

NATIONAL

Romania Japan studies head hailed

Angela Hondru began her career as a language student of a diplomat at the height of the Cold War

BY KO HIRANO KYODO NEWS

Kanji Tsushima was deeply moved when he heard that one of the students in his Japanese-language class 30 years ago in Bucharest had won two awards for her role in introducing his country's culture to Romania by translating modern literature.

"She was by far the most enthusiastic student in my class" from 1976 to 1978 at Dalles Popular University, said Tsushima, who was then a second secretary at the Japanese Embassy in Romania.

His former student is Angela Hondru, who now heads the Japanese Studies Department at Hyperion University in Bucharest.

At the time Hondru was a student, there was nobody available for Japanese-language training, so Tsushima accepted the headmaster's request to teach at Dalles Popular University, hoping at the height of the Cold War that people in the Eastern European country would grow interested in Japan.

"Ms. Hondru was so inquisitive about Japanese affairs. It seemed that she had fallen in love with Japan," recalled Tsushima, 65, who was ambassador to Romania from April 2006 to September 2008 before retiring from the Foreign Ministry last month.

Hondru won a Japanese Foreign Minister's Commendation for fiscal 2008 in July and the Japan Foundation Award for Japanese Language for fiscal 2008 on Oct. 1.

"I would not have come this far without my affection and respect for Japanese culture," Hondru said. "I would like to see the recognition of my work by the Japanese government as encouragement to further advance my teaching and research activities."

The 63-year-old professor said she was fascinated by Japan when she saw displays of a picture scroll depicting the 11th-century novel "The Tale of Genji" and an India ink painting at a national art museum in Bucharest in 1975. At the time, she was teaching English to junior high and high school students.

Hondru took over Tsushima's post as an instructor at the university after the diplomat completed his second posting in Bucharest in 1978. Hondru wrote a textbook on the Japanese language in 1980 before visiting Japan for the first time that summer through a language training program.

While translating works by Japanese novelists, including Yukio Mishima, Haruki Murakami and Osamu Dazai, Hondru took the initiative in launching the Japanese Studies Department at Hyperion University in 1990 and setting up Japanese-language courses at junior high schools in 1992 and high schools in 1996, earning her the nickname "Mother of Japanese-language education in Romania."

Hondru also trained Romanian experts on Japanese affairs who have assumed posts at the University of Bucharest, Hyperion University and other institutions in Romania.

Helped by the popularity of Japanese "manga" and "anime" among youths, the number of Japanese-language students in Romania totals about 1,600 today, with many of them starting out under the supervision of Hondru, according to the Foreign Ministry in Tokyo and Romanian Ambassador to Japan Aurelian Neagu.

Hondru counts among her former students Neagu's son, Andrei, who works for a Japanese company operating in Romania, Neagu's secretary, Silvia Cercheaza, and Diana Tihan, press and cultural attache at the Romanian Embassy in Tokyo.

Romanians have found incentives to learn Japanese since the country joined the European Union in 2007, which created business opportunities for Japanese companies. As of July, 18 Japanese manufacturers operate in Romania, according to the Japan External Trade Organization.

"Mr. Tsushima planted the seed and professor Hondru grew it into a big tree," Neagu said. "This, I would say, is a beautiful 'sempai-kohai' (senior-junior) relationship" that has helped broaden ties between the two countries.

Neagu said Tsushima was also known for teaching kendo to Romanians during his stints there and for building strong ties with the local kendo federation.

Looking back at his diplomatic career, including 30 years of friendship with Hondru and kendo practitioners in Romania, Tsushima called on young Japanese diplomats and citizens to pursue powerful cultural diplomacy, especially when Japan's economic clout appears to be declining amid the rise of China, India and other emerging countries.

Recently, Hondru has expanded the scope of her studies into Japan's folklore, comparing ceremonial occasions such as weddings and funerals between Japan and Romania. She also conducts research on Japanese myths and "kagura," a sacred dancing style of Shinto origin that dates from early times.

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