

WE ARE ETH – Episode 18

With Hans Gut, ETH Alumni and former president of Careum, a foundation that promotes education in health and social care through innovation and development

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[00:00:00] **Hans Gut:** Finally the cab driver said, yeah, I really have to go home to Tunisia, which was two or three hours away with the cab. So he left me alone. I said, Hey, he cannot just drop me on the road in a town where I don't know anybody. So he dropped me at the police station and I spent the night in a jail.

[00:00:21] **Susan Kish:** In this episode, I'm talking with alumni Hans Gut, who was studying mechanical engineering at the ETH. Then had a long career in business before leading Careum, a Swiss foundation promoting, learning, training, and further education in healthcare for over 20 years. This is the we are ETH podcast, and I'm Susan Kish, your host.

[00:00:45] Hans. How did you decide to go to the ETH way back when, when you were an undergraduate or were there any other choices?

[00:00:55] **Hans Gut:** No, actually when I did my maturity, I didn't really know, you know, what to study, but it was very clear that, uh, you know I will have to study somewhere. That's what my parents kind of expected.

[00:01:09] And then, um, you know, they sent me to a Berufsberater how do you call this?

[00:01:16] **Susan Kish:** Oh, sort of a career advisor.

[00:01:18] **Hans Gut:** Yeah, exactly. Uh, career advisor and as my marks in the Matura were pretty good in all the, you know, maths and physics and chemistry and, and those kind of topics, um, he suggested I should go to the ETH. And to me that was okay.

[00:01:35] And I, you know, I said, why not? I'm a boy, I like machines. And, um, that's how I decided to study mechanical engineering.

[00:01:44] **Susan Kish:** Did you study computers at all at that time, or sort of simple programming?

[00:01:49] **Hans Gut:** Computers almost didn't exist at, at that time, unfortunately, you know, I started my studies 19, when was it? 1970.

[00:01:58] **Susan Kish:** Mm-hmm.

[00:01:59] **Hans Gut:** Computers was really not a big issue at that time.

[00:02:02] **Susan Kish:** For those in the audience who are listening to podcasts and have the world at their hand with a mobile phone, what was it like? Where did you spend your time? Were you in labs? Were you in the library? Did you go to a coffee shop? What was your day like when you were a student then?

[00:02:18] **Hans Gut:** Well, the ETH, at the time, it was really a school. It was not very different to the gymnasium.

[00:02:27] **Susan Kish:** Really?

[00:02:27] **Hans Gut:** Yes. You know, we had to be there at eight o'clock and then there was a break, uh, now later and so on, and then it did go on.

[00:02:36] **Susan Kish:** This was before computers were ubiquitous. Computers probably were, you know, the size of this room. They were big. Right?

[00:02:44] **Hans Gut:** Absolutely.

[00:02:44] **Susan Kish:** Did you take any classes that caused you to work with your computers and if so, how did you do that?

[00:02:51] **Hans Gut:** Well, we were forced to take computer classes and

[00:02:53] **Susan Kish:** Forced! It was required?

[00:02:56] **Hans Gut:** Yes, it was required. And, you know, we had to write in this, uh, language, which was called

[00:03:03] **Susan Kish:** Cobalt?

[00:03:03] **Hans Gut:** No, Pascal.

[00:03:04] **Susan Kish:** Pascal, right.

[00:03:06] **Hans Gut:** Pascal.

[00:03:06] **Susan Kish:** Right.

[00:03:07] **Hans Gut:** And at the time I knew a little bit how to program, you know, very, very simple, uh, tasks. And then, you know, you had these punch cards and I remember, I remember the computer was at the Klausiusstrasse and in the evening a lot of students were queuing up there to put their punch cards through the machine because this was a requirement to pass some exams and and stuff.

[00:03:35] **Susan Kish:** Did you have to reserve a time or how did you...

[00:03:37] **Hans Gut:** No

[00:03:37] **Susan Kish:** Did you just sort of grab a sandwich and went over there and stood in line?

