

## Chapter 10

### School Days

#### *The Survival of the Smartest*

*Where America extols money, West Germany work and Great Britain blood, France has nailed its flag to the post of cleverness. It is achievement in the educational field which determines inclusion among the decision-makers of French society. The nation is governed by its star pupils, and the higher reaches of management are no exception.*

Jean-Louis Barsoux and Peter Lawrence  
*Management in France*

In the country of Voltaire and Balzac, Chateaubriand and Zola, Descartes and Pasteur, brains are the way to measure worth, and education is the way to furnish and train the brain, leading to the power and the pleasures of body and mind that French people find make life worth living.

Education is the consuming concern of all French people. I said all. It unites them. It gets them out in the street, regardless of their politics, their religion, their color, their region. If you ever need a conversational topic with a French person, ask him about the recent reforms. You don't have to know which. There are always reforms in progress, because every new Prime Minister and every new Minister of Education have to show that they realize that education is closest to his electorate's heart.

In 1984, the Socialist government ("the Left"), voted in for the first time since the Second World War, decided to live up to the anti-clerical doctrines espoused since the French Revolution, and incidentally collect some money for its seriously depleted coffers. It proposed to take away the government subsidies from Catholic schools. This meant that these schools, attended by a large minority, would become a great deal more expensive.

The Catholic Church organized one of the public processions (*manifs*) for which the French are famous. About a million people took part – from

both the Left and the Right. They were taken out to Versailles in special trains. They walked the 12 kilometers to Paris. The government backed down.

The French were marching for their *liberté* and *égalité* – their freedom to choose the school for their child without undue regard for expense, probably the most critical decision they would ever make for him. Whether worker or CEO, French people demand the right to decide on a secular or religious education.

Whichever they choose, it will be among the best offered anywhere in the world, it will decide his whole future and it will be a compelling commitment for the whole family.

That Brigitte Raynaud tried suicide after years of being in the U.S. and off the track, and not being able to get back on, isn't surprising. What is surprising is that she seems to be an isolated case.

School is the most harrowingly demanding thing a French person may ever have to endure. How he fares there determines, for all but a few rich, enterprising or artistically gifted individuals, how agreeable his life will be. Rank and pay in French industrial, financial and governmental hierarchies is directly related to documented evidence of intellectual superiority. Forget your notion that experience counts.

Like the sacrament of food, the school system, and the national priority of brains it represents, has the support of the entire country.

It would have to. Otherwise the suicide rate would have killed off the population long ago. Even the most irascible of francophobes usually restrains his French-bashing when he hears what poor Pierre and Gaston have to go through.

### National Fever

In fact the school system in France is a national fever. It affects everyone. The whole country trembles and quakes from September to June. Whether you have school-age children or not, French television and newspapers will drench you in the periodic pulse-taking of the children themselves.

First, *La Rentrée*. This means The Return from vacation in September. From vacation to work? No. From vacation to school. From May to August, no French person ever mentions September, but *La Rentrée*. At the end of August already begin the first statistics of how many millions of cars are clogging the autoroutes for *La Rentrée*.

The actual day of the *Rentrée*, the first day of school, is referred to by the media as "J", for *jour* (day) with a capital J. They start counting the days at "J-10", or J minus 10: that is, 10 days to go till the big one. As they roll by, each day brings interviews of school preparations in towns and villages all over the country, and spreads and interviews on various school concerns. What sort of book bag should the parents buy? A sack or a briefcase? 15 possibilities are presented, along with diagrams of the points where each one might strain the back. What kind of haircut is in this year? For boys? Girls? Short? Long? or half way up the back of the head?

Whole sections of newspapers are given over to health care for school children, a major preoccupation, for missing even a week can make a difference in your class rank. The competition is such that you can't expect a schoolmate to show you the material you missed. The role of sleep, exercise, brushing of teeth and proper diet in getting top marks is emphasized, along with the obligatory injections for contagious diseases.

