

Looking back – How ETH has shaped my life

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:00:08] Agnieszka, we lost you.

Agnieszka Rozniak: [00:00:10] Oh no. Okay.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:00:13] Okay. Super.

Hanno Kappen: [00:00:14] Yeah, That's great.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:00:15] Okay, let's go. I'm glad you're listening to the ETH podcast. This is the last of many episodes coming from us, the Audiobande, and that's why we're going to look back today. We're revisiting two of our very first guests. When we started four years ago, Agnieszka Rozniak and Hanno Kappen. Both of you were part of the very first episodes of the podcast. And at the time both of you were in Zurich. And right now, today, only I am here in Zurich. You couldn't be further away from each other geographically. What are you doing in India, Agnieszka? And what are you doing in L.A.? Hanno. Agnieszka, please go first.

Agnieszka Rozniak: [00:01:00] What I'm doing in India. So, it's actually very funny. So, when I graduated in 2020, it was middle of COVID. So, my original plan was, before starting my job, to actually go travelling. But since it was middle of COVID and traveling was not possible, I just started my job. And now, after two years, basically, yeah, more or less, like two years after graduation, I decided, okay, it's time to revisit my plans and go for travelling. And then I basically arranged things with my work and combined some unpaid leave with some holidays. And now I'm travelling in Asia for two months. So that brought me to India. Yes.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:01:42] And you Hanno, what are you doing in Los Angeles?

Hanno Kappen: [00:01:45] I am working and living in Los Angeles for the last four years now.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:01:49] Well, speak about why you're in Los Angeles later, because there is a correlation between your time at ETH and your journey to Los Angeles. But let's look back now quickly.

Agnieszka Rozniak: [00:02:04] Okay. So, we just got selected to our teams. We saw our challenges. So now we know who is in our team. Now we know who we are going to spend the next four days with locked in this tiny cube. So, yeah, basically, let's do it.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:02:24] Agnieszka, what were you talking about? What was InCube?

Agnieszka Rozniak: [00:02:29] It seems like a different lifetime. It's like it was so long ago and so much has happened, so it's not so easy to answer this question. But InCube was a very exciting student project from like the ETH Entrepreneurship Club, where we were teamed up with basically a random group of people and we were supposed to being locked in a glass box, come up with a startup idea to solve a given problem.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:02:58] And you Hanno, you worked for Swissloop. What is Swissloop?

Hanno Kappen: [00:03:03] It's still a student organisation that exists at ETH and back in the days it was like a focused project between mechanical and electric engineers to design a pod. So, we called it pod for a vacuum train system and it was all hosted by SpaceX as like a competition for students.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:03:25] It was all about speed. And in the central part of this pod were the batteries. And let's listen how I introduced you back then. The man who is responsible for the batteries is Hanno, a tall, muscular student with a boyish face. He's working in a separate building in the suburbs of Zurich, where the team built the pod together and the dangerous batteries.

Hanno Kappen: [00:03:48] I'm somehow responsible that all the electronic stuff works nicely together and the communication to the inverters, which then power the modus.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:03:59] What Hanno doesn't know yet: The inverters will play a crucial part later in this story.

Hanno Kappen: [00:04:04] So there's a lot of electronics involved in this year's project and my, um, system is mandatory to have the whole pod to work. So, there are some problems you can work around. But if a major part fails in our system or my system, especially then, um, the whole pod will not work properly. And this is very somehow very stressful for me. But I know the risk and I'm very confident that it works in the end.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:04:39] The end means the Hyperloop competition in Los Angeles. What the whole Swissloop team worked so hard for. Hanno, do you remember what happened then?

Hanno Kappen: [00:04:50] I do, vividly. So, when we came to L.A. and we were at the competition, we had one critical test, which is a test in a vacuum chamber to test the system under low pressure conditions. And we unfortunately didn't test our components to that particular pressure. And there's the passion curve that just slopes up again. And there's some nuances to this. But we unfortunately just damaged equipment in that vacuum environment, and it basically ended up in a full system failure. And we couldn't fully compete at the competition. It was a big mess. But that's sometimes how it goes in engineering. And you must just learn from your mistakes.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:05:39] And in a way, this failure or this big mess opened quite a few doors for you.

Hanno Kappen: [00:05:44] Yeah, fortunately, because of that failure, I had to start to debug a lot of things on the fly and just look into what went wrong. And since I was responsible for the batteries back then, they also faulted. And I was closely working with SpaceX in their battery department to figure out what was going on. And the battery engineer apparently was impressed with my work and my approach to these kinds of issues. And that's how the conversation started with SpaceX and The Boring Company about my employment.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:06:20] So let's get back to Agnieszka and go back to four years ago when she was taking part in the InCube project.

