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# Whisky, Woody Allen and Winterhilfe Basel

Interview by Timo Albiez  
with Paul Seger



Paul Seger (right), former diplomat and SHL Advisory Board Member, says of himself: «I'm at home in Switzerland, but I belong to the world.»

**Dear Paul, who are you?**

Describing oneself is not that easy. I'm a former diplomat, happily retired, and fortunate enough to be able to spend my time freely. But I still want to give something back. I've been very lucky in life, and out of that sense of gratitude I now devote myself to charitable projects – for instance as President of Winterhilfe Basel-Stadt or in Regio Basiliensis, where we work across borders.

**You are deeply rooted in Basel – Carnival, for example, means a lot to you. Yet you were drawn to the world of diplomacy early on. When did you know that this was your calling?**

When I was ten – which is rather crazy, really. Others wanted to be pilots or policemen; I wanted to be a diplomat. In my family that was utterly exotic, but I was a kind of European mongrel: a German grandfather, a French grandmother, Austro-Hungarian ancestors. Perhaps the international was in my blood. I was simply fascinated by the idea of building bridges – in the truest sense of the word.

**And was that idealism already apparent back then – or more the allure of diplomatic residences?**

(laughs): At ten, naturally more the residences and the supposedly glamorous life! The image of the diplomat's life in luxurious buildings was certainly enticing. But, indeed, over time it gradually became a genuine wish to contribute – to make the world work, perhaps ever so slightly, better for everyone.

**You were posted to Congo, Argentina, New York, Burma and Berlin. Where did you feel most at home?**

Without a moment of doubt, in Burma. It was the most exotic, but also the most human posting. I came from five years of UN work in New York – an incredibly intense time, but you rarely see there what your work achieves. In Burma, on the other hand, you could see it every day. We helped people to get an education, to become electricians or hotel professionals – it was immensely rewarding.

**And the country itself?**

Beautiful. And the people are so warm-hearted, it sweeps you along. Almost too much – as a diplomat you're supposed to keep a certain distance. But in Burma that was almost impossible. I'm still emotionally connected to the country today.

**You always say Burma, not Myanmar. Why?**

The name «Burma» dates back to the colonial period. The military later renamed the country «Myanmar» to break with the past. After her election in 2015, Aung San Suu Kyi said: we are returning to «Burma». So, it's almost a political statement which name you use.

**Is there an experience from that time that particularly stayed with you?**

Yes, the building of a footbridge with a Swiss man named Toni. We were in the middle of the Burmese countryside, worked for two days with the local people, and in the end saw the result: a villa-

ge suddenly reconnected with the outside world. It wasn't a typical diplomatic moment – but a profoundly human one.

**From Burma to Berlin – that's a culture shock.**

Totally. A radical change, as is part of the job. In Burma development cooperation, in Berlin representing Switzerland to our most important partner – it's like switching from the jungle to the big stage.

**You travelled a lot with your family. How was that for your children?**

Often more difficult for them than for us parents. I always had my job, my structure – they had to let go of everything: friends, school, language. When they were small, it was easier. Later, during adolescence, it was harder. I remember taking my son Tobias to the airport in New York when he flew to Scotland to study. I said: «I'm sorry for imposing this nomadic life on you.» And he replied: «It wasn't always easy, but I've learnt a lot – things others never experience.» That really touched me.

**You spoke to our students at our hotel management school today. What can the hospitality industry learn from diplomacy?**

We're not that different. Both professions are about hospitality. As a diplomat you are a host for your country – at receptions, dinners, meetings. You need empathy, curiosity and the ability to engage with people. And as in hospitality, the boundaries between work and private life blur – you're always somehow «on duty».

**And how do you balance Swissness with local adaptation?**

By taking both seriously. You represent your values – precision, reliability, trust – but you also learn to understand the local culture. If you can't do that, you'll succeed neither as a diplomat nor as a hotelier.

**If you had to give young people who want to go abroad one piece of advice?**

Go! And not just to Austria or Germany, but to places that challenge you. Far away. To cultures that push you out of your comfort zone. The further you go, the greater the learning effect. And: listen more than you speak. Those who speak learn nothing – those who listen get to know the world.

**Finally, a few quick questions: If you were a cocktail, what would you be?**

Probably not a cocktail – more likely a single malt whisky. But if I had to choose, I'd be a Caipiroschka – a Caipirinha made with vodka.

**Why whisky?**

Our son lives in Scotland – that's certainly had an influence. But whisky, to me, is an honest drink: simple yet complex. After a long day, a glass with some jazz – perfect.

**If you were a film?**

A Woody Allen comedy. Witty, quirky, with playful twists on words.

**And if you were to throw a party?**

A «Roaring Twenties» party. With costumes, music, the works.

**And if you could travel through  
time at the touch of a button?**

Berlin, 1925. The roaring twenties. Culture, freedom, new beginnings – that would be my era.

Many thanks for this fascinating conversation, dear Paul! May your retirement be fulfilling and may you enjoy your time to the fullest.

**Paul Seger**

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