As for what to wear, this subject is so consequential and the possibilities so numerous that J-3 and J-2 (the last two days to the *Rentrée* but one) are usually given up entirely to it. Little girls of six must already make the fatal choices of Look which will affect how they're regarded. Skirts or dresses, Bermudas or trousers, and what cut? Anyone faintly alive this year (1994) can report that the *caléçon*, or tights without the feet, that often looks suspiciously like long underwear, is in for all females under 70.

Don't bother trying to buy any office supplies from August through *La Rentrée*. Everything you might need has been shoved back to the storage rooms to make room for schoolbooks, notebooks, notebook paper, crayons, bookbags, etc. etc., usually displayed back of huge color posters of grinning girls and boys waving as they march joyously back to school.

Now we've reached J-1, the big *Jour* minus one. This is the day of the teachers' *Rentrée*. They meet at the school to hear a speech from the director (the *proviseur*) and find out about their classes. They're the vanguard of the French Ministry of Education. Now that the Soviet Army is no more, this institution employs possibly more people than any other in the world, something over a million. Its budget is 20.1 percent of the national budget.

For the French, it is this army which is of supreme national importance. The teachers, the elite troops of this army, are interviewed, photographed, followed and invited on television talk shows. Is French secondary education still turning out supremely literate graduates? Can they still recite lines from *Phédre*? Do they still perceive the resonance of words like honor and glory from *Le Cid*?

A fairly young, attractive teacher, a woman who just wrote a book on the subject, is asked, "What is the hardest thing about the First Day Back?" "Deciding what to wear," she says. "A *caleçon* or a short skirt lacks authority, and a long skirt seems dowdy. So we mostly wear jeans."

And the second most difficult?

"*Séduire les enfants*," she says.

Help! Seduction in the *classroom*? I can see you blanching. Do the sexually obsessed French stop at nothing?

Here we go with one of those *faux amis* (words that look the same in both languages but have different meanings) that start wars. *Déception* is another. *Séduire* (and its noun, *séduction*) has splendor in French, with none of the nastiness that Webster attributes to "seduction", of "leading astray, enticing to disloyalty, inciting to wrong." It means a fullness of pleasing, of charming, of appealing because of certain wondrous qualities. It can be applied to vacuum cleaners and lampshades as appropriately as people. In other words, there are no moral implications. Here's an example from *Les*

*Echos*:

### Hypermarché à la française séduit l'Europe du Nord

What that teacher meant was that seducing the children - charming them so that they would like her, be intrigued by her, respect her, and listen to what she said - was her greatest difficulty at the beginning of the year.

Finally J Day dawns. Half of the 1:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. news broadcasts are devoted to children coming back to school. Now we toil through countless media interviews with them. How much schoolwork did they do over vacation? As much as the school counseled them to do? How do they feel being back? Do they understand and approve of the current reforms?

The camera zooms quickly over three-year-olds in tears and brings us the happy faces of the six- to 18-year olds, grinning like the store posters. Everyone knows these are the last grins until July.

This goes for the parents too. Playtime with your child is over on J Day of first grade.

On J Day the parents are handed their first assignment: a list of all the things they have to prepare for the child to bring to school the next day.

For a foreigner, the list is about as easy to put together as a treasure hunt in Mongolia.

Emily Borel, whose little boy, Julien, just started school in a village in Normandy, reports from the front lines:

"They have all summer to give you the list, right? But they hand it out as you come to pick up your child the first day. A whole page full of everything from about 20 textbooks of different sizes - and their covers - and pencils with 3 different kinds of eraser to a real pen with real ink, and a piece of felt for the ink blots. So, 40 mothers, most of us with smaller children also in tow, go to the paper store at the same time to get all this stuff, because the children have to have them - must have them - in school the next day.

"So I'm standing in line trying to puzzle out the list, and Anaïs - she's my two-year-old - starts screaming. Then all the other toddlers in the store start screaming. Finally I get to the counter and order the textbooks and their covers. You know what the salesgirl says? I have to make the covers myself! For 20 textbooks! They don't sell them! Is this the Middle Ages or what?

"I go home and try to make the textbook covers with paper and Scotch tape. After two hours I give up. Then I tackle the rest of the list, with my dictionary. I come to *une ardoise*.

