

# WE ARE ETH – Episode 4

## With Martin Dahinden, friend of ETH Zurich, former Swiss Ambassador to the US and storyteller

### [Listen to Podcast](#)

[00:00:00] **Martin Dahinden:** I could meet a lot of exciting people throughout my diplomatic career. And ETH has almost in all phases of my professional career played a role.

[00:00:18] **Susan Kish:** Good morning. Good afternoon. Good evening. In this episode, I'm going to talk with Martin Dahinden, former Swiss ambassador to the United States, who's currently teaching at the University of Zurich in political science. We're going to talk about the ETH, its influence and role in Martin's career. And most importantly, why it's important today and tomorrow.

[00:00:39] I'm Susan Kish, host of the We Are ETH podcast telling the stories 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. These are their stories.

[00:01:08] Martin, welcome! Delighted to have you here today.

[00:01:10] **Martin Dahinden:** It's a pleasure to be with you.

[00:01:12] **Susan Kish:** So Martin, you had an extensive career in public service. You've worked in Switzerland, Paris, Nigeria, New York, Brussels, probably some more places. Um, and you've worked on tariffs

and trade nuclear disarmament, security and cooperation with the EU and the Swiss mission to NATO.

[00:01:30] So you had, uh, a pretty wide variety of career. Can you just talk about sort of the beginning years when you were a student, what was it like? Cause I don't think you went to the ETH. You, you went down the street.

[00:01:43] **Martin Dahinden:** Exactly. You're right. But from the beginning of my time as a student and later as a researcher at the university, I had contact with the ETH and one project, exciting project, I still remember. It was a time when new social movements became, I would say important in Swiss politics. Environment movement, women's movement, third world movement. And, uh, we organized then meetings, a series of lectures to discuss this new phenomenon and this was done together by the two universities, by the University of Zurich and ETH.

[00:02:29] **Susan Kish:** Did you have any publications or was there any sort of definitive outcome from these lectures?

[00:02:36] **Martin Dahinden:** Eventually the lectures were published and apparently, they're still used because it was among the first ones, at least, in the German speaking world. And, uh, it was also exciting, not only in terms of lectures, but also in terms of, uh, contacts and for some of those activists, it was new to go to the university. And something that was also very interesting, it was to link this with interdisciplinary thinking. This was at that time, not so prominent in universities, it was quite something new. And so the topic and the methodology fitted very well.

[00:03:23] **Susan Kish:** So what would be an example of interdisciplinary, and actually, what did you major in when you were at school?

[00:03:30] **Martin Dahinden:** I'm an economist but I did also history and was afterwards researching in economic history. So it's coming from two different angles. Now, when we have, for instance, new social movements, like a women's movement at that time, you can look at it from very different angles. You can look at it from a sociologist angle, but you can also look at it from an arts angle.

[00:03:57] What is the impact of art or how did this change language? How did this change science? Is there something different afterwards? These were the questions we asked at that time and tried uh, to find a

solution. Of course, it's something you will never have the final solution but it's an interesting topic and a topic that is still important in our time, even so those movements during the decades have fundamentally changed.

[00:04:32] **Susan Kish:** And those questions of an interdisciplinary perspective are still important today. It's come up in terms of research around COVID and its impact on different genders.

[00:04:41] **Martin Dahinden:** Yes. I am a strong believer in it and we know that the innovations are usually not coming from the mainstream, you'll have improvements in the mainstream, but if you want to change something, if you want to change a paradigm in science, mainly you will find people from the outside or people who are very young in a discipline and not already shaped by the mainstream.

[00:05:09] **Susan Kish:** How did you go from studying economics and economic history to a career in diplomacy and public service?

[00:05:17] **Martin Dahinden:** It's a very strange answer I have to give you, uh, I never could decide in which field I wanted to work. And so a colleague of mine told me, well, go to the diplomatic service there you can every, uh, let's say 3, 4, 5 years change the place you work and change the topic.

[00:05:43] In the beginning, I was not convinced, but I looked about the modalities of entering the diplomatic service and so on. And then I applied and to my own surprise, I passed, uh, the “conours” as it was called. And I have stayed afterwards in that area. And I could do extremely different things in extremely different places.

[00:06:07] And I could meet a lot of, uh, exciting people throughout my diplomatic career. And ETH has almost in all segments in all phases of my professional career, played a role.

[00:06:23] **Susan Kish:** What would be an example of that?

[00:06:25] **Martin Dahinden:** I was at a certain time Director of the Geneva Center for Humanitarian Demining. This was an Institute...

[00:06:34] **Susan Kish:** What is humanitarian demining? What does that mean?

[00:06:38] **Martin Dahinden:** This is a demining where you let's say dispose of the mines in order to avoid that you have victims among...

[00:06:49] **Susan Kish:** Oh you mean explosive mines.

[00:06:50] **Martin Dahinden:** Explosive mines. No, no, no explosive mines. You see after a war, you have left mines and other ammunition and to reuse the surface it's important to remove those mines and humanitarian demining means for a humanitarian purpose and not for instance, in a military operation, uh, to have a pause, to go across a mine field with battle tanks.

