

## Ôe Kenzaburô's reality—A Japanese writer at Liege

A very special event for friends of Japanese culture and literature was the opening ceremony of the academic year at Liege University on September 20th. Ôe Kenzaburo, Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1994, was awarded the insignias doctor honoris causa of Liege University. On the proposal of the academic authorities, five Nobel Prize laureates received this highest academic distinction from the Rector, Professor Willy Legros. Sponsor of Ôe Kenzaburô was Professor Andreas Thele from the Centre for Japanese Studies at Liege University (CEJUL).

About 150 people attended a lecture Ôe gave in the morning about "A Japanese Writer's Reality", confirming the widespread interest in modern Japanese literature. In his lecture, Ôe was retracing in an intimate description his life from his childhood years in a deep mountain valley in Shikoku up to the inspiration for his writings. A major part in Ôe's work was influenced by the birth of his mentally handicapped child Hikari in 1963, reflected in novels such as "A Personal Matter" (Kojinteki na taiken) or "A Healing Family" (Kaifuku suru kazoku). Other sources of reflection were a visit to Hiroshima the same year and the investigation on the victims of the atomic bomb (Hiroshima nôto). As Ôe emphasised in his lecture, it is important to face reality and think things over: "Think hard for a long time, no matter how painful hard thinking may be. Thinking seriously for a long time is good for you. You may not be able to come up with a perfect answer or solution to your problem, but when you reflect upon it later, you will know that having spent a long time quietly thinking about a question or a problem was meaningful."

In the evening 14 people were invited to an intimate dinner with Mr Ôe, organised at Château de Colonster, and also attended by BJA representatives. For the participants it was an unforgettable experience to know more about Ôe's life and working reality, and to discuss his personal opinions and criticism over modern Japan.

Ôe Kenzaburo had already been in Belgium in 1989, when he had received the Prize Europalia. This time he stayed in Liege for three days, and as he confessed to a journalist, was about to finish his latest novel in his hotel room, novel which is inspired by the suicide in 1997 of his brother-in-law, the film director Itami Juzo, well known for his films such as "Tampopo". Ôe who had come from the EXPO-Hanover, was to give lectures the following week in Beijing.

For those interested in the work of Ôe, there are now a large number of translations in English and other European languages, such as "A Quiet Life" (Shizuka naseikatsu), "An Echo of Heaven" (Jinsei no shinseki); "The Catch" (Shiiku); for which he received the Akutagawa Prize in 1958, and "The Silent Cry" (Man en gannen no futtobôru), Tanizaki Prize in 1967.