"The dictionary says this is a roof tile. A roof tile? Well, maybe they're going to build something. So I go to the barn and get a roof tile. Julien takes it to school the next day, along with the uncovered textbooks and the rest.

"When I go to pick him up, he tells me that the *ardoise* was supposed to be a writing slate and that he was the only one in class not to have his textbooks covered.

"I said, Julien, nothing in my life until now has prepared me for this."

After J Day, the fever rises as the mission to learn, and get better marks than anyone else, goes into gear. We quiver and shudder until at last All Saints, Christmas, February, Easter give us a respite and we're told how many millions of French families are gasping for the desperately needed air of the mountains, etc. The parents need the vacations as much as the children, having been up every night helping them with their homework.

### The Bac

Finally we have the paroxysms of June with the *baccalauréat*, known as the *bac*: a series of exams at the end of secondary school that take a whole month. Its outcome determines whether the child will have automatic free entry to university - or not. Photos of children scribbling exams (to prove

world from a different angle – this blew the minds of both teachers and pupils in France. Bernard Pivot, the country's most popular television personality, devoted a whole program to what school administrators, pupils and teachers thought of it. The pupils expressed being "thrilled and amazed" at this teaching system. The teachers and administrators were so restrained in their condemnation that I had a feeling they might come 'round – some day.

French secondary education is about the transfer of knowledge, not, as in the U.S., about awakening the slumbering mind to the excitement of learning and the possibilities of how and where the child himself can get the information. The word for schooling in France is *formation* – forming the mind, not opening it up – and the pressure from the parents and the teacher to perform is unrelenting. It seems to work better than the American system at turning out independent analytical thinkers, generalists with well-stocked minds.

The teacher is at school the figure of authority that the father represents at home.

Knowing the child – having any sort of relationship with him or awareness of his individual skills and quirks and needs – is not part of the deal. On the contrary.

The strategy of bringing the little savage in line that starts in the family is thus backed up and reinforced by his teachers. The teachers of my own children were angels of compassion, according to the tales of most of the American mothers I know who have children in French schools. In general, American mothers go into shock at their children being slapped in the face or shamed in front of the class. Slaps from teachers are fairly infrequent, but shame and ridicule belong to the teacher's daily arsenal as well as to that of the parents. In fact, it is just as well that French parents criticize their little tots mercilessly, to toughen them up for what awaits them at school. They don't seem to end up inevitably on psychiatrists' couches, as an American might be inclined to expect, possibly because they let out their rage out on their roads, statistically among the most dangerous in Europe.

It's the American mothers faced with these situations who need help – in not burning down the school or murdering the teacher. Their children seem to be able to sail through them perfectly smoothly.

But in some cases, professorial ruthlessness in class can be disastrous, particularly if there's a slight handicap. Anne-Marie Chevalier, a Frenchwoman who lived in Washington for several years with her family, has had experience with both and prefers the American way. Her daughter is dyslexic.

they're still alive), interviews with them about how they think they did and how they feel, and what they hope to do now.

All the questions are published in the dailies. The first exam is philosophy: one question to write on for the entire morning. "Being or becoming? Which is more important?" In 1993, the question for the literary *Bac A* pupils was, "Is human reason led to suppose more order in the world than is actually the case?" Four hours. The outline (*le plan*) counts 50 percent of the mark.

There's no nonsense about multiple choice for the exams on any of the subjects – although, to the shame and horror of many parents, there were a few in June 1992.

The *baccalauréat* comes in many shapes, which open different doors to the future, the one called "C" opening them all. Whichever section the student chooses, any *bac* diploma certifies a certain level of intellectual achievement qualifying the *bachelier* for university studies.

For the children, the 12 years of French secondary school are like competing every day in an Olympic Event. They're ranked in their class according to their marks from the first grade on. Good health, determination and stamina have to back up the superior brains, if they want to be number one in the class and please Papa, or at least be somewhere near the top and avoid a thrashing. If the whole country weren't out there cheering, clapping and stamping their feet, the system would collapse. Because you can also compare it to a prison sentence:

- Your superiors (the teachers) treat you like dirt. (That teacher interviewed on television, who wanted to *séduire* the children, is a notable exception.)
- There's no demand for creativity. (That comes later.)
- No one cares what you personally think or feel.
- Punishment for any aberration is severe.
- There are no sports but gymnastics.
- There is no escape.
- There's no certainty you'll get a job when you're out.

