

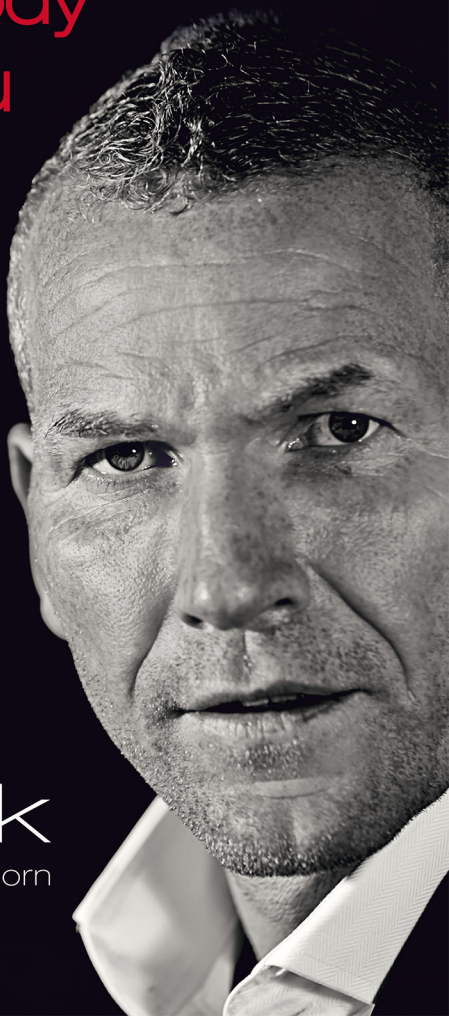
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Why Nobody Wants You to Get to the Top ...

... and How
I Made It
Anyway

Martin
Limbeck

Foreword by Mark Sanborn



Martin Limbeck

Why Nobody Wants You to Get to the Top . . .

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. . . and How I Made It Anyway

Translated from the German by Christian Villano and Esther Lenssen

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Foreword

*You can't control everything that happens to you,
but you can always control how you respond.*

That principle enables some to create remarkable success despite difficult circumstances. It also explains why setbacks are inevitable, but defeat is chosen.

Martin Limbeck knows this and has demonstrated the power of personal responsibility to go from difficult beginnings to great success as a world-class sales trainer and consultant. And he's brave enough to pull back the curtain, so you can see what it really takes to triumph despite the lucky breaks and fortunate circumstances we'd all love but don't usually get.

I've known Martin for many years as a colleague in the Global Speakers Federation. I respect his work, admire his work ethic and appreciate his friendship. Not only have I seen him present and become familiar with his story, but I've also seen him in the gym during our association meetings where I was working out. The last time he was with his son demonstrating the discipline and effort that has made him successful in his business and life.

In this book, Martin will challenge your thinking. You might not agree with everything he says, but what you need to do is carefully consider if his ideas might better serve you than the ideas you've been acting upon. Take action. Try what he suggests. You'll learn from what Martin has learned.

One big benefit you'll receive is the gift of encouragement. There is a myth that successful people lead charmed lives, that they've been given a handout or a hand up to get where they are. While there are those who will help us in our journey, in the end success is a do-it-yourself project.

I've had the great opportunity and fun of working with some of the world's best companies and top performers. Almost without exception, those who achieve much are those who learn continually. They seek out books, seminars and experiences that are a source of their intellectual fuel. By choosing this book, you've joined the ranks of those who aim higher, work harder and live fuller lives. I commend you for your decision.

Here is some of what you'll learn in the pages ahead:

Martin works long hours and works hard because he enjoys it. I hope you do as well. I believe you'll finish this book with a renewed sense of personal responsibility. You'll learn that ultimately nobody can stop you but you, that struggles are inevitable, and that when you meet challenges head-on, they make you stronger and better.

Martin is a winner not by birthright or chance but by hard work, smart thinking and persistence. You and I have the same tools available to us. All we need to do is learn them from successful people like Martin and apply them. That is the challenge.

