WE ARE ETH – Episode 16

With Ogi Stanovcic, General Manager at Ontinue, the MDR division of Open Systems

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[00:00:00] Ogi Stanovcic: I'm standing in front of the building and this backpacker tourist from Spain comes up to me and says: "Do you know where the building, ETZ, room D 96-1 is?" And I said, that's really funny, that's the lab that I'm working in. There's a bunch of computers. I said, I'll show you in. How come, what are, who are you looking for? He said: "Oh, just trying to get to the internet." So he pulls out, "Let's go Europe", a book for Switzerland.

[00:00:38] Susan Kish: Oh my gosh.

[00:00:40] Ogi Stanovcic: It said, best bandwidth in the in country is in this building and you can go and write your emails and that just cracked me up.

[00:00:49] **Susan Kish:** In this episode, I'm talking with Ogi Stanovcic, who did his Master in Management, technology and economics at ETH Zurich, and has worked for the company Open Systems for over 20 years. This is the We are ETH podcast, and I'm Susan Kish, your host.

[00:01:08] Why ETH? How did you pick ETH? You were smart, young, wanting to study engineering, and how did you pick that particular school?

[00:01:18] **Ogi Stanovcic:** It was a recommendation from a very respected professor who was giving guidance and saying, this is the one school that you should go to. That was ETH.

[00:01:31] **Susan Kish:** And where were you living at the time when you made the decision to come to Zurich and study at the ETH?

[00:01:37] **Ogi Stanovcic:** I was living in former Yugoslavia. So in Belgrade, which is now in Serbia. And by that time, it was obvious there's not much for young people to to do there, so aspirations to go abroad just strengthened and this is how it came about to come to Switzerland.

[00:01:58] **Susan Kish:** Fantastic. How did you make the decision to stay here? Because after you graduated, you started working here at IBM.

[00:02:04] **Ogi Stanovcic:** That's right. I started that already through the studies. To be honest, I was attracted but didn't really have Switzerland on the radar as such. So, I was thinking I'll just study at ETH and then I'll do whatever, where it goes. And throughout that time, I started loving Switzerland so much that it was a clear decision. This is the place where I'll stay.

[00:02:28] **Susan Kish:** Yeah. So, what was it, what was the tweak, what are the two or three things you remember about Switzerland caused you to say, you know what, I'm gonna stay.

[00:02:39] **Ogi Stanovcic:** People. It's love. So, Nina, today, my wife, we started dating when I was,

[00:02:45] **Susan Kish:** that always makes a difference, that's a really good point.

[00:02:47] **Ogi Stanovcic:** Makes a huge difference. And just the opportunities in an organized way. Things work and you can thrive, and you can develop things you can innovate. Those are the things that I loved about Switzerland and still do.

[00:03:08] **Susan Kish:** What was it around questions of security - cuz you - it looks like you, you studied or you started right off at the Global Security Analysis lab in Rüschlikon, which must have been pretty intense, right?

[00:03:21] That's an intense place. So, what was it about technology and security or cybersecurity? Cuz those are early days. Why? What captured your interest?

[00:03:34] **Ogi Stanovcic:** Yeah, that's absolutely right. Those were really early days This was the time when internet was coming, out of academia into businesses and talking about there's a need for security. And global security analysis lab had some of the most brilliant people, it still has. There I was of course, junior, I was still at ETH.

[00:03:53] There were two things that sprung my passion during that time. One is cybersecurity and the other one was videoconferencing. And guess what I'm doing today? I'm doing cybersecurity over video conferences all day long.

[00:04:13] **Susan Kish:** Oh, is that right?

[00:04:13] **Ogi Stanovcic:** I did my master thesis on video conferencing, on tele teaching and compression algorithms for tele teaching. So that was really very interesting. And the other part was security. And at that time it didn't look like these two things really combined well, but both were a passion.

[00:04:30] **Susan Kish:** Because that's before voiceover Ip, that's before all that stuff, right?

[00:04:35] **Ogi Stanovcic:** This was the early days of voiceover Ip. So, let's say mid-nineties it started and there was some university researchers that had the first, audio and video codecs, that could be squeezed through the bandwidths that were available at the time.

[00:04:54] **Susan Kish:** Which all came through into town through Techno Park, right?

[00:04:57] **Ogi Stanovcic:** Yes.