It's possible that French secondary school teachers will at some future date treat their pupils like suffering creatures who need encouragement. Two things make me think so: the guns that some immigrant ruffians of the suburbs produced to shoot at several of them recently; and the popularity in France of *The Dead Poets' Society*.

The spectacle of pupils in that movie being encouraged to speak up in class, not to memorize but to think, and to climb up on a desk to see the

"In America they don't murder the child's confidence," she said. "I came back to France when my daughter was eight. The teacher ridiculed her in front of the whole class, saying a four-year-old spelled better than she. Luckily I found another school for her – the Alsatian School in Paris – that had a different policy."

Once the *bac* is over, the misery is only just beginning for the brilliant ones who have big career ambitions and are aiming at a *Grande Ecole*, one of the super-difficult-to-get-into, high-powered academies that exist only in France.

I guess it's hardly necessary to add that there is no such thing as "school spirit" in French secondary schools, as there is no time to do anything but study. Exams are too important to trust with anything as delicate as the honor system. As far as I know, no French student was ever caught singing in school, and certainly not "School days, school days, oh for the good old golden-rule days...."

## Chapter 11

# The Selection of the Elite

## The Grandes Ecoles

*Il n'y a sans doute pas de pays au monde où les diplômés soient mieux respectés, leur validité aussi persistante. En France, le diplôme est une fusée longue portée qui, sauf accident, vous propulse jusqu'à la retraite. (There is surely no other country in the world where academic degrees have more power or longevity...In France, a degree is a long-range missile, which, unless there is a mishap, carries one through to retirement.)*

Alain Peyrefitte, of the Académie Française  
*Le Mal Français*

This was the headline in the business section of a recent *Figaro*:

### David (X, inspecteur des Finances) intègre Stern

French-speaking foreigners might suspect that this meant that a Monsieur David was going to take over the Banque Stern, but that's about all they'd glean. For French people, the headline resounds with coded information that Monsieur David is one of the most brilliant men in France; *donc*, as the French say, a man headed for, or already in possession of, great power.

"X" is the code for the most prestigious and difficult engineering school in the world, the Ecole Polytechnique, in Palaiseau, near Paris. Inspecteur des Finances means that in addition, he not only went to the world's most difficult and prestigious civil service school, the Ecole Nationale d'Administration, known as the ENA (pronounced "enah"), but also that he graduated among the first 10 in his class, thus qualifying for the State's most devastating power network, the Inspection des Finances.

Power in France is about X's and *énarques*, graduates of X and the ENA. Diplomas from these two academies, and, to a lesser extent, a few other high-powered engineering schools, are the point of about 16 years of excruciating school misery. Graduating among the first in your class at one of them, let alone both, guarantees positions of leadership until the end of your career. As Alain Peyrefitte comments in the quote above, they're long-range missiles.

Hence when a Frenchman asks, "*Qu'est-ce qu'il a fait?*" ("What has he done?") about another Frenchman he has just met, the question is not about what jobs he has had, but what degrees – and where from.

X comes first. As we saw in Chapter 8, France loves engineers. The country's symbol, recognized far and wide, is not, for instance, Versailles or the Bastille, but a feat of engineering.

The Eiffel Tower is a many-sided beacon. It reminds travel-befuddled foreigners where they are. Ascending its heights gives the intrepid a glorious view of the pride of France, the world's loveliest city.

For the French, it is much, much more. As a work of mathematical precision and building innovation exploiting a new material, it puts the world on notice that whatever the world may choose to think about France as Fluff and Frivolity, France thinks of itself as a nation of brilliantly creative and daring *ingénieurs*... sometimes of a tour de force, and sometimes of something very practical.

Eiffel's tower is both. He put it up as an outrageous challenge to the heavens; but also as a way to get up there in the winds and study what they were doing, thereby founding the science of aerodynamics.

For French fathers, it's as powerful a symbol as Abe Lincoln's log cabin. While the American father says to his son, "You too can grow up to be President of the United States," the French father says, "You too can master the secrets of the universe, and become an *ingénieur*."

