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The Rise of Japanese Imperialism

FROM JAPAN GLORIOUS DAYS...



...TO MID TWENTIETH CENTURY DEFEAT

Produced by Eléazar and Kami Productions

Note of intent

Japan 1927. Emmy Gabriel, a young Belgian woman of 23, arrives in Tokyo with her husband, Chutaro Imura. Japan has become a parliamentary democracy, with a free press and fairly active social movements. A new era was beginning, the Shōwa era, the era of “enlightened peace” under the authority of a young emperor of twenty-six, Hiro Hito, the first member of the imperial family to have traveled abroad.

However, from 1929 onwards, the political balance was destabilized by the world economic crisis and the onslaught of an anti-communist and militaristic right wing. The liberal press was muzzled and communist MPs were arrested. Women, who had shaken off the shackles of a traditional life, were sent back to their homes. Emmy, who also felt cramped in the Imura family, decided to regain her freedom. In 1930, she married a French engineer, Jean Millot. He was commissioned by the CGE to develop international telecommunications in Japan. At the same time, a totalitarian regime was rising from the ashes of Japanese democracy. Under the direction of the military, Japan embarked on a war that would last fifteen years.

The French of the Shōwa Era is the story of these pivotal years, which will result in more than three million deaths and will tip Japan from the victory of 1918 to the defeat of 1945 and its lasting consequence, the American occupation. Unknown in France, these years remain taboo in Japan.

Based on the archives of the Millot family in Japan, the film will interweave the intimate story of this French family with the history of Japanese society – and more precisely, its extremely rapid shift in morality as the country opened up to the world in the 1930s. It will tell the story of the rise of militarism that accompanied it and that ended in the fires of the entry into the war.





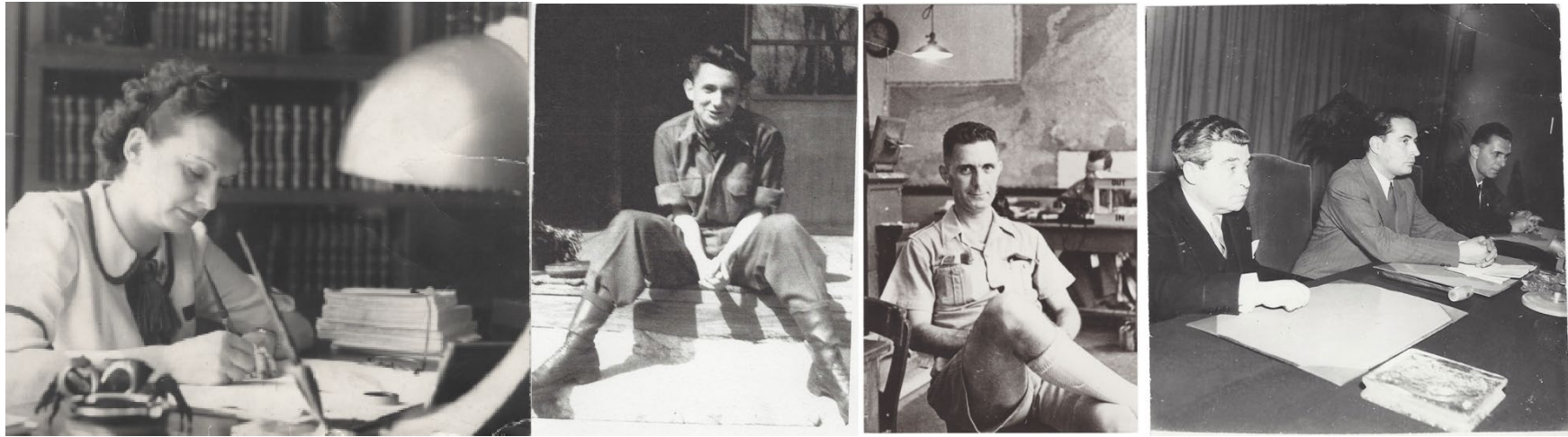
European audiences are usually familiar with the history of 1930's Germany: we know about the rise of Nazism in a period of intense freedom (cabarets, homosexual life, music, literature, parodies, expressionist cinema, etc.). However, we are usually not familiar with the history of Japan: a country that did not deal with the scourge of the first world war and which however lived through an analogous period – both on the freedom of morals and on the rise of its will to ruthlessly conquer the world.

The film will make full use of the Millot family archives to shed a light on these two decades. Emmy and Jean, our red thread through this voyage in time, live in Tokyo. They have a front seat to the country's political upheavals. They are our red thread in the chronological and bitter story of the militarization of Japanese society, of expansionism in the Pacific, of the march to war. We will follow in their steps in the inner circles of expatriates and foreign diplomats in Tokyo, we will follow Emmy into Japanese-colonized Manchuria, where she gets drunk on parties. We will go to Hanoi, then a French colony in Indochina, where Jean is sent as an interpreter and intermediary between the Vichy regime and the Japanese. We will run for shelter from the bombs falling on Tokyo, with Jean and his friend, the journalist Robert Guillain.