Martin Limbeck is a great guy with an inspiring story and a wealth of ideas. Read this book and profit from his story.

Mark Sanborn, author of *The Encore Effect* and *You Don't Need a Title to Be a Leader*

Preface: You Live, You Learn

*You live you learn
You love you learn
You cry you learn
You lose you learn
You bleed you learn
You scream you learn*

(Alanis Morissette)

There was a time when Limbeck would stuff a trout full of sinkers . . . Wait, I'll come back to that story in detail later. For the moment, suffice it to say this: You wouldn't believe the trouble I used to get myself into. How stupid was that? Today, though, I can only laugh about it.

And all the things that I put up with! I was everybody's fool. The doormat from the industrial city of Essen, Germany. The redheaded dope from coal country who didn't miss a single chance to put his foot in it.

I was constantly taking beatings. And yes, I was giving them, too. Even without wanting to. To this day, time and again I find myself unintentionally treading on people's toes. I'll say something rash while on stage or throw out a comment on Facebook, simply out of sheer exuberance—and before I know it, there's a glorious shit storm raining down on me so intensely that I don't think I'll ever drag my name out of it again.

There was so much in my life that went off the rails, and today I know why: I myself was off the rails, jagged, rough. If you are like that, you're going to rub people the wrong way. You can't avoid it. You constantly trigger resistance. Am I right?

And you know what? That's a good thing. Everything was just as it should be. Don't believe that you can be an original and get everyone's blessings along the way. That's not how it works. If you're looking to get to the top, there are a million people out there who will want to get in your way.

Perhaps this is why today you are not yet where you want to be: Your life is bitterly resisting your efforts. It sends people your way who cause problems, and you find yourself tangled in countless turf wars. Maybe it's the money that just won't flow your way or won't stay there when it does. Or maybe you simply can't find a profession that fulfills you. Perhaps you're always arguing with your partner. Or you've damaged your health. I can't say. But I do know one thing, namely that every person on this earth wants five things: a happy relationship, good friends, good health, the right job, and enough money. I always ask people in my audience to raise their hands if all five of these areas are running smoothly, and I can tell you that I have never, ever seen a single hand raised.

Actually, there was one exception. It was in Potsdam, at a presentation for an insurance company. When I had posed the question no one had raised their hand, but afterward a woman of around 60 approached me and addressed me in a very friendly manner. She said she didn't want to ruin my presentation, and that's why she hadn't raised her hand. She told me that three years ago she had been diagnosed with cancer, and she had only just survived chemotherapy. Since that moment she was completely fulfilled in all five areas. She was beaming as she said it. It was wonderful! She had a fantastic

attitude, so much so that I could have hugged her then and there. That, however, has been the single exception.

Some people aspire to financial freedom and ruin their relationship or their health in the process. Others invest everything in their relationship and end up losing all their friends. Still others are healthy as horses but poor as church mice.

I have yet to see someone who is at the very top.

Why? Because nobody wants you to get there.

And no, I'm not paranoid. And I'm not whining either. On the contrary, today I'm simply happy for every single one of the thousand struggles that I have waged. Today I know that every defeat yielded a benefit. There are sure to be more defeats along the way, and they, too, will serve as a lesson. In life, what goes around comes around, be it good or bad. Just remember one thing: Everything is fine just as it is. Even if sometimes it may take a while for it all to make sense.

Because every time things came crashing down around me, every time life gave me a kick in the ribs, or every time I screwed up royally, I drew a lesson from it. Each struggle shaped me that little bit more. Sure, today I'm still Limbeck—but at the same time I have become a completely different person. Do you know what I mean? I've never been easy on myself or on others. That is why my learning curve was so steep.

As far as the five areas of life are concerned, I've been at rock bottom. Bodywise I was fat and ugly, with no strength or vigor to speak of. In terms of women, I can only say good heavens! On the friendship front, it was nothing but disappointments. With regard to money, everyone rode a cool Zündapp motorcycle while I drove a pathetic

Honda Camino because that's all my folks could afford. And as for my job, I probably endured the worst apprenticeship of all time.

