

WE ARE ETH – Episode 29

With Patricia Schramm, Ambassador for ETH Zurich and former President of the American Swiss Foundation

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[00:00:00] **Patricia Schramm:** Yes, we do have to be concerned about what we're going to do next and in real life and get jobs and make money, but I think if you're passionate about something and you have a certain talent for it, the rest will follow and you have to maybe have some faith in life and in serendipity and in things just coming your way and be prepared for that by being serious, being hardworking, but also by following your passion.

[00:00:32] **Susan Kish:** In this episode, I'm talking with consultant and former diplomat, Patricia Schramm, who is a friend and an ambassador for ETH Zurich in the U. S. and for 20 years was the president of the American Swiss Foundation. This is the We Are ETH podcast, and I am Susan Kish, your host.

Patricia, if I understand, you study literature and philosophy, Latin and Greek, all these really classical studies. Talk to me about how that plays a role in what you do today, either as a diplomat or as an executive or now as a consultant.

[00:01:12] **Patricia Schramm:** Susan, it's so nice to talk to you. It's been wonderful to study the past, to try to understand the present, and maybe chart a path to the future, and from a very early age, interested in books. I loved books. I loved music. I loved history. I had a very literate family. They supported my learning. They supported my studies, and I just really enjoyed it.

I was such a happy student, and you're asking me how it affects me now. I feel like I've Come back full circle to where I started. I loved learning. I went out into the world. I applied some of what I learned, and I came back now to education as my field. It's really wonderful. I think as human beings, we have this capacity to learn and to be curious and learning and curiosity are the two things that have driven me throughout my career.

People told me, why are you studying these things? They are not useful. And I have many answers to that. One of them is that Latin is probably the most useful language

I ever learned, because it helped me learn English. I grew up speaking in German, I had to learn English. But if there's so much Latin in English, it was easy to figure out what the words meant.

I never studied medicine or science, but had I done so, I would have been happy to know Greek, because so much of that vocabulary is from Greek. So instead, I studied the ideas of the past. I studied the literature and the philosophy, and those ideas are timeless. I was fascinated by the early Greek development of democracy.

It wasn't what we know today as democracy, but it was fascinating to me to study and to sort of our civilization comes from. And today I work with an institution at ETH, for example, that is based on democracy in Switzerland. It's the result of the creation of Switzerland as a democracy. And immediately with the creation of Switzerland, ETH was created.

So, to have that long view on what governments can do, how important education is, how important public education is. All those paths seem to be coming together in, in what I do now.

[00:03:31] **Susan Kish:** Well, what's interesting also about your answer is this is a time when the study of liberal arts seems to be de-emphasized in many institutions. Maybe not so much in Switzerland, but certainly here in the U. S., and you make an interesting case for the study of the liberal arts. How do you contrast the study of the liberal arts with the study of what they call STEM, science, technology, all those practical, practical places where you can see a career from?

[00:04:00] **Patricia Schramm:** I think everyone has different talents, and I do have to emphasize that. As a child in Switzerland, growing up here, going to school in Zurich, there was a choice to go to the university or to ETH, and I had no talent for the subjects that they taught at ETH. Otherwise, I would have loved to go there. I think in the beginning comes talent.

And then, then comes a definition of, if I can go back to since you're talking about roots of words, education means to lead out of, right? Educare means to lead out of, and the original meaning, I think, was to lead out of ignorance, right? So, education leads you out of ignorance into knowledge or wisdom. Um, and I think that, again, different people have different paths, but I was fortunate to be supported in my desire just to pursue what interested me.

And that's what interested me. It wasn't driven by what would be useful or what would be make me a lot of money when I graduate. It was driven by passion, interest, and it's wonderful to be able to share that now and perhaps to encourage the next generation of students to follow their passion, whatever it may be.

And, I've been a very lucky example of how that can turn out. My life has been completely unplanned. I had little plans here and there, and they always turned out differently. So, to just follow your sort of core talent and convictions and passions, and then somehow the utility can come later.

[00:05:34] **Susan Kish:** So, speaking of utility, if I understand correctly, it sounds like you grew up in Zurich, English was a second or probably fourth language. And then you chose diplomacy and somehow ended up in New York City in the 2000s. Talk me through how that happened.

[00:05:51] **Patricia Schramm:** As I mentioned earlier, serendipity is a big word in my life, the sort of lucky coincidence that can happen. I was actually in the midst of finishing up my studies at university when I received a phone call from a woman whom I had met, who was the U.S. ambassador to Switzerland, and she had fascinated me as a person.

And she was it's incredibly inspiring to me in her career and her presence and the work she did. And so, we'd had a few conversations, but she basically called me and said, would you like to come work for me in New York? And I was not at all prepared for this phone call. Being a sort of good Swiss linear person, I said, I don't think I can do this.

