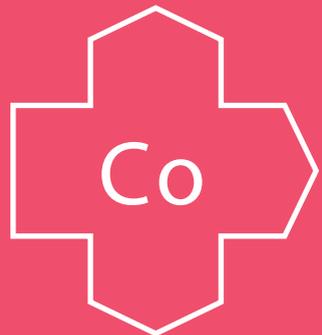


# PREFACE



## PREFACE

I was born on August 5, 1925, as a citizen of Balgach (St. Gallen Rhine Valley) in Erstfeld (canton Uri), as the second son of Maria Johanna Eschenmoser (1894–1978), née Oesch, and Alfons Otto Eschenmoser (1887–1977), butcher, both from Balgach. I had a brother, two years older, Alfons (1923–1979), a skilled mechanic and founder of the discount store “Eschenmoser” in Zurich. Since October 9, 1954, I have been married to Elisabeth (\* 1930), who grew up in St. Moritz as the daughter of Martin Baschnonga (1902–1994) from Ems and Maria Parpan (1899–1976) from Obervaz (Grisons). I had met Elisabeth on August 1, 1950, in St. Moritz where—parallel to my mother’s annual spa treatment—I spent my traditional summer vacations. Elisabeth and I had three children: Jürg (1958–2016), married to Laura Ooi; Esther (\* 1961), married to Christoph Pfenninger (\* 1961); and Philipp (\* 1963), married to Natady Sangaré. From Esther’s family we have two grandsons (Martin,\* 1982, Stephan,\* 1986) and one granddaughter (Denise, \* 1989; all Pfenninger), and from Philipp’s family one grandson (Henry Eschenmoser, \* 1998). We enjoy our (currently only) great-grandson (Flavio Pfenninger-Schmid, \* 2010), affectionately called “Poncellini” by his great-grandmother Elisabeth. Our first apartment had been at Allenmoosstrasse 6 in Zurich, where Jürg, born four years after our wedding, spent his first two years. Between 1959 and 1963, we (together with Jürg and Esther) lived in a five-room apartment at Niederhofenrain 33 in Zollikon. Since 1963, the year Philipp was born, we have lived in our own house at Bergstrasse 9 in Küsnacht, which we bought in 1963, and added an annex to in 1976, when the children were 18, 15, and 13 years old.

Professionally, I have had the extraordinarily good fortune to spend my entire career as a university teacher and to dedicate myself to scientific research. In retrospect, I believe that fate could not have granted me a better profession than that of a natural scientist, and within the natural sciences, none more fitting than that of a researcher in the field of chemistry, and no other branch of chemistry would have suited me better than the one to which I was to devote my professional life: synthetic organic chemistry.

Looking back, I clearly recognize that I have not been the good father to my children that I would like to have been. On the other hand, Elisabeth *was* a good mother; she bore the main burden of raising the children, and, despite my obsession with science, which was not easy for her to cope with, she stood by me all these years with love and empathy. We were, and are, basically a happy family. After the hustle and bustle of our American years, 1996–2009, Elisabeth and I are now spending happy retirement years in our home on Bergstrasse in Küsnacht. These are, however, overshadowed by a steadily progressing loss of her eyesight, which Elisabeth has accepted with fortitude. In comparison, the atrial fibrillation of my heart, which occurs at irregular intervals, is comparatively easy to bear. But the fibrillation is a portent.

I am not writing this memoir because I believe that my life was a particularly interesting or significant one; it was too straightforward, too middle-class, with plenty of good fortune professionally, and what was good about it was given to me rather than earned by me. This life, however, can serve as one of many examples that and how it was possible around the mid-20th century in Switzerland to descend from a poorly educated and socially extremely modest background and become a researcher and professor at ETH thanks

to a lucky combination of genes and the joy of learning. In addition, with these biographical notes, I would like above all to keep the life of my parents, whom I remember today with deep respect, from sinking into complete oblivion. And finally, recording the few recollections that are not yet forgotten and lost forever allows me to retrace once again the path of my life. I see meaning in it, the task fascinates me, and to accomplish it gives me pleasure. What remains in my memory, that is, what got under my skin emotionally at the time it happened, I consider worth keeping, regardless of whether it seems “important” as such or not. I do believe that each human journey through life—regardless of status and internal or external valuation—would be worth a written recording, because each is unique in its own way and ultimately part of a wider context.