And today? Today I'm fit enough to win a boxing match, and that's not something you can pluck out of thin air, let me tell you. Today I have a dream woman in my arms. Today I have friends whom I can count on. Today I live in a villa, and right outside my front door sits a . . . Right, I know, nowadays that no longer counts as a status symbol; a Tesla would be cooler. But hey, I've wanted a Porsche my entire life and now I have two. Be happy for me!

Nowadays I work eight hours a day—most days twice that, just because it's so enjoyable. On weekends too. Not because I have to, and not because I'm a crazed go-getter, as some people have branded me. No, I do it of my own free will. Because today I have my dream job. Today things are happening to me that are beyond my wildest dreams.

For example, I always wanted to speak with my favorite soccer coach. It meant the world to me. His name is Armin Veh and at the time he was still coaching the Eintracht Frankfurt regional soccer team. I just found it impressive how he led the team: relaxed, with humor, but extremely professional too. And he made sure that the players did their job on the field. Of course, he's in the limelight, so it's not easy to get access to him. So what happens? I go to my favorite Italian restaurant, and there he is, sitting with his assistant coach Reiner Geyer. Aha, I think, life is throwing this moment my way. I say thank you very much, sidle up to both of them and engage them in conversation. They turn out to be very friendly, both great guys; I'm still in touch with them. Reiner Geyer managed to arrange for my son to escort the players through the tunnel at a home game—a wonderful experience! Granted, this may seem like a detail to you. And it was certainly a chance occurrence; it just fell into my lap. Things like this keep happening to me. But whether you believe me or not, my good fortune was not

completely a matter of luck but due to the fact that, through the years, I have drastically changed my perspective on life. In life, you get back whatever you project. I can never preach this point often enough.

In the past, I saw myself as the victim. Consequently, life used to treat me as one. In the past, I saw myself as ugly, thus I saw the ugly sides of life. Today I see myself as a winner. As a result, life rewards me generously. Before, such wonderful things would not have happened out of the blue as they do nearly every week nowadays. Today I can walk into a room and notice that people feel my presence. You know what I'm talking about, right? Sometimes a room will light up when someone walks in; other times, it gets brighter when someone leaves. I can still remember a time when nobody noticed me, unless it was to poke fun. Whether I was in the room or not, no one cared. Today, I attract attention regardless of where I go. Seriously, when I go somewhere, it's as if a spotlight is turned on. That's what people tell me time and time again. Why is that so? Because of what I project. And where does that come from? From within, from my mindset. And what is the source of that mindset? It lies in the fact that when nobody wanted me to get to the top, I went and made it anyway. Every person is that which they have experienced. If you want to know how I got to the top, my life story will tell you.

I will tell you that story in this book.

You will no doubt recognize yourself in various places along the way. This book has a very specific goal. It is to embolden you.

I want you to pursue your own path, regardless of who would stand in your way.

Martin Limbeck

1. Red Cards

First off, let me say this: I didn't have a bad childhood. I cannot find fault with my parents in any way. If I tell you about my early life, what I'm referring to is what it felt like for me, not whether my folks did a good job or not. That is not what this is about. I love my parents more than anything else and spend as much time as possible with them. Family is after all one of the most important things to me.

Nevertheless, I was often miserable on the campground on which I grew up.

I was my mom's favorite, the youngest of three. As a kid I saw my father as a matter-of-fact type of person, with little emotion. He was also on the road a lot. My mother compensated for it by coddling me twice as much. My brother is ten years my senior and my sister six. Because there was such an age gap between us, we weren't that close. My sister had to watch over me a lot when I was small, and she hated it. We fought often, and she was physically stronger than me of course. One time she hit me full force on my bare back with a needle brush, so that I looked like a beginner in a fakir club on training day. Suffice it to say that it wasn't exactly cozy at our home.

