

Founder Story

A boy, a bike and a big dream.

By Hans R. Holdener



Lead



**As my history teacher
described the agricultural
revolution in mind-numbing
detail, I daydreamed of
becoming a worldclass
businessman and driving
a Porsche 911 Targa.**

Hans R. Holdener

Childhood



My story about a restless young man and his father is also about **dreams, passion, a thirst for risk and action – and the value of a surprisingly helpful streak of stubbornness.**

Often in trouble as a boy due to what my mother lovingly labeled “high energy,” I caused my parents much worry about my future. My dreams were as remote from reality as my father’s had once been.

Raised in a sleepy Swiss village called Steinen in the canton of Schwyz about an hour south of Zurich and expected to succeed his father in the family business, my father was determined to chart his own destiny elsewhere.

To his father’s dismay, at the age of 15 my father left for a culinary apprenticeship. After receiving his diploma in Berne, he traveled the world as a chef for several years, eventually settling in Oslo. Where I was born.

Childhood

Like his father, my father wanted me to follow in his footsteps. Like him, I felt no eagerness to do so. But after years of consternation about my poor performance in school, he persuaded me to try a culinary apprenticeship in Switzerland, which in his romanticized memory had become “the best place on Earth.”

On our way there we stopped at the Porsche factory in Stuttgart, the highlight of the journey for me.

For hours I walked amid the magnificent, sparkling cars, dreaming of the day when I would drive away in one.

It wasn't merely a childhood fantasy; I understood that I would have to work very hard to reach that day and believed myself ready for the challenge.

Porsche plant in Stuttgart



Youth

The following afternoon we arrived in Goldau, a dull village a stone's throw from the one my father had been desperate to escape, even more stultifying to his sixteen-year-old son, accustomed to Oslo's urban bustle.

The proprietress of the local hotel restaurant informed me with military sharpness that I would work from 6am to noon and from 2pm until 8pm. I had never even stood up at 6am, much less been ready for a job.

At 9pm, she continued without awaiting a reply, the electricity went off to save energy and use of the bathroom was verboten. Handing me a roll of toilet paper, she ordered me to make it last for ten days. I reeled from culture shock, unable to imagine how I would survive six months of twelve-hours workdays and blackout nights.

The next morning when I went down to reception, I learned that my father had left. Though I later understood that this was his way of pushing me to grow up, just as some fathers throw their boys into the water to teach them to swim, at the time I felt abandoned in a cold, alien world.

The stern proprietress scrutinized my every move, on the lookout for any misstep or infraction. Determined not to displease her, I became so vigilant about saving energy that one morning when I arrived early to the restaurant and saw the water gurgling in the fish tank, I turned it off.

I did indeed learn to work hard - cooking and cleaning and conserving - and more importantly I learned to be responsible and accountable for my actions. But I was no closer to finding my calling in life.

The next day I awoke to a piercing scream – the proprietress beholding a tank full of dead fish. She called my father shouting that I had to leave, but he convinced her to keep me, flattering her with his confidence in her ability to civilize wayward boys.

Youth



Journey of my life

Steadfast in his conviction regarding my future, my father arranged for my relocation to a more hospitable locale, a lakeside restaurant called Hörnli in Walchwil, owned by a warm, welcoming couple.

The chef Vincent, who was as openhearted as my previous supervisor had been harsh, gave me the nickname “Olav” after the king of Norway, thereby exhausting his knowledge of that nation.

There I spent five days a week working from early morning to late evening, one day at school, and one day of rest. Here I learned more about cooking, teamwork, and the importance of timing and delivery.

But above all, I learned, in the depths of my homesick soul, that I didn’t want to be a chef. It had been my father’s path, but I knew now that it wasn’t mine. I also knew my father would be furious, so I couldn’t ask him to pay my airfare home. I had to find my own way.

One day on the restaurant balcony, watching a group of bicyclists cruise by, I decided I would cycle back to Oslo. With my hard-earned savings I bought a Cilo bike and began months of intensive training.

Almost two years since I’d left home, as the sun rose on a Sunday morning, I started pedaling toward the German border. With a tight budget, I would need to spend carefully in order to complete the journey. Perched on the handlebars, my rucksack contained a spare shirt, wallet, maps, chocolate, a Sony Walkman, and a photo of my dog, Alex.

