

CULTURAL CONNECTIONS TO JAPAN – Part 1: Roland Gaul

In this new article series by the Cultural Section of the Embassy of Japan in Luxembourg, we present many different important personalities who have shaped the cultural connections between Japan and Luxembourg over the years. Thank you for reading and please enjoy!

“Never stop beginning, never begin stopping” – The Life and Work of Mr. Roland Gaul

In a quaint apartment in the heart of Diekirch, is a collection of books, objects, wooden trinkets, travel souvenirs, ancient weapons and all kind of other memorabilia from Asia and the South-Pacific. One step inside the bamboo-clad hallway with many collector's shelves, historic flags and exotic plants, and you are whisked away to another world entirely - the world of Mr. Roland Gaul. And he can tell you exactly what each object in his collection is, with a smile on his face and a glint in his eye.

Mr. Gaul is an outstanding original in Luxembourgish WWII military history. His way of life has led him from the U.S. Embassy in Luxembourg, to being the Director of the National Museum of Military History (he founded with some friends 40 years ago) to receiving “the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Rays” of Japan, just last year in 2021.

Mr. Roland Gaul is a Luxembourgish citizen with Belgian roots, born and raised in his hometown in Diekirch. After he finished school at the Lycée Classique in Diekirch, (Latin and Biology) he continued his higher education at the Royal Military Collegel (ERM) in Brussels. In 1977, he married very young. As he was looking for a job, and over many stations in his life, from the military to the finance



Mr. Roland Gaul retells his memories

sector, he entered the U.S. Embassy in Luxembourg and ended up in Public Affairs. He stayed there for a dozen years, continued his career at the Luxembourg Ministry of State then at the Luxembourg army to finally become the director of the military museum in Diekirch, he once initiated as a volunteer.

First Steps towards Japanese Culture

One of his personal interests, however, was his love and appreciation for Japan and its history and culture. In the early 70s, in his teenage years, his interest for martial arts was sparked, where his love for Japan started. He joined the Judo club in Ettelbruck and later co-founded the Judo club in Diekirch consequently. During these times, a Japanese pastry chef worked in Diekirch, Mr. Fujinaga, who teenage Roland befriended to learn more about the cultural diversity of Japan.

Back in these days, no Japanese language classes existed, so 16-year old Roland started to learn basic Japanese by himself. With a so called “Linguaphone” set, a big box of books and phonograph records, he got to work – and tried to find every possible Japanese book he could locate. His research also led him to the newly-founded (in 1970) association of “Young Friends of Japan” in Luxembourg City, which he promptly joined as the then youngest member. In 1973, he was finally able to join a delegation to go to Japan and to partake in an exchange, in collaboration with the then “World Youth Exchange Association”. He went to Tokyo, Kyoto and Nara, for three weeks. Young Roland was overjoyed.

The First Visit and Marvels of Japan in the 1970s

Talking about his first visit to Japan, Mr Gaul is retelling his memories with great happiness: He remembers seeing all the cultural aspects and objects for the first time he had only read about. His welcoming host family was glad to share the Japanese culture, and he stay friends with them for a long time. Young Roland saw *bonsai* trees, *sushi*, *sashimi* and *sukiyaki*, tea ceremony, *shodo* (Japanese traditional calligraphy),



The old Linguaphone “Teach yourself Japanese” records boxset is still in his collection, “as a trusty souvenir”

samurai armor & weapons and ladies in *kimonos*, as well as visited *sumo* tournaments, *kabuki* (dance drama theatre with expressive make-up) and *bunraku* (traditional Japanese puppet theatre). “Much to the suffering of my knees”, he jokes, as being in Japan required a lot of sitting in “*seiza*” posture for him, a respectful way of sitting on your shins. He even met the Sumo Legend Takanohana, “who had super big hands and a very firm handshake”, Mr. Gaul laughs. Back then, he was already fascinated by the technological marvels of Japan, even more so when he took the *Shinkansen* for the first time. The high-speed railway system with unseen top speed and precision when stopping at the station left him with big impressions.

In the years that followed, the newly founded “Friends of Japan” in Luxembourg, which Mr. Gaul later became president of, took up contact with “Friends of Luxembourg” in Osaka, which resulted into more exchanges and cultural events, such as a *koto* (traditional Japanese stringed instrument) concert in Luxembourg City and an exhibition of E-Tegami (personalized postcards with brush & ink drawings and calligraphy). The ties between Japan and Luxembourg strengthened, in both directions.

The Past, The Future, and the New

Mr. Roland Gaul visited Japan several additional times, over the decades, with his partner, with friends and with groups. When asked what his observations on the changes in Japan are in the last 50 years, he is surprised by Japan’s younger generations. “Young people are expressive, even more so in the fashion hotspots of Harajuku for example, but everywhere young people are combining western influences with traditional Japanese culture. It’s fascinating.” There is still room for other traditions to be kept, such as the respect for the elderly and all of nature, as well as keeping the influences of Buddhism and Shintoism in modern life, he notes. “That’s very important, keep your roots, but don’t stop evolving.”

With such a long history and experience, is there any advice Mr. Roland Gaul has for the next generation? “Don’t believe everything you are told and think for yourself. There is a lot of wrong information out there, or people trying to negatively influence others.” In his own youth,

growing up in the 60s and 70s, he was told to never question authority and only believe what is written, he recounts, and that way of upbringing can narrow one’s mindset and world view. “Don’t just read about it, go out there and experience it. See for yourself. Travel, be receptive and learn! To have respect and tolerance, but always staying attentive is the key.” Mr Gaul remarks that he is glad to see that schools nowadays have young teachers that invite discussion and dialogue, rather than being authoritarian. “Teaching respect and tolerance begins in school, no, even earlier than that, in the playground and at home!”



Mr. Gaul in his collection, each artifact holding memories and experiences

In 2021, Mr. Roland Gaul received the “Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Rays” from the Government of Japan, presented by the Embassy of Japan in Luxembourg, for his contribution to promoting the friendship between Japan and Luxembourg. He still lives in Diekirch, retired from his museum director position, now working happily as a legacy and WWII battlefield tourist guide and travel agent together with his wife Silvia, always up for projects he can support. “I definitely want to visit Japan again in 2023 or 2024!” he says, “It has been such a long time since I’ve been there. There is still so much to see and study!”

When asked what he would see as his greatest achievement looking back, he responds with a smile: “Bringing people together and creating networks. Find new friends and keep the old ones, create peace and harmony through understanding, mutual respect and sharing culture. There will be setbacks, of course, but never give up.” In his elaborate bureau full of memories stored in traditional objects, souvenirs, antique weapons, tropical plants and many, many books, he ponders for a second and concludes with a grin: “This is my life motto after all: Never stop beginning and never begin stopping. I think that summarizes it perfectly.”