In general, I seemed to be taking beatings from all sides. Socially, I found myself left to my own devices. I didn't have a big brother around since he was too old, nor did I have a best friend with whom to ally myself. Why didn't I have friends? Because I had red hair, I was chubby and had pimples. And because I had no interest in having other redheaded, chubby and pimply kids as my friends either. I

didn't want to belong to the outsiders. And yet, I had been dealt the card of the outsider. Bad luck.

I was teased throughout my early years. They called me "Chub" or "Redhead." And when there was something happening on the campground, when something broke or someone complained—it was Limbeck's fault.

Frank was usually the ringleader. Oh, before I go any further, let me say that whenever I tell you a story, it's something that actually happened. The only thing I've altered are the names. I don't intend to expose anyone here, let me make that clear. Therefore, I'm leaving out all last names and inventing first names, except of course when it concerns well-known personalities.

Anyway, this Frank kid had claimed me as his personal chump and scapegoat. One time we were out at five in the morning dismantling the miniature golf course and throwing the pieces in the lake. Naturally I took part; I was also petulant and rowdy and had to let off steam somewhere. Frank was also there. As the policeman who owned a trailer on the campground dragged us in front of our parents by the scruff of the neck, Frank's father was so certain that I was the usual suspect that he smacked me right then and there.

Thank God my father was there at the time and intervened, "If anybody smacks my son, it's going to be me!" You wouldn't believe how important these words were to me. Because that's exactly what I wanted: for my father to set boundaries for me.

Alas, this hardly ever happened because I never really felt his presence. He was self-employed and always on the go. He would come home at seven-thirty in the evening, we would have dinner, then watch the news, and then it was off to bed. Having conversations

with him, doing things together—I never actually saw any of that. At least that's how I perceived things.

He was a loner and an outsider. On the campground you had to be sociable in order to belong; there was constant partying everywhere. My father kept his distance and hardly drank any alcohol, at most a beer. On campgrounds where everyone is drunk every weekend, drink one beer and you're left on the sidelines.

As a consequence, I also became a loner and an outsider—just in my age group. Even if I wanted something else entirely. At home I played on my own: I could spend hours building Lego cities and airfields. In the evenings we would watch TV. On Saturdays, there was a short religious broadcast followed by a cowboy movie. Everyone was allowed to see it, even the kids in my clique would rave about it on Sundays. I, on the other hand, had to go to bed. And the Saturday night when, by some off-chance, I was allowed to watch the western, I fell asleep within the first five minutes. That was typical.

A Losing Battle

There were lots of Turkish students at my school. One of them was named Erkan and was the leader because he was the strongest. He beat me up on a regular basis. He always seemed to find a reason to. It was obviously good for his ego. Thinking back, it's astounding how many beatings I took week in and week out. One time, in my role as the neighborhood piñata, I got thrown back first into the front window of a flower shop. I could have gotten very seriously cut up, in fact I could have died.

Today, of course, all of this still exists. From what I know, kids who are in the position that we were once in are taken by droves into the

custody of child protective services. When we were kids, that was just the way of the world and nobody batted an eyelid.

When my testosterone levels began to skyrocket, redirecting my desires, girls wanted nothing to do with me. I might as well have been thin air for them. But I was also a bastard: Because my self-esteem was about as big as an ant, I vented my frustrations on girls. It was also a way of reaching out. I teased them and even picked arguments with them. How pathetic was that! My father, our family ambassador, was often forced to go to my school because of it. I acted like a loser—and that's fitting, because I was a loser.

Losers steal, for instance. And I stole. There was a small shop in the country that sold gardening tools, flowers, fishing equipment and the like. Frank got such a kick out of egging me on. And I was a faithful accomplice, of course, because I wanted to belong. I would steal anything to hand and stuff it into my fishing boots, and get promptly caught and escorted home by the police. I couldn't even steal properly, so I decided to leave it be.

I couldn't kick a ball either. And if you grew up in the Ruhr Valley, that was bad news. Our entire school supported the legendary team Schalke 04, and we were practically next door to the soccer stadium, which today has been partially torn down and serves as a training ground. In those days it was our temple. Soccer in the Ruhr area is like a religion. At every given opportunity, we used a tennis ball to initiate the ritual that was our street soccer session. On each occasion the two strongest players would choose the ones they wanted for their team. Needless to say, I was always picked last. And "picked" is a big word—I was the last one left. A wretched feeling.