[00:03:41] **Hans Gut:** Yes, you stood in line most of the time without sandwich, but, uh, you, and then, um, you know, you push the cards, those punch carts into the machine. If you were lucky um, uh, it printed out something which, um, satisfied the professor if you were not lucky, which happened a lot, at least to me, nothing came out, you know?

[00:04:03] **Susan Kish:** How did you find a bug? If you, if you had a problem in one of those punch cards, how could you figure out where the bug was?

[00:04:10] **Hans Gut:** Good question. I, I really don't remember, but it was very, very time consuming. Extremely time consuming. I believe the computer, you know, those were those, um, papers which came out of the, the computers.

[00:04:23] Those endless papers. And I think they indicated, um, where the problem was and you could kind of zoom in there and try to, eliminate.

[00:04:33] **Susan Kish:** So which command line didn't quite work. Or where the logic was circular.

[00:04:37] **Hans Gut:** Yes.

[00:04:38] **Susan Kish:** Whatever.

[00:04:38] **Hans Gut:** Something like that. Yeah. But this is really a long, long time ago.

[00:04:44] **Susan Kish:** Have you ever learned to program since then or played with programming?

[00:04:48] **Hans Gut:** No. No. That's not my, uh, forte at all. Oh, I,

[00:04:52] **Susan Kish:** You might be surprised now that you've got ChatGPT, you just write in a few commands.

[00:04:57] **Hans Gut:** Oh, okay. Yeah. Maybe I should, uh, should go to class again.

[00:05:01] **Susan Kish:** I think we all can do that. You studied the ETH, you studied successfully there, so you finished the the years. Then what did you decide to do? With the love of machines and doing well in those areas?

[00:05:16] **Hans Gut:** Well, actually, and, and this has a lot to do with the ETH. Um, at the ETH, we, at the time we had to do kind of, um, apprenticeships in industry. And the two, uh, apprenticeships, which I did, they became my future employer.

[00:05:34] **Susan Kish:** Ah-huh.

[00:05:35] **Hans Gut:** The, the first one was really where I made my Diplomarbeit, my, my diploma work, the company was called Oerlikon-Bührle. It was, uh, a very large company with, with a big machine tool division. And, uh, I joined this machine tool division because that's what I studied, uh, machine tools, how to build machine tools.

[00:05:58] But later in my life, um, I joined, uh, Mettler, today Mettler-Toledo, and I got to know the people and they got to know me, uh, during my first internship. So that's why, uh, you know, the ETH really played a very, very important role in my choices for, for the job because I got to know my future employers through the ETH.

[00:06:22] **Susan Kish:** And at these jobs and machine tools, did you design tools? Did you design machines? What did you actually do?

[00:06:31] **Hans Gut:** No, immediately after the ETH, I joined the sales department for machine tools, and that's something which interested me always a lot. And I had the opportunity, you know, to, to travel a lot, which, um, to me was very, very attractive.

[00:06:47] **Susan Kish:** And I'm assuming that was not just travel inside Switzerland.

[00:06:51] **Hans Gut:** No, no, that was not traveling at all inside Switzerland, they gave me all the kind of, um, you know, very, very difficult countries. I had to travel through Africa to North Africa. All the maghreb countries. I was responsible for the Middle East, but this was all, um, very exciting for me.

[00:07:13] Those were countries which I didn't know. And um,

[00:07:17] **Susan Kish:** So this is morocco and Algeria? Tunisia.

[00:07:20] **Hans Gut:** Tunisia, yeah. And Egypt. Uh, yes.

[00:07:23] **Susan Kish:** Egypt. This is the Dubai. Before it was the Dubai we know what it is today.

[00:07:27] **Hans Gut:** Yes. Yeah. I didn't go to Dubai, but I went to Iran. That was a big country for us.

[00:07:32] **Susan Kish:** Very cool. And, and what were, what were sales like in those days?

[00:07:37] **Hans Gut:** Well,

[00:07:38] **Susan Kish:** Because you didn't have an, you couldn't sort of connect with them on LinkedIn and send 'em a note and say, I'm gonna be in town. I'll stop by.