[00:07:21] This is a humanitarian demining; one of the major problems was, uh to deal with all the information, with satellite imagery, with interviews with the, with all those data. And then we worked together, with ETH to develop an information management system that is still now in many new versions active. This is one of those examples.

[00:07:49] Or another example is when I was Head of the Swiss Development Cooperation. Um, I became this in 2008, and this was the time where we became more aware that we have to deal with global issues like climate change, like food security, like water and many others. And this meant also that you could not continue with focused small projects in the villages, but you have to think how do you can make a real impact on the global level? And, uh, for me, knowledge is the key to achieve this. To disseminate knowledge for instance, and there we have also worked with ETH, for instance, in the area of water, how to spread knowledge about water purification and so on. That goes beyond of what you can do as a project manager in a local project.

[00:08:56] **Susan Kish:** So Martin, you were Ambassador to Washington for many years. What does it actually mean to be an Ambassador? What, what does a day look like in the life of an Ambassador?

[00:09:05] **Martin Dahinden:** In one phrase it's defending the country's interests, but this means that you have to build up a network and the United States is a very special place because usually you build up your network to the government. In Washington, it's broader. You need to know people in Congress, you need, uh, to deal with the lobbyists and in addition of course you have the cultural life that is very different from New York, for instance, because you have a lot of events coming from outside for one or two performance.

[00:09:42] And so it's an enormously interesting, uh, place and you will meet people I would not meet in Zurich.

[00:09:50] **Susan Kish:** That sounds fabulous. It sounds like one of those things where every night was probably booked.

[00:09:56] **Martin Dahinden:** Yes. And you see, people often think the job of a diplomat is to go to a cocktail party and there is an important saying of Lord Palmerston uh, a 19th century British Prime Minister, who said “dining is the life and soul of diplomacy”, but it's the other way round. The diplomat works, even when he is eating and even when he is drinking something, so it never stops. And when you go to a cocktail party or a dinner you'll think before whom I will meet, what are the messages I want to convey and so on.

[00:10:37] **Susan Kish:** So I want to switch the conversation to food, right? Cause you are the well-known author of that fabulous book that Swiss cuisine is more than muesli and fondue. How did you start to be interested in food and how did you continue your interest in your decades of, of diplomacy and public service?

[00:11:00] **Martin Dahinden:** It was actually before I went as Ambassador to the United States, I knew that we would have a big kitchen almost every day invitations.

[00:11:10] Then I was thinking what messages I could convey through food, not having a dinner or a cocktail or a lunch as the environment for a conversation, but to put something on the table that tells you a story. And this was the starting point for researching. There were very famous Swiss people who developed food and we prepared this food. And with the food, we told stories and to be really open with you, I'm not a chef, I'm a storyteller.

[00:11:49] And my contribution was to come up with those stories. And we had then an excellent chef at the (Swiss) Residence and he developed sometimes very old recipes into something you still can eat. And that still has the same flavor as it has had in the Renaissance or in the Middle Ages or in the 18th century.

[00:12:13] **Susan Kish:** Could you tell the story about the Swiss chef and the Pater Nosters (the Lord's Prayer)?

[00:12:18] **Martin Dahinden:** The probably most influential but today completely forgotten chef is Maestro Martino, he's a Ticinese from the Italian speaking part of Switzerland. And he was the key person in the transformation of the cuisine from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance.

[00:12:36] **Susan Kish:** It wasn't a French and it wasn't the Italians, it was the Swiss?

[00:12:40] **Martin Dahinden:** But like many Swiss, he made his career not in Switzerland. It was too, uh, let's say, narrow here. And so of course, to have this impact, he was in Rome, with two famous Renaissance Popes and he developed a cuisine where you could see where you could smell. And not like the medieval cuisine where you did cook the things for very long, for hygienic reasons and so on and then put the spices on the top of it.

[00:13:13] **Susan Kish:** To mask any rotten flavor. Is that why you do that with those spices?

[00:13:18] **Martin Dahinden:** Yeah. And, and because you did not process the different ingredients in a way that there, let's say smell and taste would appear. This was typical for the Renaissance, like with the paintings. You'll see.

[00:13:33] One interesting thing with Maestro Martino is the following: he had to put down the recipes. This was an order by the Pope and the problem was, there were no watches at that time, even the Swiss didn't have watches. And then, what he invented is to say how many Pater Nosters you had to pray with each step in the cuisine. So boiling water then you take the broccoli, put it in the water and you'll pray two Pater Nosters. So very interesting idea for a time where there have been no watches in a kitchen.

[00:14:13] **Susan Kish:** And it's just such a, a great anecdote. How did you actually latch onto food as a medium for storytelling and as an emblem of what it means to be Swiss?

[00:14:24] **Martin Dahinden:** When I studied diplomatic history, I found it strange that food was only described as something surrounding communication.

[00:14:36] And then I thought, wouldn't it be an idea to use food stuff as a communication to say something with food. And this has become more and more important. And very often, if you'll see state dinners, you will find certain food stuff that tells you something.