Most of my teachers, too, treated me like dirt. On Fridays our math teacher would join us for lunch in the cafeteria. On this occasion there was chicken. Whereas at home we would eat chicken with our

hands, our math teacher insisted we use our knife and fork. I didn't know how, and so I got into trouble yet again. Or rather, my parents got hassled for it. As if the quality of one's upbringing depended on whether one followed the book of etiquette.

My father, on yet another diplomatic mission, concluded the summit conference having secured my permission to eat with my fingers whenever there was chicken on the menu, just like I did at home. What a farce.

The music professor was a clown in a checkered suit and a bow tie. The type that at forty still lives at home with his mother. (If you're the type who at forty lives at home with his mother, move out for God's sake!) One day I had to get up and sing in front of the class. My teacher knew that both my brother and my sister were very musical. Surprisingly, that didn't help me at all. My performance was an absolute train wreck. And the professor had achieved his goal. The worst part of it was his pitying tone, "Oh, Martin, go back to your seat. You're just not cut out for music. That's just the way it is—"

That's how deep-seated beliefs are born. "You're not cut out for music." Bull's-eye. Hit and sunk. I internalized this and for nearly my entire life I actually believed that I was not musical. Simply because a bad teacher did not live up to his responsibility and found it necessary to make a weak student even weaker.

There was a similar case with my German teacher, a man with long hair and a mustache. He was our homeroom teacher and seemed to think he presided over the path our lives would take. One time he called my father in because I was getting bad grades. He said, "Mr. Limbeck, your boy will NEVER amount to anything!"

That hurt. Think about it for a second: how aggressive and spiteful that was. How abjectly petty, how bitter about your own failures

you would have to be in order to humiliate in this manner an already insecure boy in the throes of puberty.

And because a good portion of the teachers belittled me, I had no standing among my classmates either. That is how leadership works, for good or bad.

A kid once said to me, "I'll bet you can't eat a piece of bread while I'm holding it." Dope that I was, I saw no particular problem and accepted the challenge. A circle of leering kids formed around me, and the boy in question proceeded to pull his pants down and stuck the piece of bread between his bare butt cheeks. "Eat up, Limbeck!"

Now you know what my role in society used to be.

There was one guy on the campground whom I admired; his name was Henry. His father had his own shop, selling coal and oil, which meant that Henry had money. He had everything that I longed for. And he looked good too, a Mick Jagger type. No wonder, then, that he also had the prettiest girl of them all. He was a leader. He set the tone. He had the coolest leather jacket. He rode a cool chopper—and I lived in a caravan and had never touched a girl.

Henry had gotten to where I wanted to go. But he was light-years ahead of me. I felt so inferior compared to him. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, I wanted to be near him. One time, while I was at his place, he suddenly announced that he had to go somewhere, leaving me alone with his sumptuous girlfriend. I could feel my heart pounding from head to toe. She scooted over next to me on the couch and began to flirt with me. I quickly noticed that something wasn't right, but she looked so very enticing and smelled so good. Oh my Lord! My brain closed up shop and went out to lunch. The nerve impulses coursed through my body but stopped short of my muscles: I could no longer move. My power

of speech had been jammed. I was way out of my depths. Suddenly Henry walked back into the room and they both burst out laughing. Very funny indeed.

On one occasion I almost got lucky, with a girl named Hannah. She wasn't the otherworldly goddess that Henry's girlfriend was, but she was very kind, and I liked her. And it was clear that she kind of liked me too. She was the very first girl who took notice of me. But then along came Eric, another athletic type, and swiped her right from under my nose. With Hannah you could say I came in second place. But a better term for it would be first-place loser. It was at that time that I really began to hate losing. If you're looking to understand the hell-on-wheels Limbeck of later times, herein lies the key.

