Between Two Worlds

Ghostwritten memoir excerpt / Memoir

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You didn't pick up this book to hear about what breakfast cereal I liked as a kid or which subjects I struggled with in fifth grade. I get it. But the thing is, we're all products of where we came from, aren't we? The building blocks of who I am - the good and the bad - were mostly in place before I ever set foot in a boardroom or signed my first business contract.

So, bear with me for a bit. I promise not to drag you through every childhood birthday party or school field trip.

I was born in a small industrial town in western Sweden, the kind of place where generations of families work at the same factories, where everyone knows everyone else's business, and where excitement is in short supply.

My parents moved us there when I was young because it was safe, small, and predictable. They figured there was a ceiling on how much trouble someone could get into in our hometown. They weren't wrong about that part.

We were a typical Swedish family in most respects. My father was a civil engineer who worked for a larger Swedish company. He was one of those company men, loyal to a fault - the kind who stays with the same employer for decades. What's interesting is that he was actually the first person in his family to graduate from college. Before that, he'd served in the Swedish Navy SEALs. Yes, we have those in Sweden, though they're not as famous as the American version. He was disciplined, regimented, and determined - all traits that I both rebelled against and ultimately came to appreciate, some might even say emulate.

My mother was officially a homemaker, though anything but a traditional housewife. She was a force of nature - strong-willed, opinionated, and an early adopter of feminist ideas. This was in the 1970s, mind you, when the women's movement was still quite radical in many eyes, especially in small-town Sweden. She didn't burn her bra or anything like that, but she made sure her voice was heard and that her children - especially her sons - understood that women were equals, full stop.

She made us take part in the household in a way that other people might not have. We cleaned the house as a family. It was made clear early on that there are no female and male jobs. There are only jobs or

tasks that need to be completed. She taught us how to fix our own clothes and how to take care of our clothes (ironing and doing the laundry). It was not just her job; it was our job. As she said, “I will show you how to do it, but I won’t do it for you. It is your stuff, and if you want to have a clean shirt you better know how to do it.” Makes total sense to me, as it instills confidence and builds independence.

This dynamic between my parents - my father’s military precision and my mother’s progressive mindset - created an interesting foundation for my approach to leadership. From my father, I inherited a respect for structure, preparation, and following through on commitments. From my mother, I gained a willingness to challenge convention and stand up for my convictions. Being one of four siblings also taught me crucial lessons about negotiation and resource allocation from an early age. Family dinner conversations became informal training grounds for debate and persuasion - skills that would prove invaluable in business negotiations decades later.

We weren’t rich by any stretch, but we never went hungry. We had what we needed, if not everything we wanted. It was a stable, predictable life - until it wasn’t.

When I was eight years old, my father took a job at an engineering company in Berlin. Not making cars - his position was in their hydraulics division, which the company had recently acquired. This was back in 1978, and if you know anything about history, you know that Berlin was a very different place then. The Wall was up, the Cold War was in full swing, and the city was divided between East and West.

My dad drove to Germany immediately to start work, and my mom packed up me and my three siblings and followed a few weeks later. This wasn’t a weekend trip to a neighboring country - this was moving to a city divided by armed guards, barbed wire, and political ideology. I went from a sleepy Swedish town where the biggest danger was falling off my bicycle to a place where soldiers with machine guns were a common sight.

I still remember our “welcoming committee” when we arrived - a group of East German border guards with zero sense of humor and plenty of weaponry. They questioned what a young Swedish family with three small children was doing coming into East Germany. My mother, all thirty years of her, standing there with us kids clinging to her, trying to explain in broken German that we were joining my father for his new job.

Those guards - who looked and acted like they’d stepped out of a World War II movie - repeatedly asked if we had any contraband or weapons. Like my mom was smuggling hand grenades in my little sister’s teddy bear or something. They eventually let us through, but the message was received loud and clear: We’re not in our hometown anymore.

Berlin was a shock to the system, but you know what? I loved it. The energy, the tension, the sense that important things were happening all around us - it was intoxicating to a kid who’d been bored out of his mind in small-town Sweden. It was a sensory overload that captivated my eight-year-old mind.

The German school system was something else entirely. Coming from Sweden's relatively relaxed educational approach, where creativity and self-expression were valued, I was thrown into a system that prioritized discipline, structure, and obedience above all else. My class was run by this stern woman who could make a drill sergeant look compassionate. She wore her hair in a tight bun and never seemed to smile. I swear she could silence a room full of eight-year-old kids with just a look.

My brother had it even worse. His teacher was this old-school German man who didn't hesitate to smack kids' knuckles with a ruler when they got out of line. I remember my brother coming home one day with red welts on his fingers. My parents were horrified - that kind of corporal punishment would have been unthinkable in Sweden. They complained to the school but were essentially told, "This is how we do things here. If your son doesn't want to be punished, he should pay attention and follow the rules."

So, what did my parents do? They told my brother he better pay attention from now on because they couldn't stop it from happening again. Can you imagine parents saying that today? They'd be on social media organizing a protest before the kid even got home from school.

For all its strictness, though, that structure was exactly what I needed. I was a bit of a handful as a kid - always testing boundaries, seeing what I could get away with. In the Swedish system, the answer was "quite a lot." In Berlin? Not so much. For the first time, my actions had real consequences, and I had to follow orders.

Don't get me wrong - I didn't suddenly become a model student or anything. I still had (and have) a hard time with blanket authority. Tell me to do something "because I said so," and my first instinct is still to ask "why?" But I did learn to pick my battles. When you're surrounded by people who take rules very seriously and have the power to enforce them, you adapt or you suffer.

What Berlin gave me, beyond structure, was culture. Real culture - museums, opera, architecture, history that you could touch and feel. Stockholm has culture too, of course, but it wasn't part of my daily life in our hometown. In Berlin, it was unavoidable. My mother, thinking this might be our only chance, dragged us to every museum and historical site she could find. At the time, I groaned and complained like any kid would. Now, I'm grateful. It opened my eyes to a world beyond small-town Sweden, showing me what was possible - what humans could create when they put their minds to it.

After two years in Berlin, we moved back to Sweden. Talk about culture shock in reverse.