### Power to the Mathematicians

The difference in qualifications for the two careers says a great deal about the way the two countries look at life: the one, pragmatic, the other theoretical. For a future *ingénieur* shaker and mover, aiming at a powerpacked degree in France means choosing the harrowing mathematics path to the *bac*; single-minded dedication, starting at age 15, to ever higher realms of mathematics in order to qualify for several more years of total grind, open only to the most brilliant, and survived only by the toughest and most determined... in order to qualify for still more

exorbitantly demanding exams for entering the gates of heaven to one of the *Grandes Ecoles* of engineering mentioned above.

If he passes them brilliantly, he is set for life. I said *life*.

That French power is about mathematical brains is one of the fallouts of the French revolution. Despite all the singing and banner-waving about *égalité*, the revolutionaries recognized that, while you could give the vote to everyone (everyone being males), some people were still going to be more equal than others. So they aimed at a different basis for inequality than birth. But based on what? Money? Property? Horrors. Physical appearance? Worse. What's left? Intelligence.

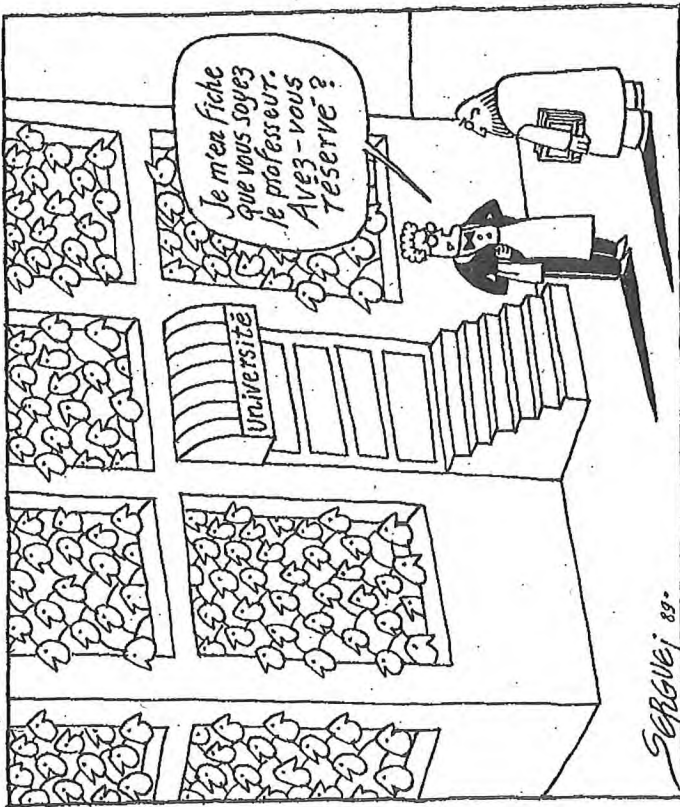
But how to measure it? Fairly? By math exams! What a wonderful way to stimulate mathematical research and crown *ingénieurs* with the rewards they merited. The French had been in love with math since the Crusaders brought geometry back from Byzantium. All through the Middle Ages and up to modern times, Paris had been a mecca for learning of all kinds, and as science developed, Paris was its center. There were more scientific institutions in Paris in the 18th and 19th centuries than anywhere else. Lavoisier, the father of modern chemistry, Pasteur, Lesseps and Eiffel were the heirs of the Gothic cathedral architects, of Abélard, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Pascal, and Descartes.

The country has always admired intellectual adventure and treasured innovation and progress, accepting it, reconciling it with the past. The greater the bookworm, the more eggheaded you are, the more likely you are to win friends, influence people and above all, be accepted at a *Grande Ecole* of engineering.

If possible, at X.

The system of *Grandes Ecoles* is unique to France. These high-powered academies are separate from the university system. They're also free, or provide pay for their students, and the privileges don't stop there. They are utterly unlike universities, to which anyone with a *bac* can go. Entrance to *Grandes Ecoles* is on the basis of competitive exams. Universities are underequipped, dilapidated and overcrowded. *Grandes Ecoles* are equipped with the best material, the classes are small and the professors are the best in France and well paid.