In the course of writing down my memoirs, I experience as particularly fortunate that my father—throughout his lifetime a journeyman butcher and enthusiastic life story teller—at the age of 82, complied and described his life (on my request) in a handwritten record over the subsequent four years. His “Memoirs” are a jewel to me; to my knowledge, they are the first written record of the life of an Eschenmoser. He, the butcher enthusiastic about his profession, wrote expressively and far away from linguistics and spelling, just as he was: hearty, elementary in his emotions and reactions, sparkling in his temperament, full of enterprise and work enthusiasm, and with a sense of humor bordering on the slightly clownish that made him so likeable. He loved joking with people, but he was also capable of fierce anger and robust confrontation, impulsive as he was. Tenderness was foreign to him, but he preserved an inner piety until his death. The recollections of his youth, apparently

also the emotional intensity involved, are incredibly richer and stronger than mine. All my life I have lamented my “poor memory for stories;” my father’s memory for stories, on the other hand, was phenomenal.

As much as I value the existence of my father’s “Life Memories,” I also lament just as much how little I know today about the early and middle years of my mother’s life, now three and a half decades after her death. In stark contrast to my father, my mother lacked the talent to tell stories, especially regarding her youth. This was too hard—as I must assume in retrospect—owing to the fate of her family, especially that of her own mother. Being the center of attention, so to speak, which good storytellers cannot help doing, did not suit her. Even if she could also radiate cheerfulness, the seriousness of life of a deeply religious woman prevailed in her, religious faith being the center of her spiritual life. I had never tried to urge my mother to write down her memoirs; if I had, she would not have complied. Today, I think of all the questions I refrained from asking her at a time when she was still full of energy. As a rule, and well into later years, I was actually disinterested in matters concerning the earlier life of my parents or the (very large) circle of my relatives, an attitude that I now regret in old age. Ultimately, this lack of interest may be related to my innate, notoriously distant attitude toward people. In my youth, I had suffered from extreme shyness; this has largely, but never completely, dissipated in later years. Actually, giving, in my professional life, lectures to students, or delivering scientific presentations about the state of my own research at universities or at international congresses, never worried me; on the contrary, this kind of communication usually gave me great pleasure. However, I was reluctant, all my life, to talk about personal matters to an

audience, for example, after dinner speeches or similar public addresses—a shyness that I never managed to overcome completely.

What I value today are the numerous and sometimes surprising documents that were found in my mother's rich estate. Fortunately, she kept a lot of things, even quite inconspicuous ones, so that the aggregate of what she preserved is able to tell a story of the early days of my parents—and among them her own—in a fragmentary way. One of the documents that she kept for me is my baptismal certificate, written entirely in Latin, which tells more than further words into which spiritual world I was born on August 5, 1925, at 00:30 h, according to the birth certificate.

Fig. 0.1.  
My baptismal  
certificate,  
written in Latin.

Diocesis Curionis Parochia Eschfeld.

**FIDES BAPTISMALIS.**

Anno 1925 die 5. mensis Augusti navu  
et die 23. mensis Augusti solito Ecclesiae ritu baptizatus est

Infans Albertus Jacobus<sup>2</sup>

Parentum Alphonsi Ottonis Eschenmoser et Mariae Johannae  
Besch ex Badgach, pagi Longobardiae Helvetiae

Ministro J. Furrer, loci parochus

Patris Alberto Zoller et Maria Eschenmoser

Quod ex libro Baptizatorum manu propria et sigillo Ecclesiae parochialis  
testatum facti

Eschfeld, die 24. mensis Augusti anno 1925.

Parochus Loci:  
J. Furrer.

L. S. 