I have to finish my degree first. And could I come in maybe six to eight months when I'm finished with my degree? And she said, no, actually, I need you to come next month. That was really tricky. And at first, I said, I couldn't. And then I told a friend two days later that he won't believe this person called and asked me if I wanted to go, move to New York... Why didn't you say yes?

[00:06:58] **Susan Kish:** And?

[00:06:59] **Patricia Schramm:** And so I reconsidered. And I called my parents and said, do you think I should come to New York? Sure. Why not? And so I packed two suitcases and they moved to New York and worked for this incredibly wonderful person who became a mentor and a friend. And that was my first job in New York for two years. And then I went back to Switzerland and did complete my degree,

[00:07:23] **Susan Kish:** I was going to ask that question.

[00:07:25] **Patricia Schramm:** Which was good thing because I couldn't have done what I did afterwards without that degree. So, it was a good thing to, to take that again, a leap of across the Atlantic and get some work experience, get to know Americans, get to know how they work, how they think, get to know a young man. And that was the next serendipitous thing, no?

[00:07:47] **Susan Kish:** You got married and you stayed in the states.

[00:07:49] **Patricia Schramm:** I stayed, I got stuck.

[00:07:50] **Susan Kish:** Hey, got stuck, what do you mean?

[00:07:52] **Patricia Schramm:** As I like to say, I came for a job, I stayed for a man. It's not very liberated, perhaps, but no, of course, it was all making choices, right? It's

about choices in life, and we make them every step of the way, sometimes consciously, sometimes not so consciously, sometimes with lots of good data, and sometimes with no data. And life just takes its course. So again, I was very lucky.

[00:08:18] **Susan Kish:** So, you raised your family. Sounds like most of your career was actually in New York.

[00:08:23] **Patricia Schramm:** You're absolutely right. I ended up going back to New York to a big Swiss company called Sando, which was now called Novartis and split Sando off again. I thought maybe the corporate career would be my thing. And as I was walking that path, I met another ambassador, a Swiss ambassador, who, uh, oh, this is interesting.

You're in New York. You know something about business. You know something about art and music and literature. I'm looking for a cultural attaché. Would you be interested?

[00:08:57] **Susan Kish:** You seem to get these calls a lot.

[00:09:00] **Patricia Schramm:** It's incredible. It is just amazing. And I think of a quote I heard not long ago from an ETH alum in New York who said, luck favors the prepared.

And I think that's a great way to describe what happened to me. I was always on a nice track and then something happened and I was able to say, yes, I can switch tracks. I can do that. I can go a different direction. And it was lucky. It was no doubt, just lucky that I got this offer. But for seven years, I was cultural attaché for Switzerland in New York, making my hobby into my profession.

[00:09:37] **Susan Kish:** So much fun.

[00:09:38] **Patricia Schramm:** It was amazing. It was all about bringing Swiss artists and musicians and dancers, finding the best in Swiss culture, bringing it to New York, very competitive environment in the arts. So, you had to really bring the best and and work. It was a diplomatic position. You had to work to promote Switzerland and its diplomatic agenda through the arts.

It was a wonderful, just eye-opening experience. And again, very lucky to have had that and to have had a mentor with the Swiss ambassador who introduced me to the world of diplomacy, Swiss diplomacy, government, just a whole other sphere of knowledge that I had never studied, but that I just picked up by doing and it was fascinating.

[00:10:24] **Susan Kish:** And then if I understand correctly, you started working for the American Swiss foundation. Can you tell us about what you did, but also tell us what is the American Swiss foundation and especially their young leaders program, which is the one I keep thinking of.

[00:10:39] **Patricia Schramm:** It was founded before World War II had even ended on May 8th of 1945 by a group of Swiss in New York who wanted to rebuild the understanding of Switzerland in the United States after the war. There was, there were misconceptions and misperceptions about Switzerland in the United States. Why was Switzerland neutral? Why wasn't it with us?

And this small organization of Swiss friends of American friends of Switzerland. That was actually what it was called. It was called American friends of Switzerland. And they started programs to. Inform Americans about the history of Switzerland, the shared values, the inspiration that Swiss freedom fighters had provided to the American founding fathers, and the inspiration that America's constitution had, you know, given to Switzerland when they drafted their constitution in 1848.

So this sort of back and forth flow of inspiration of democratic values, that was the story they told. And they did that for many years. And then in 1990, a new person became Chairman Ambassador Faith Whittlesey and started this program called the Young Leaders Conference. And I think the concept is so brilliant because it is at once sustainable over time and renewable So you take a group of 25 young Americans to Switzerland for a week long program at the highest level.