Future academics and research scientists try for one of the "Normales Sups", short for Ecoles Normales Supérieures. As for the business-bound: despite the lofty reputation of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes de Commerce (HEC), the most prestigious, it boasts few CEO's of the leading French companies. The best and the brightest are not yet applying. Why would



Lionel Jospin, Minister of Education (1989) as waiter in front of a "university":  
 "I don't care if you're the professor. Do you have a reservation?" (Serguei, *Le Monde*)

they? It hasn't the official sanction of 200 years experience, but only 48. It's not free, but very expensive. Above all, the entrance exam demands little math. If you're a math star in a country which idolizes math stars, why hide your light under the HEC bushel?

### The Prépa

So let's look at what these math stars have to do.

First of all, from age 15 at the lycée, do your 20 hours of math a week and eight of physics brilliantly for the next three years. In the last year of the lycée, known as *terminale*, the level is already altitudinous – now you're ready for protons, Black Holes and expanding the universe. Pass the *bac*. If possible, do better than average, with a *mention*, or even – oh, joy – a *mention bien*.

Now you solicit acceptance at one of the preparatory cram schools, or *prépas*, to rake your mind over for the entrance exam to a *Grande Ecole* of engineering: two years minimum and probably three years of excruciating grind in higher math, math, math.

But stop and think a minute. Do you really want to become one of those sunken-eyed green-skinned youths you've seen slinking into *prépa* classrooms, looking as if as if they just escaped from the Gulag? Is it worth it? Every *bac* season, the newspapers inform prospective *prépa* students what they're letting themselves in for, and suggest they tick off the following qualities in themselves besides brilliance in math:

- a strong constitution
- good health
- good memory
- resistance to temptations not to study all day and most of the night
- desire to excel
- zest for competition
- reserve intellectual capacities
- an organized method of study
- above all, a determination to dominate all tests and trials

If you're still undaunted, you put a file together of all your marks and professors' comments throughout your school years and present yourself at the *prépa* nearest where you live. For the next years you can't afford to waste any time on the Métro. If you have a *mention bien* or high honors on your *bac*, you'll try first at the two *prépas* with the highest rate of acceptance at X, therefore the most popular and the hardest to enter. These are the lycées Louis le Grand and Henry IV: the *prépas* take place physically in lycées. If they accept you, and if you live farther away than a 10 minute walk, you find lodgings nearer. Fast.

The first year is called *Maths Sup* (*Mathématiques Supérieures*). If you flunk the exam at the end of the year, you're finished. No repeat. Forget engineering and switch. Either to a university or Sciences Po. More about Sciences Po later.

Otherwise, if you haven't gotten mononucleosis, or dropped dead of cardiac arrest, you drudge on into the second year, known as *Maths Spé* (*Mathématiques Spéciales*). At the end of this killing year, you qualify for the entrance exam. X has a special one: nothing but math.

If you're willing to consider another of the great *Grandes Ecoles* of engineering, you can also take a different exam for them, which includes physics. These are: the Ecole des Mines, The Ecole Centrale, the Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées, France Télécom, the Ecole des Arts et Métiers, and a few others. If not, and if you fail the X exam, back you go and repeat *Maths Spé*. Good luck. You're only allowed to repeat once.

If at the end of this repeat year, you're not accepted at any of them, listen to this:

You can now go back to Square One. I mean, where you were just after you passed your *bac*. You have no piece of paper, no document whatever, that shows you were accepted and completed three perfectly hallucinatingly difficult years.

About 10 percent of *bacheliers* go to *prépas*. About half of these are accepted at *Grandes Ecoles*. But of those who do the *prépas* for X and the other leading engineering schools, only two percent are accepted. And one percent for X.

Never mind the others, one of them is you! Bravo! You're an X for life! You'll be in all the newspapers, with the 350 other new X's. Newspapers devote pages and pages every summer to the candidates accepted at all the *Grandes Ecoles*. The lists are not in alphabetical order, but in order of how well the candidates did on the entrance exams.

