

A portrait of Benjamin Melzer, a man with short brown hair and a light beard, looking directly at the camera. He is wearing a light-colored button-down shirt that is open at the collar, revealing a tattoo on his chest that reads "Need to Breathe". The background is a plain, light gray.

**BENJAMIN  
MELZER**

with Alexandra Brosowski

# FINALLY BEN

Trans – My Path  
from Girl to Man

*Eden*  
BOOKS

**BENJAMIN  
MELZER**

with Alexandra Brosowski

# **FINALLY BEN**

Trans – My Path from Girl to Man

*no.*



# Contents

Few Words in Advance

## **“It’s Me, Max!” (1987–2005)**

Empowering Sport and a Hard Choice

First Loves

Lesbian or What?

Letting Loose

The Fuse Burns

## **“I Take It Anymore!” (2005–2010)**

Family Shards

Decision Day

## **My Plan G (2010–2014)**

Step 1: To the Shrink!

Step 2: The Nerve-Racking Approval Process

Step 3: Hormones – Blessing and Curse

Step 4: Bye Bye, Yvonne!

Steps 5, 6 ... 17: The Surgical Marathon

## **Finally Ben! (2014–2020)**

Let’s Talk About Sex!

My New Life as a Man

From Kitchen Salesman to Cover Model

Media Binge – Media Hangover

Hairy Situation

Catastrophic Failure

My Angel

Ben the Human

## **Your questions – My answers**

Operations/Clinics

Penis Construction/Penis Pumps

Love

Sports/Nutrition

Having Kids

General Trans Issues

Hair Transplant

Being Brave

A New Name

Tattoos

Ben Himself

Book Readings/Translations

Thank You!

## A Few Words in Advance

Twenty-three years in the wrong body. Seventeen operations to change that. It's been a damn long road. But I've walked it and I've arrived. That's all that matters.

Sometimes it's good not to know what lies ahead of you, because otherwise you might not set off at all. The title of the first part of the *Hobbit* movie trilogy is *An Unexpected Journey*. I'm a big Tolkien fan, and this title could also be that of my own journey, which I have undertaken without any ifs, ands or buts. On their surprise expedition, Bilbo and his friends have to master great dangers and nasty surprises, face their worst enemies and fight for their lives. At the same time, they learn the meaning of home, friendship and love. This is my story. However, it took me more than two decades to even set out and begin to find my true self. Even as a small child I knew that I was born in the wrong body. I was born as a girl, but I always felt like a boy. But I had no name for what I was. Until I saw Chaz Bono, the son of the US singer Cher, on a TV show. A trans man. Born a girl, made a man. Finally, I knew what I was. At last my doubts, my loneliness, my deep unease made sense. But it was a difficult truth to confront. "It's as if the good Lord was napping when your sex was assigned," my mother says.

I'll have to deal with the consequences of this snooze of God's for the rest of my life. But I don't care. Today I'm free to be who I am. I work as a model, fitness coach, entrepreneur and influencer and was the first transgender model to make it onto the cover of *Men's Health*. Needless to say, I'm proud of that. It's my sign to the world that more tolerance is possible.

But my openness has also made me vulnerable. In a way, you never feel “right”. They say if you’re in the spotlight, you have to be careful. Huh? I didn’t go down this difficult road just to hide or twist myself into something false again. *No way!* I tell my story openly. Even what underlies the big scar on my arm. Which, in the community, is a no-go. I reaped a shitstorm for this, was labelled a traitor. There are many trans people who make a secret of their biographies. That’s their entitlement. Most are afraid of losing their jobs, their friends, or fear being excluded. I can understand that. But if we don’t talk about it, nothing will ever change. After all, it’s my body. I don’t have to be considerate of anyone’s sensitivities. And my deepest happiness is to finally be able to live as a man. That’s why there was no alternative for me. I had to make this arduous journey.

Like Bilbo, I have faithful companions by my side – but above all of them are the women. The women in my life – my mother, my aunt, my grandma, my ex-trainer and my friends – have supported me and encouraged me again and again. Without them I would have been truly alone...

This is not a guidebook. I am simply telling my story because I would have loved to have had a book like this for myself. It would have opened my eyes, answered many of my questions. Of course, every person has to find their own way. There’s not only one truth. But if you are affected, or your child or a friend, then start the journey, find companions, be brave together.