[00:04:58] **Susan Kish:** That's my recollection. Was that the big pipes came in through techno park and the only place you can get online was like if you knew somebody at the ETH because otherwise forget it.

[00:05:10] **Ogi Stanovcic:** And I'll tell you a really funny story that, that happened sometimes mid-nineties when I was at, the ETH at the electrical engineering building.

[00:05:17] I was doing my semester work. And this was also using video conferencing. And I had a friend who studied with me. He's from Chicago. So, when he went to Chicago, he went to a lab there and we were testing the delays in latencies, in bandwidth and stuff. So, I go out to take a break.

[00:05:37] **Susan Kish:** Wow.

[00:05:38] **Ogi Stanovcic:** I'm standing in front of the building and, this backpacker tourist, from Spain comes up to me and says, do you know where the building, ETZ room D 96-1 is and, I said, that's really funny, that's the lab that I'm working in. There's a bunch of computers. I said, I'll, show you in. how come, what are, who are you looking for? He said, oh, just trying to get to the internet. So he pulls out, "Let's go Europe", a book for Switzerland.

[00:06:16] **Susan Kish:** Oh my gosh.

[00:06:18] **Ogi Stanovcic:** It said, best bandwidth in the in country is in this building and you can go and write your emails and, that, just cracked me up.

[00:06:27] So at that time it was bandwidth that was limiting the video conferencing that was a challenge for tele teaching. So analyzing that from the technology point of view, but also from the user experience. It was fantastic. It was like a playground you just could not find unless you had the Let's go Europe book. You would not know where to experience with that.

[00:06:46] **Susan Kish:** That's a great story. So what caused you to make the leap from IBM to a startup? Cuz you joined Open Systems in what? 99?

[00:06:56] **Ogi Stanovcic:** In 99.

[00:06:57] **Susan Kish:** A peak of that first internet wave. That's when magazines used to be this thick, right? With all the advertisements and stories.

[00:07:06] **Ogi Stanovcic:** And the advertising was still in the print, like you say. So Open Systems was, a very small, very specialized company that I got to know.

[00:07:16] Not just in Switzerland but even in Europe, they were doing some real-life projects, going and protecting organizations, firewalls and intrusion detection and all that. And that was it. I was like, wow, this is the company. I,

[00:07:30] **Susan Kish:** It was a cool time.

[00:07:31] **Ogi Stanovcic:** It was a very cool time. I loved it. I never really made any plans. I certainly didn't think I would stay for, a quarter of a century in the same company. But it was just great, and it still is. It just, there's so much happening in this space and when you have excellent people around you. And when you have excellent customers working with you and when you feel that you're doing something really good you just stay, you just keep going. It just amazing every time.

[00:08:03] **Susan Kish:** That is very inspiring. And I have to say that's exceptional, right? Finding people who've stayed at the same company and still smile as you are right now and talk about it with such joy is, that's just very cool.

[00:08:16] As we were speaking about before, I'm pretty sure I met you 20 plus years ago in Zurich when I did something called First Tuesday Zurich, which met on the first Tuesday of the month. Do you remember those times? And do you remember any stories from those times?

[00:08:31] **Ogi Stanovcic:** Oh, I remember that.

[00:08:34] Then I remember meeting you like it was like, it was yesterday, Susan. This was first Tuesday very well known actually. Everybody in our industry was trying to get onto that. And let's get Susan and be nice to Susan so that she can invite you. And so this was really a very attractive platform, I went there by, I wouldn't call it an accident, or maybe it's an accident or serendipity. My good friend Florian Gutzwiller, who is the founder of Open Systems, was invited to speak. He had a snowboard accident just before. He calls me in the morning on that Tuesday and says, I just can't come. Can you go stand in there? So this was at the stock exchange in Zurich - a full audience...

[00:09:23] **Susan Kish:** we used to get a thousand people for those...

[00:09:26] **Ogi Stanovcic:** ...when I peeked behind that curtain, I think my blood drained out, every cell of my body. But you were kind and we spoke about it and yes, this was an interesting time. Investors were interested. We were not really looking for investors and for the longest time, the very Swiss way, let's earn the money and do it until you have the maturity to say, okay, let's expand this globally and internationally.

[00:09:53] And yeah, those were wonderful times.

