

EUFASA CONFERENCE

Paris, May 2022

Guest speaker Jean-François BARSACQ

“TRUST YOUR LUCKY STAR”

GREETINGS

Good afternoon. My name is Jean-François Barsacq. I am currently posted in Tirana (Albania), where I have been living for one and a half years. I am a member of AFCA, the host of this EUFASA conference. I am happy to have the opportunity to share with you some aspects of my professional life as a spouse of a diplomat.

VIEWPOINT

As you can see from my white hair (even though there is not much left 😊), when I look back on the past, I have the privilege to embrace several decades at a glance. It is very efficient. Especially when you want to draw conclusions on how to combine a career with **the decision you have made to share your wife's destiny**, whatever the countries her ministry has decided to post her in.

THE STAKES INVOLVED

In the past 30 years, I have lived in 7 different countries for all together 14 years. 7 different countries, often with stays in France in between, this means potentially more than 10 occasions of changing jobs! (Not mentioning changing houses, schools for four children, languages, etc.)

Don't worry, I am not going to bother you with all the details; otherwise, I would jeopardize the end of the programme of the conference 😊.

So, the question is: ***‘how did I manage to pursue an honourable career in this context?’***

But first, I must clarify what I mean by “*an honourable career*”. I can identify two factors:

1. Making continuous progress
2. Keeping a reasonable level of self-esteem

MAKING CONTINUOUS PROGRESS

I have succeeded in finding activities where I could put my core skills into practice. In other words, activities that could enrich my professional experience.

→ I have not been obliged to accept any available job, just by fear of leaving blanks in my résumé.

KEEPING A REASONABLE LEVEL OF SELF-ESTEEM

I have held positions which were globally relevant to the level of my studies.

And I have not totally disappointed elderly relatives for whom professional stability was of utmost importance, particularly for a man. They were so worried I could “sacrifice my career” because of my wife!

→ I haven’t had to cope with the feeling of being downgraded, neither in my eyes nor in the eyes of others.

So, ‘how did I manage to pursue an honourable career in the context I have briefly described?’

A HIDDEN BASIC STRENGTH

Retrospectively, I was lucky enough during my studies not to know what I would like to do in terms of a job later. So, I first studied Latin, ancient Greek and French. Then some History. And finally, Economics and Public Law. And when I started to work, I applied for a job as IT analyst and developer. (After all, coding is just another foreign language that people don’t speak, just like Latin).

I was not aware that through this long journey, I was building a **profile of an “enlightened generalist”**, something that would be useful in my future life.

BOUNCING BACK

Before my first expatriation, I had become an IT consultant for the public sector. So, during my later stays in France, I was always able to work either for consulting firms or for public institutions (e.g., a university, a ministry). That was the easy part.

But **the real challenge was the expatriation challenge**, and it was a double one:

- when arriving abroad, the issue was to find something to do
- and something to do which would be marketable in my résumé when going back to France.

When I had permission to work, some French companies hired me for jobs related to my skills which gave me the **opportunity to discover** private business environments.

When barred from being employed, I carried out **voluntary activities**, some of them with substantial responsibilities. E.g., I got elected chairman of the board of a French lycée where our children were studying. It involved managing a large budget and important projects, which made me look “serious” enough on the French labour market upon my return.

After my 60th birthday, I decided to **allow myself a bit of fantasy**. I came back to my initial area of interest. (Remember French, Latin and ancient Greek?). Three years ago, I followed an intensive training course to become a professor of French as a foreign language. I got a degree, and I am currently giving courses to Albanians who are themselves teachers of French.

CONCLUSIONS in form of ADVICE

- **If you decide to share your partner’s postings, stick to it.**
Don’t regret the career you would have had at home. What you discover abroad is more valuable than what you might have done in your own country.
- **Don’t be obsessed with planning in advance.**
Saying this, an image that comes to my mind.
I have often heard that diplomats and their families are like nomads. OK, it is true that we move a lot, as nomads do. I thought it was just about that.
A few years ago, when I was living in Mongolia, I finally understood what this really means. When you are a nomad, you cannot make the grass grow for your cattle. After a while, you have to go where the grass is greener. Transposing this in our context, I would say that in order to succeed, you need to accept that you can’t control everything.

Therefore: Stay flexible, even versatile. Take advantage of opportunities. Even if they are not what you expected, you never know what they can lead to later.
- **Trust your lucky star.**
Believe me, it works!

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