Agnieszka Rozniak: [00:06:30] Hi, Jennifer. So, this is a last day of InCube which is incredible. We have 20 minutes to our final, final presentation when we will pitch the idea which was created over the last four days. What's really funny is that it's our ninth prototype, the solution, which we will actually present. So, we really rethought a lot during the whole process. We were circling around like crazy, up, and down. Failure, success, failure, success. I don't know if this is something that I can officially say at the podcast, but this is what it is. We are super hyped. I think we really love our idea. Although they say: Do not fall in love with your prototype. It's too late. We fell in love. I am standing in front of the InCube, waiting. My team is inside for the last 20 minutes, playing some crazy music and basically dancing around as we used to during those four days. So yeah, the InCube is ending, unfortunately. So, I guess it's time for me to go, dance the last time and go to the final event. Bye!

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:07:50] Agnieszka, failure, success, back and forth, hyped dancing, extremely motivated. Is there something, are there things you have to deal with today as well in your job that you profited from doing this or being part of InCube at that time?

Agnieszka Rozniak: [00:08:06] Oh, this is a very big question. So first of all, I mean, it's very funny to listen to it again because like I can hear all of this like excitement and motivation in my voice and this brings a lot of memories. So, yes, I mean, so basically, I work in R&D center now in a company called ESRI. So, I do deal with a lot of like challenges in my daily work, and I need to come up with a lot of like creative solutions and basically make things from scratch. So, this works. This is for sure, like kind of the same type of approach of basically figuring out things from scratch and just dealing with failure and coming over and over through different solutions or different approaches and yeah, and also what's, what's funny. It's like our R&D center actually started as a startup, which was a spinoff from ETH. So, it's a company, it's like a privately owned company. But in a sense, it also has this like a bit of a startup feeling within the team and within the people. So yeah, there is something to it for sure.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:09:18] Can you tell me what the company does or what it stands for?

Agnieszka Rozniak: [00:09:21] Yes. So, what it stands for doesn't explain or doesn't help much, but the company is basically a GIS company, which is geographic information system. And we produce software for maps, basically. Long story short. Yes. And our logo is actually as signs of where. So it's really all about like geography and information.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:09:48] Hanno, we want to go back to you now. At the time we met you four years ago, you spoke about possible future plans, about your future, and that's taken your full. The not very successful competition in L.A. was a huge success for one of the Swissloop members. Do you remember Hanno, the person in charge of the batteries? He was approached by engineers of Elon Musk's Boring Company.

Hanno Kappen: [00:10:12] And then they said before we had the damage that they would like to interview me for a job offer and then all the bad stuff happened, and we tried to, uh, do that first. And afterwards I asked if they still were interested in doing an interview. I was unsure, but they weren't. So, they said that they were very impressed also by how I handled all the stuff with the damage itself. They were even more impressed after the damage than they were before. So that was kind of good, I guess. And as far as I know, they sent out four job offers in total for the competition. So, four out of maybe 300 people got a job offer and I was, uh, blessed to be one of them. So, I somehow saw that I cannot really, uh, decline the offer.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:11:06] Okay, we get it. This is a once in a lifetime chance. But what about his girlfriend in Zurich?

Hanno Kappen: [00:11:12] Yeah, that's an issue. But still, she said she would support me either way. That, of course, means that I would, um, must move out and move to L.A. But she understands my decision. But still, it's, uh. It was tough.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:11:30] As soon as he gets his visa, Hanno, with his bachelor's degree from ETH Zurich, will work full time as one of three electronic engineers at The Boring Company in L.A.

Hanno Kappen: [00:11:41] Since that's a full job and I won't have any time left, I will do my master's not yet. It's a very open contract, but, uh, still, I don't know. Maybe if it's not good working there, you don't know. I guess it will. But, uh, still, if there are some issues, I would come back and, um, start my master's.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:12:09] This was four years ago. And on my screen, I can see you're laughing. What happened since?

Hanno Kappen: [00:12:15] Well, as you as you can see, I didn't come back and did not start my master's. So, it's kind of funny to look back and listen to what I was saying. Yeah. I mean, I do I still have a good time and I think, I gained a lot experience that I would have not otherwise if I would have went back to school. Not saying you shouldn't get a master's, you should definitely if you don't know what you're doing or if you still are trying to specialise more in a field, that's definitely the way to go. But I feel for what I'm doing and what I still am trying to do, this wasn't the way to go and I am not sad about not having gone back.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:12:56] And of course, I want to know what happened to your relationship.

Hanno Kappen: [00:13:02] I mean, obviously we didn't want to go into a long-distance relationship, and we did break up, but we are still in touch. So, we stayed friends. And whenever I come back to Zurich, which is quite often, usually I try to - two or three times I go back and whenever I go back to Europe, I always fly into Zurich because I just I love the city and there's a lot of friends that I still have there. And then we meet up and just tag up and we we're still on good terms, which is nice.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:13:33] Both of you: When you look back at your time at ETH, what sticks with you? What shaped you? What do you think of when you look back?