They meet a group of 25 Swiss. They spend a week together getting to know each other really well. And they talk about All the important things in the world and they exchange views and they learn from each other. They talk about business and politics and the media and the military and foreign policy and security policy and social media and everything.

And they talk about it all day with the leaders of Switzerland, corporate CEOs, leaders in government, in academia. And they talk about it at night, some more. One of the great things during the program was always a visit to ETH. That was how I first really got to know the leadership of ETH. Was by bringing them, the young leaders, because the whole idea of the program is you introduce them to the best of Switzerland.

So ETH was always on the program. It's the best of Switzerland, and it's the best of Europe, right? So year after year, I had the privilege of leading these brilliant young people through Switzerland and to ETH, and I got to see various parts of ETH, depending on who hosted the conference, we would go and see robotics, or we would go see material sciences, or we would see the Wyss Institute, or we would see architecture.

And so I became quite the expert on ETH just from visiting every year with the young leaders. Meanwhile, after, after 30 plus years of the program, there are now about 1,400 alumni. There's a U. S. Senator, several, about four or five congressmen, several former governors, editors of all the big news outlets, the CNN, White House correspondent, you name it.

These are all people who've been to Switzerland for this week long Young Leaders Conference and who've developed knowledge and a love of Switzerland, really. And

friendship with Swiss people. And so I think that it's an incredible network for Switzerland in the United States. And it's an incredible introduction for the Swiss participants of an America they don't know.

The bankers know American bankers and the pharma people know American business people, but they meet Americans. American political leaders, media leaders, and they get to know how Americans really think in a much more broad sense. It was wonderful, this exchange of views, this dialogue, this building bridges between the two countries, and what a privilege for me to spend this time finding the young leaders and working with them to come to Switzerland, leading the program, and really making a difference, I think, over time in the friendship between the two countries.

[00:14:45] **Susan Kish:** So, Patricia, if somebody wanted to be considered as a young leader, I'm thinking of our audience here. What do they do? Do they like write you an email or reach out on LinkedIn or how does that process work?

[00:14:58] **Patricia Schramm:** I did leave earlier this year, so there could be new rules, but the concept was based on an invitation only process so that you had to be nominated by someone who knew someone at the American Swiss Foundation. So it's based on outreach. The foundation would ask senior leaders of both countries for nominations.

ETH was always asked to nominate a young leader. There's always, it was important to have someone from academia, who's often a young leader from ETH. So I have a few friends at ETH who were young leaders, some a long time ago, like Ralph Müller, who was 20 years ago, but I just saw him the other day. He still remembers and he's still engaged in the network.

One more recently was Marco Hutter, who's a robotics professor. And so this selection process is very, it's highly selective and it's based on recommendations and nominations. So yes, an email to me or to anyone who's on the board of the American Swiss Foundation is the best way to start that process.

[00:16:01] **Susan Kish:** Got it. Thank you. It sounds like this theme of diplomacy and the theme of connection and the theme of weaving these two countries is consistent across your career.

[00:16:13] **Patricia Schramm:** I was very lucky to be born with two passports. So that was a good beginning.

[00:16:19] **Susan Kish:** It's a good foundation. And the two passports were US and Swiss?

[00:16:23] **Patricia Schramm:** Exactly. So the story began before I was born, when a young Swiss conductor moved to Buffalo, New York to conduct the Buffalo Symphony Orchestra and met a wonderful young woman who was interested in

music. And they fell in love and got married shortly after and had a very happy life together. 60 years now they've been married.

And they moved to Switzerland when I was born. So I was born in Switzerland. As a dual citizen and was able to accept that job in New York because I had a passport. The two countries are a part of me. They are who I am. They are close to my heart. They are my heart. And so I care very personally and deeply about the relationship between the two countries.

And I've been so lucky to split my time between the two of them because my work has always brought me back and forth. Academia in the arts. It's been really fabulous, too. Connect people and ideas in the two countries. That has been my life mission and it's been my, my life. So it's wonderful when two things just flow together like that.

[00:17:33] **Susan Kish:** And can you tell us what you're doing now? I understand that you're now a consultant. You started your firm less than a year ago, but you have some really interesting clients, including the ETH. So can you share a bit about what your work is now?

[00:17:47] **Patricia Schramm:** Sure. I'm very happy to be an entrepreneur, a startup, which is quite something at my age, but I'm enjoying it thoroughly and I recommend it as a way to take a long time experience and turn it into something. Perhaps a little bit more personal and individualistic at the end of a career. So I am delighted to be an independent consultant to universities and nonprofit organizations.

