

Every diamond starts rough

Hyomin Seo

Diamonds are a girl's best friend. Or so the saying goes. The truth of the industry behind that phrase is stranger and harder than the romance suggests. Rough diamonds are mined from deep beneath the earth, then sent to be cut and polished, work carried out for generations by manufacturers in India and Israel. And for all that diamonds are sold as a woman's best friend, the trade that produces them is overwhelmingly a world of men.

I am the first Korean female De Beers broker. De Beers, the company that once told the world a diamond is forever, is the most famous name in the industry. A broker does not work for De Beers itself. My company stands in the middle, between De Beers, which produces the rough diamonds, and the traders and manufacturers who buy them, representing the buyers' interests and helping the two sides understand each other. It is a small, closed world, and its people have traditionally been men from old trading families. I would never have pictured myself here, working in one of the most male-dominated industries in the world, among traditional Jewish and Indian traders, travelling through southern Africa to do it. But life is like that. A little breeze keeps pushing you slightly towards your future, and only when you look back do you realise that all those small moments were part of a journey you did not even know you were on. For me, that journey began with the ASEM-DUO Fellowship.

Eleven years ago I arrived in Ghent, a city in Belgium I had never heard of before. I had come through the ASEM-DUO Fellowship, on exchange from Sookmyung Women's University in Seoul to Arteveldehogeschool, to study communication. It was the first time in my life I had ever lived alone, away from my parents. Given how hard my family had struggled financially, I could never have imagined living by myself in another country. I had never even had my own room. I had always shared with my little sister.

Now, suddenly, I had a room of my own, in a small student house shared with strangers. I was nervous and frightened, and my English was poor. Still, on one of my first days, I found myself climbing the stairs and knocking on a door. It belonged to a Belgian girl named Astrid. She opened it and looked at me, a little stunned. In my broken English, and half out of nerves, I more or less thrust a handful of Korean gifts at her, chopsticks and small souvenirs from home. She could have just closed the door. Instead, she let me into her life.

We became friends the way you only can when you are young and have very little. We shared bad wine, the broke and messy reality of student life, and a great deal of crying over the stress of exams. There were evenings we went out together and came home long after midnight, sometimes staying up until sunrise simply because neither of us wanted the night to end. In the years since, she has visited me in Korea. We are still, all this time later, the closest of friends, more like sisters than anything else.

For the first time in my life, I was surrounded by people from everywhere. My classmates and friends came from across Europe, Asia, and beyond, each with their own way of seeing the world. Learning to move among them, to listen and adjust and find the common ground beneath our differences, slowly turned me into a more global and open-minded person than the frightened girl who had arrived clutching a bag of souvenirs.

That year passed faster than any year of my life. When the exchange ended and I had to leave, I was heartbroken, as so many international students are. The magical chapter was over, and it was time to return to reality. Even afterwards, back in Korea, I travelled to Belgium whenever I could. But it was never the same. The magic had gone, because I was no longer the international student, and my Belgian friends were beginning to settle into their careers. That was when I understood something important. There is no perfect city. Moving abroad does not rewrite your life like a fairy tale.

But if the exchange had taught me anything, it was how to start from nothing in an unfamiliar place. So I began again in Korea, the way I had once begun in Belgium. I built a career in luxury, in sales and marketing for a Swiss watch brand. My late twenties were work hard and play hard, and, looking back, they may have been the most fun years of my life. One day a friend from my Ghent days asked me to look after his friend, who was arriving in Korea as an exchange student. I knew exactly how strange and difficult everything would feel for him, so I helped him through it, just as Astrid had once helped me. That, too, became a friendship for life.

Still, an idea kept returning to me. I wanted to try working abroad before it was too late. During the pandemic, when the whole world had come to a stop, I decided to move back to Ghent and give it a try. Nothing was certain. Nothing was promised. But as the vaccines arrived and the world slowly began to open again, so, in my own way, did I.

Finding work was harder than I had imagined. Belgium has three official languages, French, Dutch, and German, and most Belgians speak two or three of them. I spoke none, and even my English was far from perfect. I wanted to keep building my career in luxury, but luxury retail in Belgium turned out to be a much smaller and more limited world than in Korea, and it demanded the local languages I did not have.

So I changed my view a little. In Korea my job had stood between brands and consumers, at the very end of the chain. But behind every finished product, I realised, there is a whole business-to-business world the consumer never sees. And then I learnt something about a city I had once passed through as a student: Antwerp, the city of diamonds. Before a diamond is ever set into a piece of jewellery, it travels the world, from a mine in Africa to cutting factories in India, through trading centres in Dubai or Antwerp, and only then to its final destination. The industry was so international that its working language was English. It did not need me to be Belgian. It needed me to be global. For the first time, the way the exchange had shaped me was not just a happy memory. It was a qualification.

Working abroad turned out to be very different from the dream of it. I had used English in Seoul, because the Swiss company I worked for needed it to communicate with headquarters. But working full time, entirely in English, all day, was another thing altogether. My first year

was full of anxiety. I would talk myself through it in small increments: three more days, three more weeks, three more months, and then, if it is still this hard, I will quit. Those small moments accumulated. It has now been more than four years.

The diamond world came with its own education, and nobody hands you a manual. "Do not offer to shake a Jewish man's hand first." "Do not eat meat, especially beef, in front of an Indian colleague." I learned these rules one awkward moment at a time, and the cultural differences are endless. There are still moments I feel completely foreign. After four years of travelling for this work, I have not entirely got used to it, and each time I feel like that same adventurous twenty-two-year-old again. I work with mining partners in Africa. I travel to Dubai, India, the United States, Hong Kong, and across Europe. In a single week I might sit across from people from three or four different cultures, each with their own expectations and their own way of doing business, and my job depends on making every one of them feel understood. That ease did not come naturally to the girl who once felt one step behind in a shop in Ghent. It was learned, slowly, over one formative year, among friends from every corner of the world.

I do not want to give the impression that I suddenly became a confident expat travelling the world without a worry. I am still often insecure and uncertain, about myself and about the future. I have been through a break-up and started over again from a mattress on the floor. I could do it because of the friends I first found during my ASEM-DUO year, and because, above all, I still believe that every single day I try for something, it will carry me somewhere. Just as it has carried me here, to Belgium, now.

I do not have a glittering academic background. What I can say with pride is that I am open-minded, and that living abroad has taught me how vast the world truly is. So many cultures, so many countries. As an immigrant who does not speak the local languages, I often feel small and helpless. For three years I studied Dutch, six hours a week in the evenings, and now I am learning French the same way. My classmates come from everywhere: refugees from Ukraine, people who fled political persecution in the Middle East. You meet someone who was a lawyer, a doctor, or a musician in their own country, and who lost everything to tragedies far beyond their control. Now they work in a factory in a country where they do not know how long they will be allowed to stay, learning a new language in their sixties. When you meet these people with an open heart, they humble you, and they teach you more than you could imagine about life, about human dignity, and above all about hope.

In my industry, a rough diamond looks like nothing special. Only after it is cut, one facet at a time, does it reveal the fire that was inside it all along. Looking back, I think my exchange year was the first cut.

Just as I did eleven years ago, I know I will keep walking forward, gathering beautiful memories and unexpected, lifelong friendships along the way. The ASEM-DUO experience did not simply shape my career. It became the source of who I am.