[00:07:44] **Hans Gut:** No, not at all. Actually, already the planning of the trips was, um, you know, a challenge in itself. I mean, this was before, um, you know, before emails and those kind of things just to make hotel reservations was very, very tricky.

[00:08:00] **Susan Kish:** Did you send letters or... this is before fax machines, right?

[00:08:03] **Hans Gut:** Fax machines, well, fax machines they did exist. I mean, I'm old, but not so old. Okay. No fax machines they did exist, but you know, we hardly knew what kind of hotels were available.

[00:08:17] You know, one time that's kind of a, a story, which I never forget. I was in Algeria and I had to travel to, to Libya. And, um, at the time there was no flight, uh, between those two countries. So I went with a, with a cab and I had no hotel reservation. And when, when I ar

[00:08:39] **Susan Kish:** You were winging!

[00:08:39] **Hans Gut:** Yeah. When I, when I arrived, we went to, you know, all the hotels. Uh, this cab driver drove me to the hotels, and they were all fully booked. And finally, um, the, the cab driver said, yeah, I really have to go home to, to, uh, Tunisia, which was, uh, two or three hours away with the cab. So he left me alone. I said, hey, you cannot just drop me on the road in a town where I don't know anybody.

[00:09:06] So he dropped me at the police station and I, I spent the night in a jail, I mean, it was...

[00:09:16] **Susan Kish:** Because it had a bed and it was safe.

[00:09:18] **Hans Gut:** Yes, exactly. No, it was very different traveling than today.

[00:09:25] **Susan Kish:** That is a great story. And then you went, when you went to Mettler-Toledo, who I think of sort of more around precision instruments

[00:09:38] **Hans Gut:** Yes.

[00:09:39] **Susan Kish:** Than big tools.

[00:09:40] **Hans Gut:** Well, they, they, um, became famous for their balances, which they did, where you can measure, you know, all the way down to the millions of a gram. And, um, today they are very, very successful in all kind of equipment for the scientific laboratory.

[00:09:58] **Susan Kish:** And did you do sales there as well?

[00:10:00] **Hans Gut:** You know, I joined Metler Toledo and actually, you know, to me it was very important because when I was with Oerlikon-Bührle, I asked Oerlikon-Bührle whether they would support me, uh, if I did a business study and they said, okay, uh, you can do that provided that you come back and that you assume this and this position.

[00:10:25] So I had...

[00:10:26] **Susan Kish:** So you went to Stanford?

[00:10:27] **Hans Gut:** Yes. I had an opportunity to go to Stanford and when I, um, came back, the job they wanted to give me didn't exist anymore because they...

[00:10:37] **Susan Kish:** Oh dear.

[00:10:37] **Hans Gut:** Yeah. They kind of restructured everything and they said, um, now you know, you have to join our military division. And I said, no, I don't want to join this military division.

[00:10:49] That's really not where I want to spend, um...

[00:10:52] **Susan Kish:** Military division, that translates to selling guns?

[00:10:55] **Hans Gut:** To selling guns. Yes. Anti aircraft guns.

[00:10:56] **Susan Kish:** Okay. I can see. Yes. Yep. That would, yeah, that could be a problem.

[00:11:00] **Hans Gut:** Yeah, it was a problem to me. And, um, you know, they were very, very generous. They said, okay, we understand this is really not your fault.

[00:11:09] You can leave if you want to leave. And I made, uh, an ad in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung, you know, where I said, I'm a dipl. ETH and also that I have a master in science, uh, of the Stanford University. And at that time this was very, very exclusive and I got, you know, really tons of offers. And, uh, people at met the Mettler-Toledo, they saw that as well.

[00:11:35] And they called me and they said, are you this Hans Gut, who you know, did, uh, his internship, um, 10 years ago or something? And I said, yeah, it's still me. And they desperately wanted me to join Mettler-Toledo, and that's how I got there.

[00:11:53] **Susan Kish:** That is a wonderful story. Now tell me, when you put the ad in the NZZ saying, bright young man. Got an ETH degree and an MBA from Stanford, which was a big deal. Was it on the Sunday issue or like the Wednesday issue, or did you run it many days?