That's pretty much how things were for me in those days. A world in which every single day someone or other is holding up a red card in front of your face, saying: You're out. You can't play anymore. Get off the field and go take a shower. That's the place I'm coming from.

A tutor once had us study the play *Nathan the Wise* by Lessing. There is a passage where Nathan says to his friend, "No man needs must."—Ha! I hated these words. I hated school, I hated German, I hated Lessing, and most of all I hated the feeling that in my life I couldn't do what I wanted to do and had to do precisely what I didn't want to do. By the looks of it, Limbeck was the only sucker under the sun for whom there was a must! This chasm between want and must was the reason that I felt like a loser every single day.

Although it sounds horrible, I hated my life. Even worse, I hated myself. And the fact that these two are intimately linked, is clear to me today.

But I repeat: I did not have a bad childhood. I have nothing to complain about. I was simply a loser, and life handed me a constant

stream of rejections. For some reason, I was not prepared to accept this, and that was my real problem.

Surrogate Fathers

Of course there were some silver linings. When I was twelve years old, an angel came into my life and spotted a talent in me. His name was Franz. Because my father was not into fishing, there were other grown-ups who took me out on the lake. Franz taught me the basic tricks—and since then the fishing bug has never left me. Today it remains a great passion of mine.

When I was 13 or 14 years old, I would get up at five in the morning, go out to the side of the lake and put out the fishing lines. On Saturdays I would often spend the whole night fishing. Many times my mother would bring me sandwiches to eat. Naturally this was a form of escape for me. Fishing for me was a sanctuary in which to retreat, a haven of peace. Fishing is my form of meditation, to this very day.

Many who know me from my presentations find this hard to believe, but I love the peace and quiet that fishing provides, and I can sit there for hours on end and wait. For me it is essential, and it is something I owe Franz, whom I looked upon as a kind of surrogate father.

Apart from that, I had suddenly found something at which I was the best, and by far. On one particular Saturday I caught 101 common roaches and twelve carps. And today I still hold the local record for the biggest and the most carps caught. That was my first real taste of success. To be good at something! To win for the first time! The feeling was so big, so powerful, that I smelled blood: Success, winning, coming in first—this was my thing.

In a world of continuous red cards, fishing kept me afloat. I don't know what I would have become if I had not had this one specific thing at which I was the best. If you have children of your own or happen to know children in whom you see any kind of talent—be it making paper airplanes!—then have deep respect for it. This is vital.

Fishing also allowed me a complete change of course: I weaned myself from the vicious clique I had been in and turned increasingly to the circle of adults around me, especially to Franz. When men engage in a common activity, shoulder to shoulder—with or without a word spoken—there are strong bonds that are forged. This proved enormously healthy for me. Franz became an emotional anchor point in my life.

There were other heroes too in my youth—all adults. My teacher of religious education for instance. His heart was in the right place. He was one of the first to take care of those who had contracted AIDS in Duisburg. With him I made an effort, and religious education was therefore my strongest subject. I enjoyed his classes immensely because somehow I just found him cool. Another father figure.

It was because of him that I then became an altar boy—in retrospect very useful because it was during mass that I garnered experience standing before an audience—apart from the fact that also I enjoyed wearing the uniform. It strengthened my flagging ego and felt like a protective shield.

One of my teacher's acquaintances was a woman who prepared me for my first holy communion and later for my confirmation. Her lessons were always accompanied by chocolate milk and cake and a warm, loving atmosphere. I soaked it all in.

Moreover, she had a cute and clever daughter. I pursued her for quite a while even afterward, but she never gave me the time of day. That figured: I was still the chubby, freckled redhead.

Even so, the presence of Christianity, the Church and everything that came with it was a friendly, peaceful haven for me. I was safe and didn't have to fight for survival. At school and among the kids of my age group with whom I hung out after school, it was as if I had to battle naked and empty-handed in a bull ring, whereas church and fishing were my places of shelter.