And now, since part of the aura of X is that Napoleon established it as an elite corps of military *ingénieurs*, you get to wear a glamorous Napoleonic uniform and sword – and you get a monthly paycheck as well!

### The Elite Corps des Mines

But there's little time for gloating over your laurels. You have three more years of grind, with one thing to keep in mind: to outdo everyone and finish first – number one is forever thereafter referred to as *major* of his class. Too bad, you missed that, but at least you're among the first 10. Now you've really made it. You are an automatic member of the Corps des Mines. This means you are a member of one of the Grand Corps de l'Etat, with the right to high-level, strategic positions in state institutions and industries like the Air Force and Elf Aquitaine. You will be watched and courted by the boards of directors of private industry. You have a fail-safe network of other *ingénieurs* of the Corps des Mines to rescue you should you (heaven forbid) ever make a mistake. Annual dinners are held so that you can mix and meet the older members. You have a right to call all of them by the familiar form of "you", or *tu*, even if it is the President of the

Republic. Just imagine what a determining wedge that is, in itself. An annual directory indicates job openings for X's, as well as where other members are working who could be of help to you.

You also have certain privileges for life that can never be taken away from you. What privileges? One of them is secrecy. No one really knows what they are, except the other members.

The first thing you do is rush out and have your visiting cards printed, with *Ingénieur du Corps des Mines* under your name. This will insure the proper consideration from people who wouldn't otherwise know about your elevated status. Also from foreigners. It behooves them to know that they are talking to one of the most brilliant of the brilliant math stars of France.

One of the striking results of this system is not only the quality of brain power out there, but also the hang-ups of the also-rans.

I'd have thought that being one of the two percent to survive not only the *prépa* but also actually to attend and graduate from Mines or Centrale would comfort even the most power-hungry of almost-X's. After all, Eiffel was a Centralien. But some of them go through the rest of their life dragging around a feeling of failure.

Jacques Maisonnrouge, who retired a couple of years ago as Number Two at IBM, is one of the few Frenchmen to get to the very top of a gigantic American multinational. He went on to become Minister of Industry and wrote an autobiography called *Manager International*. In it he mentions several times that he "only" went to Centrale. Not X.

### The Rebel

One of the talks during my U.S. speaking tour for the Alliance Française was in Fort Collins, Colorado, where I met a charming Frenchman who turned out to be an *ingénieur* of the Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées.

"You're a Ponts!" I cried. "For goodness sake! What is a Ponts doing here in Fort Collins, Colorado? Why aren't you running your country?"

"Madame," he said, "I didn't get into X. *Donc*, no matter what I achieved the rest of my life, I knew that I would never be appointed to the number one spot at the top of, for instance, Total. I was 21 years old. I decided that a country with this absurd system of deciding a man's whole future on the basis of an exam he takes at the age of 21 was not a country I wanted to live in." An American can hardly fail to see his point.



## Back to Square One

The ones who have my unlimited commiseration are the ones who tried and failed totally – the ones who submitted to the entire *prépa* torture and didn't get into any *Grande Ecole*.

Suppose it's you. Your only choice is go back and start over at the University. Six more years before you can earn a significant degree.

Or if you're still eaten by ambition, you can hope for the ENA and spend the next three years at the Institut d'Etudes de Sciences Politiques (IEP) always referred to as Sciences Po, another prestigious school, which is technically not a *Grande Ecole* because no year or years of *prépa* are required, only an entrance exam. Sciences Po branches into specialties the second year: international relations, economics, etc. The section known as *Service Public* is the Royal Road to the ENA, but you probably won't be accepted in it if you've not already been to one of the *Grandes Ecoles*. Catch 22.

Why not just go into retailing, cinema, computers or "communication?" Help yourself, no diplomas needed.

Or best of all, start your own business. There are actually a few French tycoons who are *autodidactes*, or possessors of no degrees.

## The ENA

On the other hand, if you're accepted in the *Service Public* section, don't think this Royal Road is an automatic pass through to the gates of power. There are 300 of you in the class. There will only be 40 admitted to the new class at the ENA. The written exams are brutal tests of knowledge of economics, history, finance, politics, geopolitics.