[00:12:11] **Hans Gut:** I really don't know anymore, but, um, yeah, I, I guess at the time, you know, they had lots of advertisements for jobs. I mean this...

[00:12:21] **Susan Kish:** But usually it was four jobs, not people. Not candidates.

[00:12:25] **Hans Gut:** Yep. No, no. True. But I really can't tell you where I put it. It somewhere in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung and the reactions, they were, I mean, surprisingly high.

[00:12:37] **Susan Kish:** That's fabulous. And you put your phone number and your home address so people went...

[00:12:41] **Hans Gut:** yes, yes. Right. Absolutely.

[00:12:43] **Susan Kish:** Yeah, that's fantastic.

[00:12:45] **Hans Gut:** Different times.

[00:12:47] **Susan Kish:** They were different times. So you're at Mettler-Toledo and what do you do there?

[00:12:53] **Hans Gut:** At Mettler-Toledo. The, the boss, uh, was the guy who I got to know when I did my internship. And he basically, he said, you tell me what you want to do. And I said, well, I want to have a responsibility, direct responsibility for P&L and all those kind of things.

[00:13:10] Then he said, oh, okay, why don't you built up a separate sales company for the Swiss market. The sales for Switzerland were kind of included in, you know,

in in corporate headquarters. And there was no separate organization for Switzerland, but we had separate organizations for France and England and America and so on.

[00:13:35] So I could build up this, uh, sales Switzerland company, which was very, very interesting and very, very exciting. And after, uh, I think two or three years, um, they had an emergency in the United States with the sales company over there. And they asked me whether I was willing to go to the US and, um, then, you know, obviously I had to talk to my wife and we were both excited about this opportunity.

[00:14:05] And basically within two weeks, um, you know, I had to, to fly to the United States and take over the organization in the United States.

[00:14:14] **Susan Kish:** Oh, now that's cool. Now did you go back to Palo Alto? No. Or did you, where did you land?

[00:14:19] **Hans Gut:** No, we were, we were extremely fortunate because, um, the headquarters of Mettler US was right next door to Princeton, New Jersey. And we, we bought a house in Princeton and um, we really loved, um, to live there.

[00:14:36] **Susan Kish:** That's a beautiful area.

[00:14:37] **Hans Gut:** It is, it is. And we were so, um, openly, you know, received over there and also the city of Princeton. Um, a lot of very, very interesting people are living there.

[00:14:49] And Yeah. And they were, you know, so friendly and so open to us. Um, so we got many, many friends and we were immediately totally, you know, involved and accepted in, in Princeton.

[00:15:00] **Susan Kish:** So your kids went to school, to the public school, the local school?

[00:15:04] **Hans Gut:** Yes, they did.

[00:15:05] **Susan Kish:** So they ended up being effectively bilingual then?

[00:15:08] **Hans Gut:** Yes. Totally. When they talked among themselves, they talked english.

[00:15:13] **Susan Kish:** Fabulous. That's great. So this sounds very idyllic. You're living in the Green Belt around Princeton with brilliant people from all over the world working for Mettler-Toledo, a very generous employer. What happened after that?

[00:15:26] **Hans Gut:** Then, um, I was moved back to Switzerland after, you know, it was kind of a turnaround situation in the United States, and after everything was

stable again, um, basically I informed Mettler-Toledo, the corporate management, that I wanted to stay in the US because we like it so much.

[00:15:45] And I, I told them that, um, You know, I'm going to look for a job in Boston. That was kind of our, you know, dream location. But they didn't want to, they didn't want to let me go. And they said, Hey, how about if you could, uh, join our kind of the executive committee, um, in Switzerland of Mettler-Toledo. And they offered me a, a job, which I just couldn't refuse.

[00:16:12] So we decided, um, you know, to move back. And then I became a member of the, the group executive board and was responsible for the laboratory division, which at the time was the, the largest division of, uh, Mettler-Toledo.

[00:16:33] **Susan Kish:** All right. So they gave you a job, they made you an offer you couldn't say no to. How long did you stay doing that?