The fact that the lovely daughter wanted nothing to do with me is not so bad, because today she looks like I did then. I ran into her years later in the city of Gelsenkirchen, and judging purely from her silhouette, I would not have recognized her: a female version of me as a kid. Absolutely not my type—even if that sounds spiteful now.

My godfather was another redeeming figure. He always came over for my birthday and for Christmas and brought the greatest gifts. A chemistry set, a microscope—boy's stuff. He was a foreman, a newspaper distributor and a bread delivery man—one of the most industrious people I know. He impressed me; how many things he got done! Work, work, and more work, and still he managed to be cheerful—an important role model for me. And he used to carve the most minute figures into his walking sticks. He was a man of action, not just words. I enjoyed his company.

Later, when I was dragged off to a town outside of Frankfurt because my father had found a new job in the city, another important adult figure made his appearance: a powerful teacher. Literally powerful, too: a bear of a man, 6 feet 7 inches, almost 250 pounds, sporting a full beard. It seemed that he took a liking to me. He taught the engaging subject of “polytechnics.” And just as in my earlier experience with my teacher of religious education, the same thing occurred

here: A good teacher could motivate me in a big way. I excelled in his class. And for whatever reason he took me a little bit under his wing.

He had a weekend home in the outskirts of the town. He would often invite me to his retreat. We spent some time together and we had talks. This man gave me immense support, and I know that it is thanks to him that I got through tenth grade at a time when school and I had despondently turned our back on each other.

Besides fishing, it was at this time that I tasted a few other successes in life. At 16 I experienced a growth spurt and all of a sudden was no longer chubby. I was better coordinated, got quickly good at handball, began playing basketball, and improved at soccer—simply important milestones for a young man. I wasn't the best at any of these things, but I wasn't a bench warmer either. My self-confidence grew. I began to strive. I was seized by ambition. And a direct consequence of all these developments was that I found my first real friends. At 16!

This was a crucial insight for me: The moment you begin to make an effort and work toward a goal, to strive, to make your way in the world, as soon as you begin to nurture ambition and make it clear that you want something, from that moment on you become attractive to people. Suddenly you can have your own friends. And this works both ways, that is to say, nobody wants the company of a loser. In order to connect with others you don't necessarily have to be number one, but you can't just hang around doing nothing. The moment your will to change and make things happen becomes evident, you will suddenly find other people interested in you, and you will be attractive enough to at least establish a first small circle of friends. And this in turn will give you strength and foster continued growth.

That was the first time I experienced this phenomenon of resonance. And it wasn't the last.

Not Born in the USA

In Westerfeld, a district of town I was living in, there was a social club, where I hung out with my new friends. It was the era of Motörhead's *Ace of Spades*, AC/DC's *Highway to Hell*, and Iron Maiden's *The Number of the Beast*.

At this time I discovered something new that was plainly due to my body size: People didn't dare to bully me any longer. This was like a wave of respect washing over me. Wow. I felt good.

And sure, I got cocky. One of my friends was the son of a policeman. He was the worst of all. He put us up to all manner of hijinks, and I was glad to join in. We drank a lot at the time, and we'd formed a kind of gang. Everyone rode a Zündapp motorcycle—except me. Since my parents were very frugal, I just didn't have the budget for it. Our family didn't want for anything, but when it came to extravagant purchases, my parents couldn't abide: A moped would stay a moped. That's why I didn't ride a pricey Zündapp Hai 25 like my buddies, but a modest Honda. In some respects, among the guys this put me at the back of the line.

I souped it up of course: took the air filter out, replaced the cylinders and so on. When I was done with it, my ride was loud, fast and one of a kind. This suited my image that was slowly beginning to emerge. A girl I knew put it succinctly, "Jeez, Martin, if everyone has a black jacket, you buy a green one. If they switch to green, you get a black one!"

Exactly.

The drive to go my own way was immense. And I was willing to face all kinds of resistance in the process.

My English was abysmal. An as yet unjaded student teacher of mine gave me an invaluable tip that instantly convinced me, “Martin, I suggest you go to America for a year, or you’ll never learn English!”