Yours,  
Ben

**“It’s Me, Max!”**  
**(1987–2005)**



Sometimes I was Finn, sometimes Chris, but mostly Max – and never Yvonne. Only other people used my birth name. My family, friends, teachers. I don't know where I'd picked up these boy names. I was three or four years old at the time, and those names were pouring out of my mouth like a paper out of a cash machine. Exactly as ordered. My parents remember it too – they never tried to contradict me. They thought it was just a “phase”, a “toddler's craze”, and somehow even “cute”. The same was true of my taste in clothes and my preferences when playing. Pink stuff, glitter and jewelry? Give me a break! A story that was often told at coffee parties with grannies and aunts under the heading, “Typical Yvonne!” described how little Yvonne could still barely walk and was wearing a dress with a big lace collar. The collar kept blowing in her face, which made her so angry that she tried to tear it off with her hands, accompanied by hysterical screaming. From then on, little dresses with collars were taboo.

So my childhood was not a case of dresses and dolls, but rather of being always boyish and ready for a fight. I was such a typical tomboy.

A voice in your head whispers the truth to you. It gets louder and louder. But you're just too young to listen to it. You don't understand what it's about and what's different. It's just those loud voices inside of you that scream something other than what's supposed to be true. There is always this conflict inside of you: outwardly you are a girl, inwardly a boy.

In the delivery room, you get tagged right away with either the pink or the blue label. In a way, it's a good thing, as there's no confusion. But I was labelled wrong. Labelled pink, although I actually belonged in the blue corner. I'm not a father yet, but I can imagine what this day must

have been like for my parents. Of course they told me all the stories about my birth. How proud and happy they were then. And then that special moment in the delivery room: is it a boy or a girl? The question of all questions - because in the 1980s these 4D ultrasound devices didn't exist yet. "As long as it's healthy," parents always say. But unconscious and therefore unexpressed hopes play a role. What if the newborn girl should have been a boy? But I had a little vagina between my legs. So my label was fixed. Yvonne was born!

My middle name could have been "ambivalence". There was the happy, funny, popular kid with the loud mouth. And next to it always was the lonely, questioning, searching kid with the lump in his throat. The happy and popular child was always visible, the sad one I learned to conceal for a long time. The stage of my life was arranged for it. The scenery lacked for nothing. In fact I grew up extremely privileged. We even had a holiday home in Spain, our own small yacht and a sports plane. A remarkable achievement from my dad, who came from a very humble background. He had fought his way to the top without outside help and founded a successful kitchen and staircase construction business. My father is certainly not an easy man, but I find his energy and determination remarkable. As a child I enjoyed his strength and presence. He was no windbag, unlike many a father in my circle of friends.

In general, the assignment of roles at home was quite conventional when viewed from the outside. All the men in my family are macho level 3000, whereas my mother is a woman through and through. A real "chick", but in the best sense. Beautiful clothes, long hair, jewelry and makeup. She can't even walk on flat shoes anymore because she's always worn heels. My mum is the most feminine being I know, but

she never wanted to make me into a copy of herself. When she noticed my aversion to frills, glitter and the like, she stopped dressing me up like a doll. She was my ally from the beginning, whether I went through life as Yvonne or Max. I've never known anyone so loving and so devoted. In our family she was responsible for the love and the joy. It's clear to me that from my mother I inherited my heart, and from my father my business sense.

Our early family years were quite harmonious. Cuddling and even bathing with Dad was totally normal. But the fights started between us when he wanted to put cute little dresses on his sweet little daughter. Not on me! But if there is anything my father can't stand, it's resistance and loss of control. He didn't want to give up his image of a daughter so easily ...

Unfortunately, his way of clinging to his ideals and showing me who was the master of the house was often very hurtful. For example, if a waiter asked, "And what would your son like to order?" my father would immediately start barking, "That's a girl, it's clear to see!"

I would have loved to disappear into thin air or at least hide under the table, but I didn't want to draw more attention to us. It was a real nightmare. And the older I got, the more horrible it felt. These embarrassing scenes are still stuck in my mind... When I had to accompany my father to a restaurant, I sat down with a queasy feeling. My heart beat like crazy. When the waiter came, I lowered my head and held my breath. What did he see me as? A battle raged inside me. A cry of, "Ignore me!" came from one corner, while from the other a boomed, "Come on, I want to be seen as a boy!" Look, everybody. It's me, Max! And please, please, Daddy, just keep your nose out of it.

But my father was not at all inclined to keep his nose out of it. Quite the opposite. A Melzer man only leaves the ring victorious, and never without a final declaration. Loud, of course, so no one would miss the performance. His bass filled the whole arena, drawing words like swords that cut me to pieces. “Are you blind? That’s a girl!”

The thrust made me blush with shame. I was hot. An unbearable silence spread. The timid kind of waiter would stutter and apologize; the cheeky type countered with, “Huh? Oh, I wouldn’t have thought so,” or, “I don’t believe it!”

Promptly my father struck out for the next blow. “Come on, Yvonne, show him your ID!”