The oral exams, quizzing the candidate's general culture, are the most dreaded. The 13 judges make a point of being as intimidating as possible and stare at you mercilessly as you enter the examination room. The exam has already started: you're marked on your poise in entering and on how you greet them. Desperately trembling, your whole career, your whole life staked on the next 30 minutes, the room and the judges in it a blur, you had better notice whether or not there is a woman among the judges. If so, and if you don't say exactly this: "*Bonjour, madame, bonjour, messieurs*", you get a fat round zero.

The exam questions may be on poetry, finishing a verse by Verlaine or Apollinaire, say, or giving your opinion of the Grande Arche. Or they might ask you a puzzle: you're given three sets of initials and required to spot their common denominator. Answer: they're the initials of wives of former French presidents.

Many of the questions are simply to test your spirit and wits. Here are some past winners:

- Q. How deep is the Seine under the Pont Neuf?  
 A. Under which arch?  
 Q. What is the difference between us and the Last Supper?  
 A. I don't know which of you is Judas.  
 Q. What is temerity?  
 A. Candidate doesn't answer. He walks out of the room.

Here's one for you:

You are the President of France. You must choose a Prime Minister. The short list is very short – just two men. One of them is brilliant, but, alas, corrupt. The other one has an integrity which is irreplaceable. Unfortunately, he's stupid. Which do you pick?

If you blink for a second in answering this one, sorry, pal, no ENA for you. This country is about brains. You can't do anything about stupidity but, "*La corruption, ça se soigne*." ("You can heal corruption.")

The nervous collapse of the ENA candidate after this oral is not to be believed. He goes into shock, sure all is lost, until he hears the results weeks later, even if he (or she – 10 percent of the class is female) is a future *major*, or at the top of his class.

Once accepted, he is officially a salaried civil servant, and has two years more of learning about finance and administration, part of which will be spent working in industry or the government, in France or abroad.

If he graduates among the first 15 in his class, he can choose which of the Grand Corps de l'Etat, with their attendant perks, network and innumerable privileges, he wants to join. The plum for the top two or three is the choice of Monsieur David, of our headline, the Inspection des Finances, which sets up state government and industry budgets and fiscal policy.

Next in line of prestigious Grand Corps are the Conseil d'Etat, the high administrative court of justice; the Cour des Comptes, the State's auditing arm, and the Foreign Office. Unless he chooses to *partouffler*, and buys his way out, the *énarque* owes the state 10 years of service on graduation. Then

he is on his own. After these 10 years, Inspecteurs des Finances are particularly in demand for top posts in the private sector as well as state industry, not only because of their certified brains, but because of their 10 years experience in the Ministry of Finance, and their intimacy with its *grands commis de l'Etat* and intricate procedures.

More are going into the private sector than before, but the attraction of the government is still strong. That's where they tend to be. It's a government of trained pros. The most powerful civil servant in France is the Inspecteur des Finances who runs the Trésor, the beating heart of the Finance Ministry.

Like X's, all *énarques*, whether or not they made a Grand Corps, now belong to a powerful network. They'll be parachuted into an upper-level job in the government. They have the right to *tutoyer* all other graduates, which can create colorful scenes on television. With the change of majority parties in the Parlement in 1986, Prime Minister Jacques Chirac (RPR, a right of center party) turned over the official P.M. residence, the Hôtel de Matignon, to the new occupant, Michel Rocard, a Socialist. During the traditional changeover ceremony of handshaking and so forth on the front steps, it was startling to hear these two political adversaries address each other as *tu*. They are both *énarques*.

*Enarques* graduating among the top 20 of their class have luster, and power. But the ENA is simply a school, and it dates only from 1946, which is like about 10 minutes ago for a Frenchman. It isn't in the same class at all with X. The Ecole Polytechnique is 200 years old, it is a military institution with an ancient tradition and an aura of great generals and great battles won, as well as great inventors, great mathematicians and great scientists.

Being an X not only entitles you to classmates' crossed swords at your wedding. You now have a title. On your wedding invitation you have a right to put *Ancien élève de l'Ecole Polytechnique*. No title for *énarques*.

The really motivated, the really tough, the real stars of France are both.