cheap labour as a way of decreasing the numbers in an overpopulated country. Bilateral labour export programs with Argentina and Brazil in South America, with oil producing countries like Saudi Arabia and with West Germany (between 1963-77), France and the Scandinavian countries in Europe sent thousands of Koreans abroad who contributed to the country's economic development by sending back remittances. Particularly in West Germany, developing into the principal host country for immigrant Koreans in Europe, a thriving Korean community was created composed of miners and nurses living in the Ruhr area. The Korean community in Germany also had a strong dissident character actively opposing the military rule in the homeland.

During the 1960s, adopted children from Korea started to arrive in Denmark, Germany and Italy from 1964, in Switzerland and France from 1968 and in Belgium and the Netherlands from 1969, all closely allied countries which had participated on the Southern side in the war. International adoption continued with even larger numbers throughout the 1970s and peaked in the middle of the 1980s when also Luxembourg (from 1984) was added to the list of adopting countries. In the 1990s, the practice started to slow down as a result of external and internal criticism, and today only Norway, Sweden, Denmark, France, the Netherlands and Luxembourg still receive children for adoption from Korea. The same decades also saw the highest emigration statistics from Korea, even if the absolute majority of émigrés went to the United States and those who choose Europe continued to prefer Germany above all. The immigrants groups organized themselves in Korean associations, established language schools and churches, while the adopted Koreans started to organize themselves from the late 1980s.

In the late 1980s and especially after the end of the Cold War, rapidly and aggressively expanding Korean companies started to make themselves more heard in especially Western and Eastern Europe resulting in the existence of substantial sojourner communities of businessmen, while students and artists started to arrive in countries like France, Austria and Italy. However, after a harsher policy in the EU countries, since the late 1990s with the exception of wives of European men of whom many are in Korean Studies, emigration from Korea has almost ceased.

According to Korean statistics as of 2001, there are altogether 45,881 adopted Koreans in Europe with 10,923 in France, 8,622 in Sweden, 8,417 in Denmark, 5,806 in Norway, 4,056 in the Netherlands, 3,698 in Belgium, 2,351 in Germany, 1,111 in Switzerland, 418 in Luxembourg, 382 in Italy and 72 in England as well as an additionally 25 in odd countries like Ireland, Iceland and Finland.

Excluding the Koreans in former Soviet Union and the Central Asian republics who use to be counted together separate from those in Europe, according to Korean statistics as of 2001 there are 68,597 Koreans living in Europe of whom a little bit less than half are estimated as not permanently settled sojourners. This means that the adopted Korean actually make up the largest category of resident Koreans in Europe and especially in the Scandinavian region with half of the group totally dominating the ethnic Korean presence. Of the immigrant and sojourner Koreans, 30,492 are found in Germany, 10,836 in England, 10,485 in France, 4,888 in Italy, 3,317 in Spain, 1,610 in Austria, 1,254 in Switzerland, 1,076 in the Netherlands, 1,070 in Sweden, 588 in Poland, 533 in Belgium, 405 in Hungary, 326 in Norway, 282 in Denmark, 277 in Greece, 219 in Romania, 199 in Ireland, 194 in the Czech Republic, 144 in Portugal, 116 in Finland and 111 in Bulgaria with additionally 176 in the countries of Luxembourg, Albania, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Cyprus, Iceland, Macedonia and Slovakia.

To sum up , the Korean presence in Europe can be said to be small in numbers, widely and unevenly spread out geographically as there is no European country where there are no Koreans, and highly diversified consisting of everything from adopted to immigrant Koreans, and from resident blue collar workers and small entrepreneurs to expatriate business people, college students and diplomatic personnel.