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# Jean Paul Teyssandier. The man who materialized the Bridge Rio-Antirrio and throw bridge across the impossible!

The very moment, the construction of The Bridge Rio-Antirrio or more official, The Bridge “Harilaos Trikoupis” was assigned to the French Company Vinci, and more specific to its subsidiary Gefyra S.A., nobody really believed that it could be materialized till the very end. The difficulties were too many and the whole project seemed unrealistic. It’s all about the biggest cable bridge that has ever been created. It started to being built in 1999 and was completed in 2004 between Rio (near Patra) and Antirrio which connects Peloponnese with west continental Greece and northern Europe.

Jean Paul Teyssandier, one of the most famous French engineers in the world who has undertaken hundreds of big projects in his career, admitted that the specific project was the most challenging of his entire life! One of the reasons was that he undertook it from the very beginning till the end. Something that an engineer does not usually do. The fact that his wife and himself are very fond of Greece reinforced his will to go for something so promising!

The difficulties that he should overcome were huge. The first problem was the physiology of the soil and the unpredicted weather conditions. More specific, in that spot, the water is very deep, the bottom is very smooth and there is a seismic tectonic rift that passes through the spot where the bridge would be built. That means that the lack of solid ground and the danger of frequent earthquakes would prevent the materializing of that kind of project. And that was only the beginning of the… iceberg! According to Teyssandier, the basic obstacles that he and his team should overcome was the negotiations with the investors after… finding them of course! The same moment, there were too many contradictory reactions from members of the greek parliament, even if he had assured them that the importance of the project had many benefits for the country in multiple ways.

In 1987, he started the first discussions with the government. Really soon, Teyssandier realized that the greek public was not able to administer such a project. The technical and financial issues were really difficult to handle. Moreover, the lack of experience and know-how combined with the reluctance of many members of the greek parliament made the French engineer to feel like he was entering into a tunnel where there was no light or exit!

In this point, it is important to mention the characteristics of the bridge, so as to realize the size of this human attainment. The Bridge of Rio-Antirrio is consisted from a road of 2.252 meters where huge pylons are hanged and hold the weight of the whole bridge. To achieve something like that requires stable ground. The problem is that the expertise team could not find a solid soil not even at 15, nor at 90 or 450 meters under the sea. So, this means that as soon as an earthquake would pass though the bridge, the unstable bottom would be liquidated, the pylons would sag and the bridge would collapse. The challenges were many for the French engineer but his experience, fate and well-prepared team managed the impossible! They stabilized the marine bottom with metal cylinders 30 meters length and put hundreds of those under every pylon. In the circumstance of an earthquake, the pipes would be able to hold the ground.

Teyssandier confessed that it was the first time that he attempted this kind of implementation. So, he really took a big risk and he succeed!

But before coming to that point, it was important to find the investors. The fund that will allow the dream to become true! The arguments should be really strong in order to persuade the banks to invest in such a big plan with high risks! The first meeting with the European Investment Bank was disappointing. Their answer was simply: "we don't care about linking two villages'. It needed a lot of courage to make them realize the importance and utility of the bridge by emphasizing the importance of the connection with north Europe. To cut a long story short, the expertise and the experience of previous similar assumptions of the French engineer gained their confidence. Actually, Teyssandier had just completed a project about a bridge between England and Wales. The Prince of Wales himself had congratulated Jean Paul for the perfection of the project! That was enough to make the bankers go for the financing… the big picture: The creation of the bridge "Harilaos Trikoupis"! But the issues didn't finish here. It was essential to create a contract that would cover both sides, both the investors and the greek public. Only that there was still a very… important detail. The greek public had never done something like that before!

It took two years (1996-1998) to create a contract that would be fair enough for both sides involved. The greek public assured that would be responsible of taking the risk in case of discovering archaeological findings, etc. On the other hand, the investment bank would take over the financial and technical risks! Jean Paul still remembers the day that they got in the office of a big law firm in London and were trying to figure out the legal details and at the same time to explain the whole process with more than 22 lawyers! The contract said that the project would take 7 years to be completed. In case that they would go ahead the permissible limit, there would be strict sanctions and cancellation of the funding. That would be really catastrophic. That is why Teyssandier had personally guaranteed that nothing bad would happen!

The professionalism, the fate, the know-how, the expertise and the persistence of success motivated the whole team to do their best!

During the interview, the French engineer does not hide his emotions for this specific project that was characterized by himself as the project of his life!

Finally, the greek public took the contract in 1993. It was signed in November 1996 and the loan by the Investment Bank was given in December 1997. In the meantime, there were many discussions with the board of directors of the banks and they were very persistent about having guarantees, in case something went wrong. Teyssandier played the most difficult part because he was the intermediate between the designer of the bridge, the constructor and the client! As a result, there were too many exacting sides that he had to balance and compromise! Teyssandier admits that his presence of mind and the fact that he is a man with a low profile saved him from many unpredicted situations.

In 1999, finally was the right time for the outset of the project. That was the happiest time of his life. He mentions -by using some sense of humor- that there are two happy moments in life. The moment that you buy a boat and the moment you sell it! The same thing happens with a project. It's very refreshing when you start and very relief when you give it away.

The secret to achieve is making all the people involved feel safe and secure that everything is going to be fine. Any arguments, mistakes or misunderstanding would cost seriously the outcome of the project. The team must be 'tied'. Or else things can go really bad. On the contrary, the good preparation, partnership, distribution of roles, expertise and harmony are very important elements for success!

Unfortunately, there were many moments of bad communication working with the greek public . Though Teyssandier admits that all the people who worked under his instructions and there were members of his team were very professionals and they stayed boned till the end. One of the reasons that he managed to predict uncomfortable moments was the fact that he had two years available-till the investors and the greek public came to an agreement- to prepare himself and find the suitable equipment and the right team. That is why, he managed to maintain an atmosphere of safety during the whole process!

During the interview, there are moments that he becomes very emotional about the building of the enormous Bridge of Rio-Antirrio. He compares the bridge with a child that you set strong bases, you raise it and then you let it go out and follow its route! On the other hand, you must always be around to take care of it and fix any problems that may appear like a good parent! That is why he does have an expert

team who can take over when it is need. And of course there are cameras all over the structure so as to have the absolute control.

In 2008, the Bridge had a strong crash test with a 6,5 on the richter Scale earthquake where took place in Arahthos which is in southern continent, very close to the Bridge. Fortunately, the structure is very well-designed to resist even at the most powerful vibration. The highly sophisticated technology combined with the innovative design responded extremely well. Teyssandier must feel really proud as a “father”! He is also proud for one more reason. Because this project connected the desires of every  traveler. Either they are tourists and they want to discover Greece or they are locals from the areas around and they use it for their everyday needs! He also mentioned that there are efforts of reducing the ticket, urging the shipping lines to do the same thing in such a difficult period.

Last but not least, he talked about the great collaboration between the Greek and French engineers and emphasized his love about greek culture by referring his passion about greek tragedies and ancient greek, a language that both himself and his wife know very well. Finally, he didn’t forget to mention the fact that he has already visited Mount Athos twice! One thing is for sure. Greece for Teyssandier is like a second homeland and that is always nice to hear!