[00:16:39] **Hans Gut:** Well, then maybe I made a mistake, maybe not. But anyway, I, uh, you know, a had hunting company contacted me and asked me if I wanted to become the CEO of a public company in Zurich called Sihl.

[00:16:59] Uh, it's a paper company. And Sihl was, they claimed, uh, oldest company in Switzerland because they started to manufacture paper, um, you know, when the,

[00:17:10] **Susan Kish:** In the Middle Ages?

[00:17:11] **Hans Gut:** Yes. With the Reformation. You know, they, when they wanted to print, uh, new Bibles and those kind of things.

[00:17:19] **Susan Kish:** So Martin Luther wrote his commandments on the, on Sihl paper?

[00:17:22] **Hans Gut:** Yes, exactly. No. Then I joined Sihl. But, um, after, you know, maybe a half a year or so, I, I realized that this company was very sick and, um then, you know, I had to do, uh, a lot of things which I really didn't like to do, um, you know, lay off a lot of people. Sihl had, um, quite a few subsidiaries in, in, in Europe, particularly in Germany, but they were all losing money.

[00:17:57] And, um, it was really kind of a horrible situation for me. And after, uh, three and a half years I quit Sihl again. And then, you know, I had the great opportunity to, to join, uh, Careum.

[00:18:13] **Susan Kish:** So you really didn't like the radical destruction. That was needed to, did you have, when you left, were they in better shape?

[00:18:23] **Hans Gut:** Yes, they were maybe in better shape, but not in good shape. You know, like the...

[00:18:28] **Susan Kish:** That must have been frustrating!

[00:18:29] **Hans Gut:** ...stock price was under a lot of pressure and, you know, the mood, um, in, in all the different companies of the Sihl Group was not good at all because, um, you know, when, whenever I visited a company somewhere, basically my message was, we have to lay off another 10% of all the employees or, or whatever.

[00:18:50] **Susan Kish:** So you were not their favorite visitor?

[00:18:51] **Hans Gut:** No, no, definitely not. And, um, I, I believe you know, there are people, I know a few of them, they, they kind of do those kind of jobs, um, and they even like to do those kind of jobs. But I'm definitely not one of them. I'm not the born turnaround manager.

[00:19:14] **Susan Kish:** What did you learn from those years?

[00:19:16] **Hans Gut:** I got to know me a lot better because I, you know, I really had to go through, um, very, very difficult times, very difficult meetings and so on. With your coworkers, you have very intense, uh, relations during such a crisis and from some of the people, you know, you become very, very close friends because you could trust them. With other people it was kind of the opposite. Um, you never knew what's going on behind your back, but I mean, for me, I learned um, that I never wanted to be again in such a situation. To me, it was also very important that, you know, I had my family who understood that I'm maybe sometimes tired or in a bad mood or, or, or whatever.

[00:20:03] And very often I was, I just wasn't home or I came home, you know, at 10 o'clock at night or, or whatever. But my, my big luck was, you know, Sihl had a, a lot of real estate. Really a lot uh, very, very expensive real estate. And the company, which afterwards became Careum also had a lot of real estate, and they asked me whether I wanted to join their board because they thought that I was, uh, kind of, uh, that I had some know-how.

[00:20:35] And then when I left Sihl, I was on, on the board of Careum. Which at that time was not named Corum, it was the Rot-Kreuz-Spital. And they lost the permission to operate as a hospital exactly at the time when, when I joined them. And then the board asked me whether, you know, I was willing to kind of organize a restart of this foundation.

[00:21:06] And, um, as the timing was kind of optimal for me, I said yes, certainly I, you know, I, I do that.

[00:21:15] **Susan Kish:** But did you know anything about medicine or hospital management or any of the related disciplines? Because it did a lot of nursing training, right?

[00:21:25] **Hans Gut:** Uh, I probably knew maybe equally as much as you do. I don't know. You know, I was never...

[00:21:32] **Susan Kish:** One knows something as a patient, but that's different.

[00:21:35] **Hans Gut:** Well, it's different but important, too important, too. I mean, the answer is no, I didn't, I, I had, um, no particular idea about hospital management or, you know, schooling, school management and so on. But, um, I think, you know, this foundation was financially totally independent. The foundation had money.