[00:09:56] **Susan Kish:** And I remember Open Systems cuz you were, what we used to at that time call a hot startup and it was one of the few places, First Tuesday was one of the few places you can go and meet investors and potential clients and the whole range because it was before you had, before LinkedIn, before Xing, before Angel List, before any of those.

[00:10:16] The concept of an incubator was not well formed. Anyway, those were interesting times.

[00:10:24] **Ogi Stanovcic:** Oh, those were, I still think today of these, how, the, there was a quick briefing of how to do a three minute pitch, the elevator pitch and doing that. It was also a huge pleasure.

[00:10:34] **Susan Kish:** Very cool times. So, you are still, as we just said, still with Open Systems and in fact, it sounds like your job recently changed. So, what do you do at Open Systems?

[00:10:45] **Ogi Stanovcic:** So, I take care of strategic alliances and,

[00:10:48] **Susan Kish:** Okay. Which means what?

[00:10:51] **Ogi Stanovcic:** Which means the biggest in this space, Microsoft, has become very strong. Hasn't always been in the security space strong, but with huge investment focus and adoption of the cloud, that became a very big, and important alliance for us from the technology point of view as well as go to market. So that's the biggest part of that and also keeping all these relationships together, how the ecosystem and technologies and so on serves together to protect our clients around the world that's the result of that.

[00:11:25] **Susan Kish:** So, when you see a strategic alliance with Microsoft, as your big guy, does that mean figuring out how to integrate open systems seamlessly into the Microsoft platform? Or what does that practically mean?

[00:11:40] **Ogi Stanovcic:** How do we connect our product team with Microsoft product teams so that you don't wake up in the morning and the world has changed, but you have a certain heads up to adopt. So, when something is announced and the amount of news that come in this space is incredible, there are books with just summaries of what was announced at the last event, the entire organization does

that. When you partner with somebody who has more than a hundred thousand people, there's a lot of work to just keep track of who is doing what.

[00:12:11] **Susan Kish:** One of the things, as you said, cybersecurity is like in the news all the time, and the other huge thing in the news these days is around GBT now GBT 4, right? And how it's making a difference.

[00:12:25] I just used it to write a poem about the joys of, the risks of AI. But what are your thoughts about Chat GPT 4 and its impact in what you do and what Open Systems does around security?

[00:12:41] **Ogi Stanovcic:** Absolutely exciting times for all. There was somebody who once said, if it's written in Python, it's machine learning. If it's written on PowerPoint, it's AI. That was the joke for the longest time. And now the world has seen No, actually there's a lot more to that.

[00:12:57] This isn't just come overnight, but the world is seeing that. In our space - very important. So no, we are not there yet that AI or GPT can do everything for us and we can just go back and relax. There's still a lot of work to do for humans in there. But, there's examples of writing pieces of code and query where Chat GPT can use that and say or where you can use Chat GPT and say, okay, I would like to refine this query and do that. Everything in security is about queries. Data is around. It's really are you looking for the right thing?

[00:13:35] Querying these security logs to come to the right decision fast. Everything is about speed. This is where that comes in.

[00:13:47] **Susan Kish:** So that sounds like using Chat GPT to strengthen speed up, deepen the protections, but it can also be used on the bad actor side. It could be used to improve your phishing, take out those giveaway spelling mistakes that you get in those emails that you go, wait, that doesn't sound right.

[00:14:08] **Ogi Stanovcic:** Yes, a hundred percent. If you look how these phishing emails are written today compared to, some years ago, you can already see that. Just like you said, that's an excellent example of what it is. There's more things, again, Chat GPT is not just about. Okay. Doing spelling or write me a, biography in a nice way it can write code, right?

[00:14:33] So if you say, I would like to do this it can write code now. There's that nothing is good or bad, but the thinking makes it I think there's the use makes it. If you can write code, you can just, like anything in our industry, every advancement can be used for good or bad.

[00:14:49] So it's really a question of how do you get on the good side of things.

[00:14:52] **Susan Kish:** So it sounds like watch this space.

[00:14:55] **Ogi Stanovcic:** Oh yeah. Very much. Very much.

[00:14:58] **Susan Kish:** Got it.

[00:14:58] **Ogi Stanovcic:** It's still in the early days, it's dramatically changing capabilities and use, and I think also challenging academia in terms of, huh is this paper written by a human?