Journey of my life



The Black Forest is a wonderful region for cyclists who like to climb hills. But heavy rains and thunderstorms pummeled me, slowing me to an arduous crawl.

So I shifted course from the country roads to the Autobahn, which was more direct and mercifully less steep. But after just a few hours, the police stopped me and transported me back to the country road.

My morale plummeted, the 1000 kilometers ahead to Kiel in Germany stretching beyond my endurance, my destination seemingly unreachable. Drenched, exhausted, and utterly alone, I felt tears run down my face, merging with the raindrops, disappearing into my wet shirt. At times the headwinds were so strong they seemed to push me backward. My body

shivered with cold and ached from overexertion. It was all much harder than I had imagined. I longed for the safety and comfort of home.

Every hour I thought about giving up. Every hour I pressed onward. I slept wherever I could, even on the floor of a train station.

After 13 grueling days, I arrived in Kiel, Germany. Almost penniless, I asked a Norwegian truck driver if I could join him on the boat towards Oslo. Courtesy of his kindness, I slept soundly on one of the restaurant's sofas, knowing I would soon be home.

Back in Oslo



I didn't know that home would feel so different. Upon my return, my father refused to speak to me. He remained mute the next day, the next, and the next, until days became weeks, his silence casting a gloomy shadow over the household.

Finally, my mother said she couldn't stand it anymore. So we began talking, and he began to accept my desire to choose my own path.

So we began talking, and he began to accept my desire to choose my own path. First I needed to

complete my education, which I did in Oslo, while also working in assorted jobs from bouncer to computer tech.

Not long before I graduated from university, my mother died. Shattered by grief, I stuffed my belongings in my car and drove first to Paris and then to Switzerland to start anew.

In 1997 I opened a small business letting apartments in Zurich. Over the years, it has grown into an institutional investment platform for real estate, requiring as much **grit and determination as I needed for that bike ride.**

During my lonely first sojourn in Switzerland and my long journey back to Oslo, I came face to face with myself and discovered the qualities – passion, discipline, dedication, and a surprisingly helpful streak of stubbornness – that have since shaped my life.

I learned that I could rise to unexpected challenges, that I had the wherewithal to persevere in the face of daunting setbacks, and that when I set a goal I will risk life and limb to reach it. Helvetica's foundation lies in this formative experience. When Thomas Holst and I started the company, I had

no background in the financial industry, just as I had never done a long-distance ride when I set out for Oslo.

I risked all my money, just as I had risked everything before. And I put my reputation on the line, just as I had dared to assert my independence from my father.

Start-up phase

Searching for a financial partner, we met with one institution after another – they laughed at my naiveté and lack of relevant expertise. After twenty banks had rained on my aspiration, I felt the headwinds pushing me back, and I pressed on.

At twenty dismissals, I felt the demoralization of miles to go with exhausted muscles, and I pressed on – through thirty rejections, until at last, one small financial boutique took a chance on me.

I could have lost everything, my life savings, my business, my dream. Instead, my vision to build an independent real estate asset manager— owned by its partners and guided with passion, integrity, and responsibility— has become a reality.

**My “high energy,”
once a liability, has
become an asset.**



Helvetica Property

Today when my father says, “Investors must be very happy with you,” I hear his paternal pride.

And I feel a surge of gratitude for him and the sacrifices he made for me. Although he had a different vision for my life, he nevertheless helped make my childhood dreams come true. After all, I have him to thank for my stubbornness and determination – and also for Switzerland, which is indeed one of the finest places on Earth.

Even my dream of a Porsche 911 Targa has come true; In 2007 I bought the 1987 model of my boyhood, a wonderful vintage car. I still have the Cilo bike, which remains in great shape after 33 years.

**And I still have the drive,
passion, and dedication
that brought me and
Helvetica the success we
enjoy today.**



**It was the greatest
journey of a young life.
The resulting knowledge
gained lasted even longer.
It has contributed to
found Helvetica Property and
has made a great Impact
on our values, as well as the
way we work today.**

Hans R. Holdener

**Thank you
very much for
your interest.**

