No Map, No Permission

Angelo Ponzetta

No Map, No Permission

How I Built a Global Life from Rejection to Reinvention

"What They Don't Teach You About Global Business

Learned the Hard Way"

Title | No Map, No Permission
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Publishing, layout and design assistance by Bookst®

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Preface

When I began my journey over 30 years ago, I never imagined I would live and work across so many cultures — or that I would one day write a book about it.

I was not groomed for leadership.

I did not come from a wealthy or privileged background.

I did not speak English fluently.

I came from a small town in southern Italy.

As a child, I moved to Switzerland, where I spent years trying to belong in a world that did not feel made for me.

But life teaches what schools cannot.

I was rejected from jobs, ignored in meetings, and dropped into markets I did not understand — Japan, Korea, China, Thailand, Hong Kong, Australia — and was told, without instruction, to figure it out.

So, I did.

I learned how to lead without speaking the language.

I learned how to listen to cultures before trying to change them.

I learned how to rebuild trust in broken teams — and turn around companies on the brink of collapse.

And I learned, most of all, how to stay — when others fled.

This book is not a traditional memoir.

It is not a leadership manual either.

It is a bridge — between story and strategy, between young professionals trying to find their place and CEOs navigating unfamiliar terrain.

Each chapter reflects an authentic experience:

Moments of courage, mistakes, adaptation, reinvention, and connection.

Whether you are reading this as a student, an executive, an entrepreneur, or someone just trying not to give up — I hope you find something here that reflects your own journey.

And if you're curious about the ideas and philosophies that shaped how I think, I have included a short list of books at the end of this volume — works that helped me navigate cultures, decisions, and uncertainty when no one was there to guide me.

Because the truth is: no one is ever fully prepared for a global life.

We are all learning as we go — failing, adjusting, and trying again.

There is no map.

There never was.

But if you have purpose, curiosity, and the courage to act —

You do not need permission.

Just go.

— Angelo Ponzetta

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Part I

No Map No Permission

Part I – No Map No Permission

Every journey starts somewhere — but not always with a clear direction.

This first part is the story of how I built a global life — without perfect plans, without predetermined titles, without instructions.

It is the story of rejections turned into opportunities, of unknown languages that became bridges, of companies quietly brought back to life.

It is not a traditional memoir.
It is a frontline journal of survival, growth, and reinvention — told one chapter at a time.

If you are searching for your place in the world — or trying to reinvent yourself while everyone else seems to already have a map — this part is for you.

Chapter 1

Born Between Borders

I was born between borders — not just countries, but cultures, languages, and expectations.

My life began in Italy, in a small sun-drenched town in the south, but my earliest memories belong to Switzerland — a colder place, not just in climate, but in spirit. That contrast would shape everything: how I saw the world, how the world saw me, and how I eventually found my place in it.

I was just about one year old when my mother left Italy to join my father in Switzerland, where he had moved earlier to work as a car mechanic. We were not the only family split across borders, but it felt like we were. The journey was not just geographical. It was emotional — the start of a life lived between worlds.

We entered a society of order, discipline, and unspoken rules — all of which I had to learn the hard way. I did not speak Swiss-German. The other children made sure I knew it. I was the only Italian, the only foreigner in my kindergarten. From the first day, I was on the outside looking in.

The exclusion was not always loud. It was in the way the other kids grouped together and left me out. The way the teacher did not seem to notice when I was alone. The way silence replaced invitation. And yet, that silence taught me something.

In those quiet, difficult moments, a kind of determination took root. I learned to mimic first — expressions, phrases, gestures. I paid attention to tone before I understood the meaning of the words. I listened before speaking, copied before questioning. Little by little, I began to understand. Then to speak. Then to belong.

By the time I reached my teens, I spoke Swiss-German and German fluently. I could blend in so well that people forgot I was not one of them. But I never did. That invisible line — between who they thought I was and who I truly was — stayed with me. It gave me something I didn't yet have words for: fire.

At home, life was different. Warmer. My parents did not have a lot of money, but they gave me something more valuable: resilience.

My father, a craftsman with strong hands and stronger principles, worked in a garage. My mother was a tailor — precise, focused, and deeply proud of her craft. They did not believe in throwing things away. If it was broken, you fixed it. If it was old, you updated it. And if it was difficult, you did it anyway.

Most of the clothes I wore as a child and teenager were not bought — they were handmade by my mother. We could not afford designer items or shopping sprees, but that didn't mean I went without. I would flip through newspapers and magazines, checking for the latest fashion trends, and my mother would carefully study them with me. She did not just sew — she recreated. She could take a picture of a jacket or a pair of trousers and bring it to life with inexpensive fabric and her skillful hands.

Somehow, even with very little, I was always dressed in the latest style. I may not have had money, but I had something better: a mother who made sure I could walk into school or a job interview with confidence and pride.

That quiet resourcefulness shaped my perspective on everything. Whether it was bikes, jobs, or clothes, I learned early:

You do not need new things. You need to make what you have work — and work well.

My first bicycle did not come from a shop. It came from a dumpster. My father found a rusted, bent frame and brought it home like a treasure. He handed me a wrench and said, "Let us make this better than new."

We stripped it down, replaced the parts we could, cleaned what we could not replace, and painted it — I personally selected the color. When it was done, it was not just a bike. It was a symbol, not of speed or status, but of patience, persistence, and pride.

The same thing happened with my first motorcycle. Then my first car. I never bought them — I built them. Piece by piece. Bolt by bolt. That became my first form of independence. By eighteen, I had a car before most of my peers. Not because I had money, but because I had will.