The film's ambition is to cast the story of Japan in a new light, from the point of view of this French family plunged into the heart of the upheavals of Japanese society and the violence of the war.

The Japanese film archives, both documentary images and fiction films or propaganda posters, are very rich and allow us to shed a striking light on this time period. They show both the societal changes and the shift in mentalities.

By following the singular journey of Emmy and Jean since the middle of the 1920s, until the immediate post-war period, the film will bring to life the years 1927-1945 in all their complexity.



Director's note

It is very rare for a family of foreigners to reside in Japan for such a long time, especially during the period of profound upheaval between 1925 and 1947. This couple lived through an intimate story, marriage, the birth of their two children, their education in Japan and astonishing careers over a long period. The family did not leave the country despite the tragedies it witnessed there. Telling the story of Japan from this unusual perspective allows for a new narrative, an original presentation of the archives, a combination of viewpoints.

The archives are plentiful – both the private archives of the Millot family (more than 400 photos) and the archives present at the NARA, the NHK and in the Japanese private channels. This archive covers the entire period, which begins with a strong democratic momentum, continues with the rise of militarism and the deployment of Japanese imperialism in Asia, and ends with the defeat and occupation by the United States.

We will also shoot images in Japan to put the past in perspective. In Tokyo: the temples, the old traditional wooden houses, the gardens, the popular districts like Asakusa, the labyrinth of lanes. And in Karuizawa: the forests, the cottages, the little church that Jean had built. The archive comes alive as we retrace the family's steps.

However, some passages in the film are not related to the family's history. They are historical markers that will be told as pivotal periods in history, such as the Nanjing Massacre, an episode that is still taboo in Japan today. This episode, like Pearl Harbor, will be treated as a crucial stage in the historical chronology of events.

We see this French family, a couple and their two children, living in an imperialist and warmongering Japan. The events of their daily life are not as mundane as they seem. They give us an intimate look into Japanese society, revealing its deep clashes and how it devolved into militarism. What this family lived through is a testament to Japanese history: there is a parallel between their private history and the history of the country, by the means of the confrontation, by questioning and by dramatizing the place of this family in Asia.

We use different and striking graphic designs to differentiate the private archives from other archives. The unpublished family archives will be highlighted by a specific music, on a different rhythm from the historical narration.

The narrator tells the story of the family and the history of the country in a sensitive and dynamic way. The characters will be treated with distinct voices, as when Robert Guillain tells us about Japan under the bombs or when Jean writes his diary in Indochina. There is always a strong bond between the life of this family and the events they face. This allows us to shed a light on the most significant Japanese historical events.

The characters Jean

Jean arrives in Japan in 1925. This young engineer is sent by his company, the CGE, to install telegraphic links between France and Japan. He meets Emmy in 1928. They will have 2 sons. He does not return to France once between 1925 and 1947. Jean is fluent in English and Japanese, makes a good living and lives in a beautiful house in Tokyo. He also loves photography, taking pictures of his family, friends, tourist and professional trips, landscapes and inhabitants. Many of his photos are dated and captioned on the back.

He is sent to Indochina for more than a year and a half, between 1940 and 1941, as a translator and coordinator between the French army and the Japanese army, and is close to the famous commander Nishihara. At the end of the war, he collaborates with the prosecutor Oneto in the Tokyo trial, which judges the war criminals. In 1946, he works at the Tokyo Wire Center as a department head for the 8th American Army. He returns to France in 1947, divorces Emmy, remarries and moves to Geneva.

Emmy

Emmy arrives in Japan in 1927 with her first husband Chutarô Imura, who she had married in Switzerland a year earlier and whom she leaves shortly after their arrival in Tokyo. She is pretty, lively, intelligent, elegant and highly values her freedom. She marries Jean in 1928 and becomes a mother of two children shortly after. She often “vanishes” depending on her current love affairs, traveling the country and even Manchuria. It was Jean who always brought her home, paid her debts and those of her lovers. During the war, she settles with her children in Karuizawa, separated from her husband. When he returns to France after the war, she decides to stay in Tokyo. She returns to Europe in 1952.

Jean-Louis and Marc

Jean and Emmy’s two children were born in Tokyo and lived a pampered childhood in Japan until adulthood, without knowing France. They are homeschooled. Both speak English and Japanese. After the war, they stay in Japan and are enlisted as translators by the American occupation forces. Jean-Louis discovers France for the first time in 1947 and Marc in 1950.

Robert Guillain

A journalist – correspondent in Asia for 40 years – who witnessed the events of the Pacific War and the bombing of Tokyo, Robert Guillain knows a lot about Japan. He wrote many books on its culture and history. He was one of the only French foreigners present during the bombings with his friend Jean.

They knew each other well and saw each other regularly at their traditional “Wednesday dinners”. They were together at the Karuizawa camp. After Jean’s death, Robert Guillain wrote a text for the family about their meeting and war-torn Tokyo. He sheds a bright and vivid light on the life of the French community in Japan and the relationships that the expatriates had with each other. We will tell their story.

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