Agnieszka Rozniak: [00:13:41] The main thing that comes to my mind when I think about time at ETH is how much it helped me to go through things that I thought are not possible to go through. So basically, I don't know, like manage projects, manage some very complicated projects in some very limited time or just manage multiple tasks with certain deadlines, which seemed like too much, or just understand very complex ideas

or concepts that I thought are beyond my capabilities. So, I think it's kind of in a sense, the thought that doing the impossible is kind of possible. You just need to take it one step at a time.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:14:27] And, you Hanno?

Hanno Kappen: [00:14:28] From what I've seen, especially with engineering in the US, the quality of education at ETH is very high, in the international field. And I mean, I've also interviewed and hired a lot of people throughout the last four years, and I'm always trying to compare to my experience. And it's hard because ETH is so good in what they are doing, especially in engineering and I'm very fortunate to have had this education.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:14:58] So both of you were part of our first episodes. We had a series on spinoffs and startups at ETH at the time, and you Hanno were part of SwissLoop and you Agnieszka, were part of InCube, so you were in different episodes and in different projects. You don't know each other, but do you have a question for each other?

Agnieszka Rozniak: [00:15:19] I have a question: Hanno, are you going to do your master's?

Hanno Kappen: [00:15:24] No, no, I don't know. I'm actually looking into starting my own company. So. No, that's not in the cards anymore.

Agnieszka Rozniak: [00:15:34] Okay. Oh, well, we'll see how the basic. That's actually very exciting.

Hanno Kappen: [00:15:39] Yeah. So where is your company based?

Agnieszka Rozniak: [00:15:42] So my company is based in the US and it's actually in Redlands, which is in California.

Hanno Kappen: [00:15:48] Really? You must hit me up. We should meet whenever you have time.

Agnieszka Rozniak: [00:15:52] I mean, like. Yeah. So, it's actually an American company, which is, like, has different branches and R&D centers spread all around the world. And just one of them happens to be in Zurich.

Hanno Kappen: [00:16:04] Nice. Yeah. So, whenever you're here, let me know. And I'm happy to connect with you.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:16:11] And Hanno, Agnieszka has told us what her company does, the company that she works for and works in. Maybe you can tell us something about the company you work for now and also maybe what kind of company you're planning for.

Hanno Kappen: [00:16:26] So the thing is, my friend from Space X, him and three other people, they started a food robotics company, and they went into pizza because it's the biggest market in the US for like delivery food. So, what we are doing is we are designing a machine, or we have already designed a machine that we put into a truck that makes pizza from raw ingredients like dough that we prefab and then sauce, cheese and toppings. And end of last October, we actually finished our design process and got it buttoned up so that we actually went out to the public and are selling pizzas now in the streets of Los Angeles. And actually, this last weekend was the first weekend that we made money from the pizza. So, we are in a very exciting phase and starting to get revenue and the company itself, it's like changing a bit from all the startup, like VC and now going into actually making revenue and going into a real business. That's very exciting. And then, as far as what I'm trying to do, I have no idea. I'm still figuring it out. It's been a hard process and there's so many things that you can tackle, but it also has to make some money.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:17:39] So do you have advice for students at ETH? Is there something students need to know about? I don't know. Finding a path into life.

Hanno Kappen: [00:17:50] Practical experience is super important, especially in engineering. If you can show that you have done something physically and also have done something wrong and how you learnt from it, that's like the best experience that you can show. And it's not just like studying, like having good grades. So, if you can do

so and make things that's most important, at least in engineering. But I think it applies to many other fields, too.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:18:14] And you, Agnieszka, is there something you want to tell young people who are studying at ETH?

Agnieszka Rozniak: [00:18:19] Yes, I would definitely say: follow your instincts and go with your gut and basically take up the classes or topics that you're just really interested and really passionate about. And don't worry if it seems to be a random choice because sooner or later you will find a way to connect all the dots and then find a job or, I don't know, start a company or just find an idea for yourself which led you to use all the skills that at this moment in time you may be you may think that are not related.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:18:57] What are your dreams?

Hanno Kappen: [00:19:00] I would love to create something myself, and I hope that I have the connections here that I can do that. But we'll see. We'll see how it works out.

Agnieszka Rozniak: [00:19:08] I think I would like to never stop learning and always keep being challenged and also find a way to inspire young people, especially women, to work in technology and be excited about it.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:19:21] Thank you very much, Hanno and Agnieszka, for being part of this. It was very nice to revisit you and talk to you again and look back and take an earful of what we all sounded back then four years ago. The ETH podcast is going to go into a creative break and in the coming spring there will be something new from ETH to listen to. My name is Jennifer Khakshouri, together with This Wachter and Luki Fretz from the Audiobande, we produced 43 episodes of the ETH podcast and now we say goodbye. Our stories will still be here in your podcast feed and also on the website of ETH. Keep on listening to podcasts. Thanks and goodbye.