My mother would never have asked me to do this. *Never ever!* Hers is a wise and tender sensibility. But with my father, I increasingly had the impression that he actually gloated over my shame. It’s true that he enjoys mind games. But with every such demonstration of power he lost more and more of my love and respect for him.

My father, however, has another side as well. I value this guardian side very much. And who knows if he didn’t feel like a guardian, even in these situations that were so humiliating for me – the guardian of his daughter Yvonne. And no matter how tough he was otherwise, as soon as I had a very practical problem, whether technically or financially, I could rely on him to help me. Papa Melzer can do everything. An alpha male with two right hands and lots of horsepower. However, in the course of time, this strength has often combined with the hard, dominant, brutal, loud, pejorative side, which did not do our family life any good. For me this would have

particularly devastating consequences, because the bigger my gender conflict became, the more opportunities he found to humiliate me.

My great luck was that my mother did not try to force me into the hated feminine role. Even when I was a little child, she instinctively recognized all the signs of my anti-girl campaign and was quick to avoid maltreating my hair with glittery clips or pink hair bands. She also chose clothes for me that passed as neutral, without frills or fuss. I usually wore trousers and plain t-shirts. However, there was always a great amount theater in the run-up to special family celebrations. Tights, dresses, frilled blouses, skirts. After all, you put on your finery for such occasions. And “finery” meant dresses. These costumes led to a lot of loud protest in the Melzer household for hours before the event. I raged and screamed, threw myself on the floor, drummed my fists on the carpet or sat stubbornly in front of my wardrobe so that nobody could get at my clothes. For my parents, it must have been exasperating and exhausting. After all, I held up the whole show with my performances.

For a while they could still press me into the girls’ uniform, but the older I got, the more violent the arguments became. There were two or three alibi dresses hanging in my wardrobe, but otherwise only trousers, sportswear, hoodies. While my girlfriends preferred to dress up in princess garments, I felt uncomfortable even in a simple skirt. I still remember my cousin’s Confirmation. I was still relatively small then – about four or five years old. I had no choice but to wear a little dress and white tights. I tore both off my body immediately after the service and jumped around in my underpants – which the assembled party thought was cute.

Less and less often did I let my “sartorial sovereignty” be taken away from me. The same came to apply to my entire carnival career. After all, I live in a fool’s stronghold. The Shrove Monday procession and children’s carnival were part of the compulsory program. For weeks, one disguise party followed the other. And very early on I took the opportunity to slip into boys’ roles, later into men’s roles. My female friends were mermaids, fairies, Bibi Blocksbergs, Pippi Longstockings, Sleeping Beauties. Meanwhile, I wasn’t ashamed for a second to come along as a prince, cowboy, pirate, policeman, superhero or doctor. I wasn’t a witch on Halloween either. I was a zombie. As a teenager I was the psychopath from the horror shocker *Scream*, and at fancy-dress parties I was the pimp and not the hooker. By the way, the scar above my eye is a souvenir of my cowboy days. Sheriff Stefan gave it to me while playing Wild West with a soldering-iron.

Now, I’ve become so comfortable with myself that I would actually wear a hula skirt with coconut bra for a Hawaiian-themed party. You can clearly see that I’m a man, so I can play the part without feeling uncomfortable. You’ll look in vain for photos of Yvonne in the family album. For me, short hair was the only option. If it got too long, I’d grab the scissors and cut it myself. Then I’d look as though rats had been nibbling at me, but I still preferred that to “girl hair”.

But I couldn’t do anything about these stupid ear piercings. They were given to me when I was too young to fight back. It was just the expected thing; after all, little girl wearing earrings. Period. Aside from that, as I said, it’s thanks to my mother that my childhood wasn’t an eternal torment. There were even phases in which I was able to get by without having my inner struggle be confronted from the outside. I felt like Max, behaved and dressed like him, and the outer world

supported that. It simply wasn't mentioned. I was just the girl who happened to prefer wearing pants and kept her hair short.

At that time we lived in Marl, in the middle of the Ruhr area, albeit very remotely on the edge of a forest. For me and my brother, who was nine years older, it was a real children's paradise with a pond, a big garden, a guest house and a wooden hut on the property. Until I was able to get from A to B alone by bike or bus, this seclusion forced my mother to do a lot of driving, which she did without ever grumbling.

In this sense I spent my childhood in a picturebook idyll. Loved, supported and protected. But although I am a cheerful person by nature, funny and full of energy, equipped with a stubborn and cheeky snout, I look sad, surly or even tearful in many childhood photos. My inner battle of the sexes left its mark. For example, there was nothing I feared as much as coming into new groups. Not that I didn't quickly make friends – on the contrary: everyone wanted to be with me – but the moment I was introduced as Yvonne was terrible every time. But I felt like Max and not like Yvonne! So it wasn't surprising that the other children looked surprised at first.