[00:15:00] I can make you a funny example: Kim Jong-Un. When he was very young, he was in Bern. And when he had the meeting with Donald Trump in Singapore, I think it was, to remember him they made Röschi. A typical Swiss dish. This was one course a typical Swiss dish. So they were thinking, how can we reflect the life of this person on a dinner plate.

[00:15:30] **Susan Kish:** So they made Röschi for him and Trump. I love Röschi.

[00:15:38] So just to bring it up to modern day. Security and geopolitics and energy and the whole invasion of Ukraine. Top of mind for anybody. And it feels – I live in Boston, I'm in Zurich right now, but it feels very present here. You spent decades working on those issues of security and cooperation time at the NATO time in those areas in arms control.

[00:16:06] What, what is your view of this right now? And didn't you also work in something around security studies at the ETH?

[00:16:14] **Martin Dahinden:** I have worked a lot in the area of security policy. And, uh, when you observe on a daily basis, the developments, you were not that surprised about what happened in Ukraine. Of course, I didn't know when it would happen, how it would happen, what the focus was.

[00:16:38] But since the 1990s, and also in discussions with Russian colleagues that still play a role in Russia now, you could see there was a strong dissatisfaction, with the outcome of the cold war. In western countries, like the US or Switzerland, the declaration of Paris for a new Europe did free us from previous threats, but, uh, it was not perceived like this in, in, in Russia.

[00:17:08] In Russia it was perceived as, uh, as a kind of a defeat. And this goes beyond, let's say Putin and people around him. And so it was for me, never a surprise what happened in Georgia, what happened in Crimea, but also not what happened now in Ukraine.

[00:17:29] **Susan Kish:** So what is your sense in terms of the role of an institution like the ETH in these times?

[00:17:38] **Martin Dahinden:** Now, uh, you have a situation where you'll find also in Russia, a lot of people who are deeply dissatisfied with what happened and are against Russia invading Ukraine and are against this war.

[00:17:54] And so I think it would be wrong if we cut links to Russian institutions and Russian researchers. Of course, you need to be careful that you are not misused, but I think it would be completely wrong to push all those people away and make them go to China for the studies or so, um, and I hope that, um, the Swiss universities understand how important human contacts are in such situations. And this is by the way also a lesson from the cold war. Human contacts, they're extremely important in overcoming the division. And where would you find people to discuss if not in the academic area?

[00:18:50] **Susan Kish:** In terms of the ETH and its role going forward, you've mentioned the importance of science and research for exports and for international relations. What are the two or three things that you think ETH can really look to impact the world on going forward?

[00:19:09] **Martin Dahinden:** I think it is good when ETH looks at its history. And if you go back to the early time, it was not, let's say, uh, an institution, in a national confinement, as many other institutions. From the beginning, a lot of people from whole all over Europe at that time came here and they established the institution. And ETH was always very welcoming, open, receives people who had difficulties to carry out their studies.

[00:19:50] And this was also one of the reasons why so famous people like Einstein, for instance, I'm living just next to the house he was living in Bern, uh, came here, but he's not the only one. And I think this openness should remain. In the whole academic area that you are not, let's say closing down and have a kind of a cartel of people who are already here, but promote this exchange.

[00:20:21] And this is also about bringing new ideas to the institution. Bringing in new perspective, this is all linked to this. This is something ETH should continue and I'm sure it will be continued. And the other thing is this global reach out. ETH is very strong in connecting with other institutions all over the world.

[00:20:55] **Susan Kish:** So in closing, I have two extremely important questions to ask you. First off, what did you want to be when you grow up, growing up in Switzerland? What did you think you'd want to be?

[00:21:08] **Martin Dahinden:** There are people who know already in kindergarten, what they want to be when they retire. This was not my case. I was a curious young person and looking at all sides. And, uh, my biography, when I'm looking back, shows that this has to some extent, not changed.

[00:21:27] **Susan Kish:** So in other words, what do you now want to be when you grow up?

[00:21:30] **Martin Dahinden:** I would probably be very interested in new technologies in what is happening in the cyber space and in, uh, with artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and so on.

[00:21:43] But I mean, it's easy to say. I do not know on whether I would have success in those areas to be honest.

[00:21:51] **Susan Kish:** Well, you know, it's, it sounds like lifelong learning and being curious and having diverse perspectives is yeah, that's a great recipe for whatever comes next. And then finally, where do you like to have a coffee in Zurich?

[00:22:07] **Martin Dahinden:** Oh, I would say in the ETH cantina. This is probably a surprise for you, but it's a good place and you will there find a lot of interesting people.

[00:22:19] **Susan Kish:** Well, listen, thank you so much, Martin really appreciated the chance to have the conversation.

[00:22:23] **Martin Dahinden:** Thank you very much.

[00:22:28] **Susan Kish:** I'm Susan Kish host of the We are ETH series. Please subscribe to this podcast and join us wherever you listen, and give us a good rating on Spotify or Apple Podcasts if you enjoyed today's conversation. I'd like to thank our producers, ETH Circle and Ellie Media. And thank you, our listeners for joining us.