

Time to look back



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Hartmut Rudmann’s story is one of a self-made man. Once dependent on a scholarship himself, the ETH alumnus is now happy to support the ETH scholarship programme.

What kind of environment did you grow up in?

HARTMUT RUDMANN – I grew up in Germany in a small village near Freiburg im Breisgau, surrounded by manual workers and farmers. I was the first in our family to earn an Abitur school-leaving certificate and, from a very young age, felt the urge to see more of the world.

What brought you to ETH?

In 1987, two scientists from IBM's research laboratory in Zurich received a Nobel Prize for the discovery of a new type of superconductor made of ceramic. I remember reading about this in the newspaper as a teenager and being fascinated. Then, at the beginning of the 1990s, I met someone in the athletics club who was to change my life: a materials scientist from Dresden, who trained with us for half a year. He told me about his subject and, because I was so enthusiastic, suggested I visit an acquaintance of his at ETH who was studying for a doctoral degree in materials science. This I did – and some time later I started my ETH studies. However, after a year, I found myself in trouble. The amount I'd been earning as an assistant at ETH was not enough to finance my existence. Fortunately, I was able to apply for a scholarship and was successful. The older I get, the more I realise how important this scholarship was for my future path: without it I would have been forced to throw everything in at ETH.

You now support the ETH scholarship programme yourself.

There are people today who find themselves in a similar situation to mine 25 years ago. For me, it's fantastic if I can support a young person like this. I see it as cross-generational solidarity.

For your doctorate, you left ETH for MIT.

Even as a child I used to dream of moving to the US. So I applied to Philadelphia and MIT – and received offers from both. I was hesitant to accept the MIT offer as I was so awe-struck by this prestigious institution. By chance, a fellow student from ETH who happened to be at MIT told a professor about me. The professor called me immediately and asked whatever was I thinking? MIT wanted me! With all the applicants they have, I'm still amazed today that someone picked up the phone and actively pushed me to come! And it makes me realise just how much random events can shape our future lives.

What was your goal when you returned to Switzerland after four years in the US?

I was intent on working in a startup, thinking that I could always get a safe job later. Luck had it that I was then invited to an interview at an optics startup in Zurich Altstetten, a small company of just ten. I only got the job because another candidate turned it down. In the end, I stayed with Heptagon for 15 years. The first half of these 15 years was a disaster: we made all the mistakes you can make and, in 2010, the company was on the verge of collapse. We then hired a new CEO, and the second half was completely different. Without much experience, you tend to think that if the technology is good, that's enough. However, a company will only succeed with a functioning team and a healthy mistake culture in place. It was only when we had this that Heptagon grew big. I took over product development. At the beginning, I was the only one in my team. By the end, I was leading a staff of 500 in Singapore and Rüschlikon. It's exciting to be part of a growing startup – and of a successful exit, as was the case for me in 2018.

What does life look like today?

I advise startups, including startups at ETH. For a company in the US, I remotely manage a small team in Taiwan, where the experience I gained in Singapore as a bridge-builder between West and East comes in very helpful. But most of my time is now devoted to my three teenage children. For a long time, I spent one week a month in Asia, working day and night at times. At first, the children were surprised that I was at home so much, cooking lunch and helping with homework. I enjoy this precious time with them immensely.

What would you like to pass on to your children?

Have the courage to try something new and keep at it. There are times when you must be prepared to make mistakes. It's difficult to cultivate this mindset because at school we learn that you only earn a good mark if you answer questions correctly. In business life, the line between what you know and what you don't know is fuzzier. In fact, you often have to admit to yourself that you don't know the answer. Being aware of this is a positive attribute – as you first have to find out where the limit to your knowledge lies before you can move it.

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