And one of my great clients is ETH now. It's, again, how lucky am I to be working with the number one university in Europe? One of the top 10 in the world. It's phenomenal. And it came out of, again, conversations that I had when I was working at the American Swiss Foundation with people at ETH and would there ever possibly be something we could do together?

And getting back to the theme of just going with the flow and, seeing what's. Out there serendipitously, and there was a project to reengage the alumni of ETH to find ways to engage them both to connect with each other and to connect more with the university, get together to benefit from this incredible network of knowledge that is the alumni.

of ETH around the world. I believe there are about 90, 000 of them who are doing incredible things. And I've met a few, and there are many more to meet, and they're incredibly inspirational, and the university, ETH, really has a strategic objective now to engage them strategically, so I'm helping them on their strategy to engage them to, to build alumni organizations in countries to build the alumni group in the United States, and there are other projects.

One of the things that I think all American private universities understand is how important engaged alumni are for an institution. Students come and go, faculty come and go, hopefully not so quickly, but alumni are forever. And it's an incredible...

[00:20:10] **Susan Kish:** That's a really interesting way to view it.

[00:20:11] **Patricia Schramm:** It's an incredible asset to a university, if you can engage them for their individual benefit, but also for the benefit of the university and by extension for the benefit to the country and society at large.

So the more they engage with each other, the more things they will do together, and the more this will benefit the world. So I think it's a fantastic idea to pursue this. For the president of ETH, and it's a fantastic project to help with with that connection of building bridges between the two countries.

[00:20:45] **Susan Kish:** Now, do you have any weird feelings because you are yourself an alumni of the University of Zurich and here you are working with the alumni of the ETH?

[00:20:53] **Patricia Schramm:** I think I might have been intimidated in younger years, but I'm not so easily intimidated anymore. So I see it as just a fabulous opportunity to learn, to meet great people, to put people in touch with each other, to expand my own horizon, to, and, and, and one thing I think I've learned getting back to our conversation about literature and philosophy is that it is something that you can use in context.

And I think it's important for scientists and people who are well versed in technology to learn something about philosophy and to think about what it is they're doing and why they're doing what they're doing and how they know that what they're doing is right or is there something that might be wrong.

You know, be not right. Are there any risks? Any dangers? Artificial intelligence comes to mind. There are many philosophical questions surrounding the sciences and technology. And I think ETH also has a really great approach through the Collegium Helveticum and other organizations to bring in some of that liberal arts thinking While focusing very seriously and with great expertise on science and technology.

But to come from the outside and share a different point of view is not such a bad thing. So even though I'm mystified by even the basics of chemistry, I'm delighted to talk to chemists about what they think about the world. And so if you can remove yourself far enough from the details, you can really see the whole and you can see the whole of ETH and its contribution to Switzerland and the incredible interplay between the institution and the government and the people of Switzerland, how the ETH is made possible by the Swiss people through their taxes.

And ETH makes possible Switzerland the way it is today through the innovation that it brings. To the country, to its students, to its researchers, to its companies and to society at large. It is a shining example of how public education should work. The public understands the value, is willing to use the tax money to pay for it, and it delivers.

Every time. So it's a circle. It's a really perfect circle of public investment and return on investment that then brings more investment and more return on investment and make Switzerland the number one in innovation year after year in all the world rankings.

[00:23:24] **Susan Kish:** Patricia, thank you very much. That was a really compelling, both story and an argument around the importance of education ETH as an institution. So Patricia, thank you very much. I'd love to ask some of the questions we often ask at the close of these conversations. It really picks up on one of the themes you brought up, which is curiosity.

What are you curious around today? What topic compels you these days?

[00:23:53] **Patricia Schramm:** That's a, it's a tough question because I'm curious about many different things at the same time. So I just read a book about Face recognition technology, which I find fascinating, and I am working my way through a biography of Churchill, just because I think that 20th century history is fascinating. So I'm curious...

[00:24:14] **Susan Kish:** Patricia, you have to tell me because we collect a book list on this podcast. Who wrote this face recognition book?

[00:24:22] **Patricia Schramm:** Oh, this book is called Your Face Belongs To Us, and it's by Kashmir Hill. She's the New York Times technology correspondent. She's an alumna of the Young Leaders Conference of the American Swiss Foundation.

[00:24:36] **Susan Kish:** Of course.

[00:24:37] **Patricia Schramm:** Of course.

[00:24:38] **Susan Kish:** Of course she is.

[00:24:39] **Patricia Schramm:** It all ties together, and it's a brilliant book. So yes, put that on your book list. It's fascinating.

[00:24:46] **Susan Kish:** Patricia, thank you so much for your time and your conversation and your story.

[00:24:52] **Patricia Schramm:** You're welcome. It's been a pleasure talking to you, Susan.

[00:24:56] **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. 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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