My father rejected my funding request out of hand. I had bad grades and no money. But I wouldn’t be who I am today if at that moment I had thrown in the towel. After all, if you’re trying to haul a huge carp out of the lake, what you need is stamina.

I pondered. \$8,000. Damn. Where would I get that kind of money? To whom could I sell my trip to America? Who would get something out of it if I went there? At some point I thought of my grandma. She would be so happy for me that the \$8,000 would be worth it to her. I just had to properly negotiate her sponsorship. She ended up being a tough customer with some clever objections—but it worked! Thanks, Grandma!

I got everything ready. Through my father’s landlord I secured an apprenticeship, so that right after I finished high school I could start working immediately. Everything was coming along smoothly.

Then I sat for the aptitude test given by the organization that was going to take me to the US. Naturally I got no joy from the exam, in fact I failed. At first the examiner looked at me in disgust, “Young man, your English is dreadful!” Damn! I thought to myself. Just another person standing in my way.

“How do you expect to survive in the US with such atrocious English?”

I looked at him and thought, Not with me, you don’t. I want to go, and you, Mr. Examiner, are going to get out of my way. I remembered the chain of reasoning that I had used in my sales pitch with my grandma. I wanted to close the deal and replied, “That’s exactly why

I want to go to America! If my English was anything to rave about, I would have no reason to go, would I!”

Well, that clinched it. The man took the bait, and I was off to America. What you can do with a smart mouth! I had learned that in life you get something only if you use effective sales pitches. My instant reaction was: Yesss! I’m going to the United States and I’m going to show you all!

Nonetheless, the next slap in the face was right around the corner. Nothing goes off without a hitch. The flight was miserable. It felt like there were a thousand and one rambunctious kids on the plane. The flight lasted forever and I didn’t get a wink of sleep. We landed at JFK, with Manhattan in view. Wow. My heart was hammering all the way up to my throat. My first thought was: “Kojak.” I saw myself driving alongside him through the urban canyons. In my fantasies Kojak then began blending with Karl Malden and Michael Douglas from the “Streets of San Francisco,” set between Wall Street and Central Park, while the cable cars climbed 5th Avenue and the Statue of Liberty towered amidst the San Francisco Bay. The images of a colossal America made me euphoric. I waited at the airport for my host family.

And waited.

And waited some more.

All the other kids had long been picked up. I was the only dork standing alone on a foreign continent in a city of millions waiting for people he had never seen before.

Eventually, as I, the tough biker, had almost begun to cry like a grade schooler, I was finally picked up and taken to Roselle, New Jersey, and into a lovely American home with a swimming pool. I was given my own room with a water bed. They obviously had money, but

there was a lack of warmth. They were not in good spirits, we didn't hit it off at all, they constantly fought among themselves due to marital problems, and the situation looked bleak, as always.

Apart from that, I felt instantly homesick. Sometimes I lay doubled over and crying. Sure, I was always allowed to call home, but I felt lost. On more than one occasion I entertained the thought of calling the whole thing off and catching the first flight home.

A good thing I never did! I would have gone home an epic loser, when the whole point of me coming to America was to turn myself into a winner.

And you know what? What saved me was school. Just as my school in Germany had tried to diminish me, the one in America made an effort to empower me. And it succeeded.

I was in the Class of '86, and a few days after I got there, I was approached by the liaison teacher. But it wasn't to punish or reprimand me. I'd already hung my head, but suddenly realized it was safe to raise it again: She had come to praise me. This was a totally new experience.

She proceeded to tell me that my first test results were outstanding. "You're good!" she said. Then she proposed that I skip the current year altogether and jump right into the Class of '85. In her opinion, I didn't need to attend as a guest student, I could sit for the state tests and go as a regular high schooler, just like an American student. As she said this, she gave me an encouraging look. No tricks, no hidden demands, no trap. "You can skip a grade and go straight into senior year, if you want to."

This was awesome. I could hardly believe it. I was being recognized, I was good, I felt wanted. What was happening all of a sudden?