[00:15:10] **Susan Kish:** Yeah, how you form your questions and queries for basic research and applied research. I think it will be dramatic. I think that's exactly right. Yes.

[00:15:20] So going back to Open Systems, you mentioned Florian, the original founder and also Martin Bosshart, who we had a wonderful conversation with earlier in ETH Circle.

[00:15:31] Yes. Are you still in touch with those folks?

[00:15:34] **Ogi Stanovcic:** Very much, very much. We are friends, godfathers with two children. And so on. And I'm really proud of that. Obviously, we are all always very busy and you would like to see each other more but we are very much in touch and when we were doing business together, many people said, is that even possible to be friends and do business?

[00:15:56] And I didn't know the answer at the time, but I said what choice do I have? I like these people and I like working with them and we always had lots of fun. And I can now clearly say, yes, it's possible. You can be friends and you can do business. And it's a lot of fun to do it like that.

[00:16:12] **Susan Kish:** And that's probably part of the reason you're still at Open Systems.

[00:16:17] **Ogi Stanovcic:** It's certainly a part of the why I was really looking forward. I still am looking forward to go to work every day.

[00:16:26] **Susan Kish:** That's cool.

[00:16:27] **Ogi Stanovcic:** It's fun.

[00:16:29] **Susan Kish:** Do you work from home or do you go to the office?

[00:16:31] **Ogi Stanovcic:** Both. Both. I' ll do about 50/50 these days. But I love going to the office. I love seeing people. When you're in the office and you go to grab a coffee, there's that serendipity and I love it. When you meet somebody who just came from ETH and they're telling you what she or he did as their masters and just

started here, and what motivated them to come, that's the fuel for really being still excited after all these years.

[00:17:03] **Susan Kish:** That's very cool. Now, apparently, I remember your offices being very light, very bright, very airy, but also I understand you've got some pieces of art from HR giger, the Swiss artist who did the alien work is that, did some interior designers select that or was there some more thought behind that?

[00:17:25] **Ogi Stanovcic:** Oh, there was a lot more thought behind that and yes, thank you for saying that. And anybody who wants to come and visit is welcome. Even though we are a security company, we stay open and look to be very transparent and open. The Giger is a - it looks like a monster. It looks very much like that alien that won the Oscar,

[00:17:45] **Susan Kish:** Not, not a friendly thing, right?

[00:17:47] **Ogi Stanovcic:** And, and it is HR giger did that for open systems, this was his visualization of a computer virus.

[00:18:00] **Susan Kish:** Oh, no kidding.

[00:18:00] **Ogi Stanovcic:** In, in a ratio of something like 333 million to one. So at that time this was, yeah, maybe two decades ago, maybe a little more, the slogan we used was "Immune systems for your networks". And what Open Systems and Ontinue now did was always: fight out the bad things and keep the body healthy, keep the organization healthy.

[00:18:24] So that was the story. And this is what HR Giger then took out and said, okay, I'm going to vi visualize a virus that's hanging out here.

[00:18:34] **Susan Kish:** That's great. So you guys commissioned that piece?

[00:18:37] **Ogi Stanovcic:** Yes. Yes.

[00:18:38] **Susan Kish:** Fabulous. Very cool. So outside of work, it sounds like you spend a lot of time with the Aladdin Foundation, which looks like a wonderful organization working with children who are desperately ill. Can you tell us a bit about how did you start working with them and tell us a bit about the foundation.

[00:18:59] **Ogi Stanovcic:** Very gladly. I'm really passionate about that. I'm there since the founding of the foundation, one of the founding members. I believe in 1996 was the date being involved in and with a number of people involved in in other charities and so on.

[00:19:14] We understood there's a need for the entire family so when a child is sick has a challenge, disability being hospitalized for a very long time it is obviously the

child itself, but actually the entire family who is in absolute distress over a very long period of time it's siblings, who suffer because parents will have to focus on the child who has to have a dialysis every day and so on. And they don't have time for the other children. There's actually a word in German "Schattengeschwister", so they stay in the shadows. The charity Aladdin Foundation is relief for the entire family.

[00:19:58] So that could be organizing holidays organizing a place where you can go with wheelchair, you can have there, there's other families there and there's people volunteering and taking care of, and cooking and doing program and making it interesting for some of these families.