“Huh? This boy is a girl?”

It may have been just nuances, but I noticed every raised eyebrow, every throat-clearing and giggling. My sense of meandering was so firmly anchored that I was deeply unsettled by the inadequate response of the other children. What they heard (“My name is Yvonne”) was not compatible with what they saw. Like a false tone that resonates for a long time. An angry promise. Maybe the girls were hoping for a new playmate in the dolls' corner. Or a lonely one for a new friend. The boys, on the other hand, didn't have me on the

list. In their corner, with their cars, superheroes and scuffles, I had no business being Yvonne.

Today you may wonder why the possibility of my being transgender never came up in my family or at school. The fact that my parents did not go to a counseling center is actually hard to believe from today's perspective. Certainly there were question marks, but in the early years they were never so obtrusive that they fundamentally disturbed our family life. That's quite apart from the fact that the topic of transgender has only been considered socially relevant and discussed accordingly for a few years now. In the Eighties and Nineties of the last century – before the internet, cellphones and social media – my family just had to muddle through in their own way. Especially since there was hardly any education or advice. Furthermore, I was not a sullen or even depressed child – and optically I was almost ideally “neutral”. Pretty, but neither boy nor girl. “Yvonne would have made a fine boy,” they used to say. This was a compromise that everyone involved could work with. Even me, on the outside. In the end, it got me out of the line of fire. And for the other children there was anyway only one crucial question: “Is it stupid? Or is it good for playing, scrapping, goofing around with?” Hey, I'm a Ruhr kid, and an athletic one at that. I was considered a team player and in kindergarten was already the pioneer, the alpha girl, the boss, and heartthrob. Yessir!

This way, for a very long time I succeeded – even if sometimes more, sometimes less well – in tuning out the inner conflict that dogged me everywhere.

## Empowering Sport and a Hard Choice

An important outlet in my life was and is sport. Romping around outside, racing, climbing? It's been my thing ever since I can remember. Water with all its sporting opportunities came a little later. It was to be my great love. It started with swimming. I learned that on a holiday in Spain. Herbert\*, my father's boss at the time and a good friend of my parents, taught me when I was four years old. He gently supported my first swimming attempts in the warm Mediterranean Sea by placing his hand from below against my belly so that I would not sink. Over and over again – until I could finally do it alone. “Here we have a real natural talent, a real little mermaid,” he praised me. That sounded nice, although I would have preferred to be an Aquarius. And I would have been happy to keep “carrying” water for good.

Back from vacation, I didn't want to give up my newly discovered passion and didn't let up until I was registered with the swimming club. There I did so well – I was ambitious at any rate – that they soon let me swim competitively. I was not even six years old. A fantastic, carefree time. For my mother, however, her daughter's swimming career was an added burden, as she now drove me to Dortmund twice a week to train. Forty minutes there and forty minutes back, plus the competitions on the weekends. Since I was still a child, nobody in the club was bothered at first by the fact that I showed up for training in swimming trunks. After all, I swam like lightning in them and collected one trophy after the other and a big bunch of medals. At some point the trunks didn't work anymore and I had to put on a

swimsuit like all the other girls. My mood may have suffered from this, but my performance certainly didn't.

Water is still my element today. When I move in it, suddenly everything becomes lighter, somehow weightless. Nowhere can I switch off my head and let myself unwind as well as when swimming and diving.

After five years, however, I ended my swimming career. I won another important trophy, then I quit. That naturally caused consternation among coaches and teammates.

“Oh no, Yvonne, we cannot and will not do without you. Now now, when you could reach the next level,” my coach tried to lure me back. I was very sorry too, because I liked the sport and the people there. But in my swimsuit I had no chance anymore. My developing breasts put a damper on my plans. Should I put them on public display from now on? For me it was a horrible experience. These two things growing on me were forcing something on me that I deeply rejected: being a girl. So I had to make excuses.

“I'm going to secondary school now,” I explained. “I just can't manage it with all the hours and homework and stuff.”

The fact that my brother and my cousin André quit at the same time – they switched to athletics – gave me another excuse: the driving was getting too much for my mother.

Yeah, my struggle was definitely ramping up. It was getting harder and harder to bear this constant inner battle. But the sport helped me to at least still feel like a self-determined person: after the swimming came athletics. That was an obvious next step, André was my best friend at the time after all and like a second brother to me. Maybe that's why it was never strange for him, one-and-a-half years older, to hang out with a girl all the time. For years, our families did a lot