[00:21:59] **Susan Kish:** So it had a, it had an endowment.

[00:22:02] **Hans Gut:** Yes.

[00:22:02] **Susan Kish:** It had assets.

[00:22:03] **Hans Gut:** Yes.

[00:22:04] **Susan Kish:** There was some kind of cash flow.

[00:22:05] **Hans Gut:** Absolutely. You know, the, the foundation was 125 years old when I joined, and during that period of time, uh, a lot of people before they passed away, they um, they gave money to our foundation.

[00:22:19] That's why, you know, we have a lot of very, um, very nice real estate in the city of Zurich. And, um, I had kind of great opportunities to build up something from scratch because I also had the money what I did, because I knew that I had kind of no big idea about healthcare and, and, uh, you know, whatever this foundation was doing.

[00:22:46] So I had the opportunity to find the best people. I think I had a good hand in finding the right people and building really successful, powerful, um, teams. And that's why maybe in the final analysis, it wasn't, it wasn't a catastrophe that I didn't know really healthcare because I had people around me who knew very, very well what it all means.

[00:23:13] **Susan Kish:** So I'm gonna ask you three questions to close that we try to ask each podcast. The first one is, what is your favorite place at the ETH and in Zurich, what is the place that you visualize and love to go back to.

[00:23:30] **Hans Gut:** In Zurich it's maybe, you know, I'm a member of the Zürcher Yacht Club, that's this uh, house, which is, you know, in the water. It's actually swimming, uh, in front of the Tonhalle, which is, a extremely, extremely beautiful location if you like Zurich, because you kind of, uh, see Zurich from there.

[00:23:52] At the ETH, yeah. I mean, it's hard to say. I mean, the ETH Terrasse is beautiful. It's not very important in my life, but, uh, whenever I'm there, I, I kind of enjoy the view.

[00:24:04] **Susan Kish:** When you were a little boy and you were thinking about growing up, what did you want to be when you grew up?

[00:24:10] **Hans Gut:** Oh, I believe I, I wanted to be, somehow successful. Maybe also I wanted to be, you know, a little bit relevant for whatever I was doing. Uh, I believe I always wanted to have a family. I wanted to have and I do have, um, you know, good friends.

[00:24:31] **Susan Kish:** So you didn't wanna be an astronaut?

[00:24:33] **Hans Gut:** No, I actually, I wanted to be a pilot. I wanted to be a pilot and I'm, it's, it's funny you know, I had permission to fly before I had permission to drive.

[00:24:43] **Susan Kish:** Huh. So you have a, a pilot license?

[00:24:46] **Hans Gut:** I had, I had a pilot licence with 17 years old. And, uh, at that time or still, uh, you have to be 18 to start to drive cars.

[00:24:58] **Susan Kish:** I understand. And what are you curious about? What are you learning about today? What books are on your bookshelf or podcast do you listen to.

[00:25:09] **Hans Gut:** Podcasts, actually, not very many, but uh, that's something my children always tell me I should do, you know, when you drive with your car somewhere. Um, the, the last book I was reading was kind of fascinating, was a book called, um, "Spy and traitor". And that's the story of a spy who, uh, worked first, uh, against the, against the west and then for the West cause um, what's going on in Ukraine and, uh, our, um, conflict with Russia. And so you understand it better when you read that book.

[00:25:48] **Susan Kish:** It feels more relevant.

[00:25:49] **Hans Gut:** Yeah. Yeah. And what's going on, you know, behind the scene, which we don't see and which we don't hear. It's incredible. And. That is what really what is written in that book.

[00:25:58] **Susan Kish:** Hans, thank you so much for your time. This was a great conversation and a great story. Really appreciate it.

[00:26:04] **Hans Gut:** Well, thank you. Thank you very much. And, um, I'm looking forward to all the other stories. I enjoy very much listening to your broadcast.

[00:26:19] **Susan Kish:** I'm Susan Kish, host of the We are ETH series, telling the story of the alumni and friends of the ETH Zurich, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology based 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 there.

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