[00:20:17] There's other things like having volunteers, amazing people who volunteer and come in the rotation to be in the children's hospital to spend time with the children when there are gaps. So these children are not alone.

[00:20:36] **Susan Kish:** Fabulous. Yeah, and it it sounds like it really does. It's very focused and it really makes a difference.

[00:20:42] **Ogi Stanovcic:** It, it does. And what really makes a difference is when you a child like that or a family like that, that tell you how they experience that or from their perspective. Sometimes you just say, wow, it's worth it.

[00:20:56] **Susan Kish:** So I'm gonna ask you a few questions about the ETH going back there. How did the years at ETH influence your choices?

[00:21:06] **Ogi Stanovcic:** The years at ETH not only influenced my choices in what I do today, but literally everything about my life today is influenced by ETH and I'm thankful for that. And this is what I said is certainly part of the reason why I love the idea of ETH Circle and, and doing something and bringing back.

[00:21:25] So the professional choices, certainly, like I said cybersecurity. I got into that when I was at ETH. It wasn't a specific - you couldn't have at that time a lecture on the topic, but understanding everything about computer networking and how things work together gave that, that basic to to even understand, the field and get into that.

[00:21:52] Friends, I have so many friends, those are all from student days. Not everybody was at ETH. Some of them are from university or somewhere else. That, but it's really, everything.

[00:22:02] My, my circle of friends, my, my life is very tied to, to ETH. There are a number of professors that certainly influenced me very much. I don't know if it would be fair to call out individual once but have had and continued collaboration through, through many years of work in Open Systems as a company is very engaged with with et h and many students did their internships and master thesis and with many professors we worked on that. So very close to home still.

[00:22:37] **Susan Kish:** Very cool. Three closing questions. In Zurich, what is your favorite place to go in the city?

[00:22:46] **Ogi Stanovcic:** That's a difficult one. I love a lot of places but I would say if you ask others, where does Ogi still like to go? Right these days for lunch, not for parties or for First Tuesday events, that'll be Kaufleuten.

[00:23:00] **Susan Kish:** They make the best steak tartar, at least they used to.

[00:23:04] **Ogi Stanovcic:** Absolutely. They still do.

[00:23:05] **Susan Kish:** And when you were young, when you were just growing up, what did you wanna be when you grew up, when you were 8, 10, or 11 or 12?

[00:23:15] **Ogi Stanovcic:** There, there's all these boy fantasies about, pilot and astronauts. But at about age of 12, my brother and I, we put our money together and bought the first computer. This was a

[00:23:28] **Susan Kish:** Oh wow.

[00:23:29] **Ogi Stanovcic:** Sinclair Spectrum, and that got us in, to be honest, this was about gaming first, but it was a really cleverly designed computer that had some most important programming commands on its keyboard.

[00:23:44] So you could see, you could learn basic at the time. So from playing games, it started on getting to some nerdy magazines that said, okay, if you change this code here you can get, unlimited lives in the game or whatever. And then you start digging for that in the code.

[00:24:01] So around that time, I started being fascinated with computers, and that led to the rest of it. I thought actually I would be a computer programmer one day.

[00:24:12] **Susan Kish:** And what are you learning about today? What are the books in your bookshelf?

[00:24:16] **Ogi Stanovcic:** I like to, I like variation of books I sometimes like to read very different books, biographies things like that. So you'll see a variation. One of the most recent really fascinating books that I recently finished this called Chip War.

[00:24:40] **Susan Kish:** Oh, I have it just on my bookshelf.

[00:24:42] **Ogi Stanovcic:** You have it on your bookshelf. It's amazing. It's that combination of technology and advancement, but also how technology and geopolitics and economics play a role together. It's incredible. You watch the news in a very different way

[00:24:58] **Susan Kish:** Fantastic. Ogi. Thank you so much. Thank you very much for your time. Thank you for being open about this. That was a great conversation.

[00:25:07] **Ogi Stanovcic:** Thank you very much Susan, Really appreciate being here. Thanks.

[00:25:16] **Susan Kish:** I am Susan Kish, host of the We are ETH series, telling the stories of the alumni and friends of the ETH Zurich, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. ETH regularly ranks amongst the top universities in the world with cutting edge research science and people. The people who were there, the people who are there, and the people who will be.

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