That early lesson stayed with me throughout my life and business career:

You do not wait for perfect conditions. You work with what you have. Fix what you can. Build what you need.

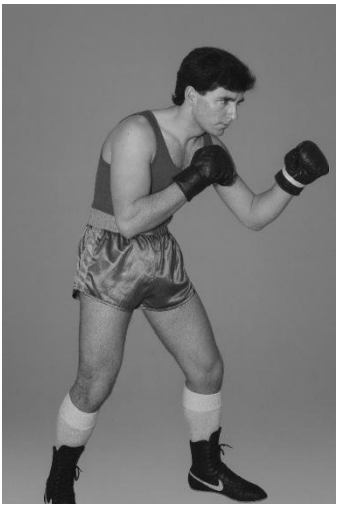
I also started working early. I was just ten when I got my first small job — cleaning the floors in a photo shop. Twice a week during school breaks. When I got my bike, I upgraded: delivering photos to customers. It was not glamorous, but it made me feel grown-up. I was contributing.

Then came the pet store — cleaning cages, feeding animals. I did not love it, but it paid more. Then a winery job — delivering bottles of wine by bike. That was physical labor: crates, hills, weather, sweat. But the tips made it worthwhile. Some customers were generous, and those extra coins in my pocket felt like proof that I could earn my own way.

These jobs were not just about money. They taught me how to move through discomfort. How to show up. How to earn.

At school, I tried to fit in. I played football like most boys. I trained hard and made the local team. But no matter how well I played, the other boys rarely passed me the ball. I was Italian. That was enough to make me invisible, even in motion.

After two years of frustration, I quit. I did not give up — I looked for a sport where I did not need anyone to pass me anything.
A family friend suggested boxing. I said yes. It changed everything. Boxing was pure—just you, your body, your focus, and your will. No politics. No favoritism. Just work.
I trained with discipline — five a.m. runs, shadowboxing, sparring, repetition. I loved the silence before the fight. The intensity of preparation. The solitude of responsibility.
And at sixteen, I became the Swiss junior boxing champion in my weight class.
It was not about trophies. It was about proving something to myself:
That I could take a hit and keep going. That I did not need permission to belong.



When it came time to discuss our futures, the school brought in career advisors.
One by one, students were informed about the professions that suited them.

When it was my turn, the advisor glanced at my file and said, "You should become a carpenter."

There is nothing wrong with carpentry. But I knew what he meant. I was from an Italian working-class family. Therefore, I should stick to manual labor. He did not ask about my interests. He did not ask what I wanted. He just assumed.

I nodded, but inside I thought: “You do not see me”.

My father, on the other hand, saw something more. He suggested I become an engineer. Or join him in the garage. But I knew that if I entered his world, I might never leave it. He sensed it too. So, he gave me a third path:

"Try electronics. That's the future."

I did not know much about it. But it felt like a window — not a wall. I said yes. And I began to study.

Still, even with skills, I was not always welcomed. I was never directly told by a career officer, "You are not suitable." But I heard it in other ways — the long silences in interviews, the polite dismissals, the jobs that never called back.

And still, I pushed forward. I believed that I could outwork rejection. That I could turn effort into evidence. That one day, I would be seen.

🎓 For Students & Young Professionals

- Lesson 1: If no one passes you the ball, find a new field — or build your own.
- Lesson 2: Everything you fix becomes part of your strength — even a rusty bike.
- Lesson 3: Belonging is not always given. Sometimes you have to claim it — and fight for it.

💼 For CEOs & Executives

- Talent Insight: Look for the ones who had to fight to be seen. Their resilience is unmatched.
- Cultural Insight: Bias does not always sound loud — it hides in assumptions.
- Leadership Insight: People born between cultures know how to read complexity — they have had to.

Chapter 2

The Power of No

By the time I graduated from high school, I knew two things:
I did not want to live a small life.
And I did not mind taking the long road to something bigger.
I started studying technology — microcomputers, circuits, early programming — just as the world was beginning to understand what computers could really do. I graduated as an electronic technician and later continued my education to become an electronic engineer.
It was a field with promise, but something was missing. I was not satisfied just understanding machines. I wanted to understand people. I wanted to grow — not just as a technician, but as a person who could move through different spaces, different roles, and maybe even different countries.
At the time, I did not know how to get there. But I knew one thing: discipline was my path forward.

Boxing and the Battle Within

That mindset had been forming long before I touched a microchip. Growing up as an immigrant in Switzerland, I had learned what it meant to be excluded. I knew the silence of being overlooked, the sting of being underestimated. I did not take up boxing to hurt others. I took it up to strengthen myself.

Boxing gave me something few things in life could offer: clarity.
I trained relentlessly — waking up at five every morning to run in the dark before school. I did conditioning drills alone. I sparred with people twice my size. And I kept going. Day after day. Week after week. Quietly, methodically, I shaped a new version of myself.
Eventually, I became the junior Swiss boxing champion in my weight class. Not because I was the strongest or fastest — but because I was the most focused.
I remember the moment I won the championship. Not for the applause, but for the quiet voice inside me that whispered:
"You did this. You proved it to yourself."
That was enough. I did not want to become a professional boxer. I had no dreams of medals or money. I had gotten what I came for: confidence.
And once I knew I could do it, I walked away.
Because sometimes, success is not about staying on top. It is about knowing when to let go — and take that strength somewhere new.