



Never give up on our children's future!

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The following text paints a picture of three generations of a Swiss family. The first generation suffered from coercive social measures that were supposedly meant to help people..¹ This writing project began in 2021 as part of the "Poverty-Identity-Society" (Pauvreté-Identité-Société)² research project conducted by ATD Fourth World between 2019 and 2023, using the Merging of Knowledge approach.³ Their objective was to *"understand better the relationships between society, institutions, and people living in poverty in order to learn from them and work to ensure that poverty is no longer repeated from generation to generation"*. Members of the Sudan family, like others who have experienced poverty and contributed to this research, possess knowledge that is indispensable to a democratic society.

Based on daily writings and interviews with the Sudan family, one young ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corps member — a trainee lawyer — has retraced the milestones and important moments from their lives. These were shared with her over the course of three years, a sign of their trust. She then created this portrait as faithfully as possible, which she re-read with members of the family. The names have been changed, but they proudly agreed for the story to be made public, not only in their country but also on an international level. In fact, a group of young Swiss parents, including the young mother named Léa in this portrait, joined the participatory research project led by ATD Fourth World. The title of this report is "Building a Future without Poverty for Children: Parents and Society Together", otherwise known as the "Family Advocacy Project". The Sudan family's daily struggle, over several generations, for a dignified and respected family life lies at the very heart of this international research project.



Frédéric

Frédéric Sudan was born in Switzerland in 1963. His story is one which affected thousands of families in the country. Throughout the last century, up to and beyond 1981, children and young people were involuntarily placed in care or on farms, without their or their parents' consent and also without any court order, essentially because their family was living in poverty and deprivation. Many of these young people suffered terrible violence, which marked the rest of their lives. In 2013, the Swiss Government recognised the victims' suffering and asked for their forgiveness. In 2016, the federal parliament passed a law⁴ acknowledging the injustices suffered and establishing measures for reparation, including research programs, access to personal files, financial support, and mutual aid projects.

Frédéric's childhood

Frédéric carried the heavy weight of his childhood throughout the rest of his life. As he explained, he had spent those years "without any reference or identity" and had very few memories of them. He remembered, however, that his mother worked as a helper in a restaurant and that his father used to take him for walks on Sundays to the cemetery where he worked. He had no other memory of his father, not even what he looked like. Frédéric did not remember the local school he attended while living with his parents or even remember going there. Later in life, he did some research but could not find any school record or certificate. This remained a great mystery to him, as did all the years leading up to

his tenth birthday. "For me, it's an empty void. I don't have any memories, positive or negative. I can't see, I don't see anything. I'm in a vacuum."

His memories of his placement in the orphanage in 1970 came flooding back when he talked about them. His youngest sister had been placed in a children's home as soon as she was born and never returned home. When Frédéric was around seven years old, he, his brothers, and two other sisters were placed into foster care overnight by the city's guardianship department. They were taken by the head of the department; their parents were not even present. Frédéric said he felt like a piece of merchandise being moved from one place to another. He could not explain why they were placed in an orphanage: nobody ever told him. He talked about his parents' instability, no doubt due to a lack of job security. He also talked about his neighbours' complaints: "The family was a bit overwhelmed." It was well known that the neighbourhood where his family lived was highly impoverished at that time. It would be reasonable to assume that Frédéric's parents faced major difficulties on a personal, professional, and familial level due to the reality of living in extreme poverty. Unfortunately, the family did not escape the practice of forced extra-familial placements that was rife during this period.

Frédéric lived separately from his brothers and sisters at the orphanage, as the children were grouped according to age and gender. He was sometimes able to see his brother. Over time, he

eventually came to wonder whether he actually had any sisters: "I lost my identity; I couldn't even remember my family name." Frédéric said that the children lost all freedom at the orphanage and were forced to live in a sort of machine-like daily rhythm. Even though he admitted that the orphanage meant he could always count on having a bed, a roof over his head, and something to eat, this period was still one of great suffering, which continues to weigh heavily on the shoulders of the man he is today.

He never had any visitors at the orphanage, and he never saw his parents. Lacking any explanation on the matter, he experienced it as an abandonment. He only learned later — a few years ago, when he was given access to his files following the government's apology to the victims of forced placement — that his parents were forbidden to visit him. This forced separation led to some very dark moments when Frédéric blamed himself and wondered why he was there at all. He did disclose, however, that the love of a family — with whom he stayed every weekend — allowed him to experience a few moments of happiness.

Frédéric has only very vague memories of school during his time at the orphanage. But since he never found any school record, he imagines he did not stay there for long. Today, he speaks of not being allowed to know or understand what he and his family were going through: he was excluded from all information about them. He has no photos of his parents, brothers, or sisters, or even himself from that period. In 2017, when he and other former foster

children were given the right to access their own files, he was then able to discover details of his own life and that of his parents. But for Frédéric, reading through these documents is still a very difficult and emotional task. He discovered some harsh things that professionals had written about his parents, but there are no writings from his parents themselves nor their relatives. Frédéric realises that there are some truths he will never know, so he writes what he refers to as "an embellished story that is easier to bear."

After the age of ten, his memories become clearer. It was at this time that his mother reconnected with her children. She had divorced Frédéric's father and had a new partner. Mothers who had suffered these forced extra-familial placements often set about finding a new husband in order to have any hope of regaining visitation rights or custody of their children. Over several months, every weekend, his mother and her new partner made a more than 60-mile round trip by moped to visit her children at the orphanage. Thanks to these visits, the partner gradually gained the trust of Frédéric and his brothers and sisters. He wrote a letter to the judge requesting the return of the children and confronted the orphanage, who insisted only two of the five could leave. He firmly declared, "These are MY children. I am taking them ALL."

He succeeded, and all the children returned home. However, shortly afterwards, Frédéric was again sent away, this time to a boarding school for a year, due to serious tension between himself and his mother. Then, once Frédéric returned home, the entire

family moved to the south of France, to the region where his stepfather came from.

Frédéric went to school in France, despite schooling not being "his thing", apart from maths. So when he was thirteen years old, Frédéric asked his stepfather to let him leave school and find work instead, doing something with his hands. So, at a very young age, Frédéric began an apprenticeship as a mason in a residential vocational school and eventually gained his Certificate of Professional Aptitude. Shortly afterwards, when he was seventeen, he announced his desire to return to Switzerland. Frédéric explained that he was suffering too much from his relationship with his mother. He described how he would swing between rage and guilt when he asked himself: "Why am I the black sheep of the family?" For Frédéric, his stepfather was his protector against this difficult relationship, someone with whom he could seek refuge and who always made sure that Frédéric was not left out. Frédéric was extremely touched and grateful that this man had accepted his partner's five children and treated them as his own, doing his best to create a sense of family unity. Having this man in his life, whom he considered as his father, was priceless for Frédéric. When his mother married him, Frédéric chose to take his last name.

Meeting Marie

Leaving his stepfather was not an easy step. Frédéric returned alone to the town where he grew up, but it was a place that he no longer knew or recognised. His stepfather had found him

somewhere to live — in a hostel for apprentices — and a job as a bricklayer in a construction company. When he received his first wage, Frédéric turned to gambling. He met an uncle every Friday after work and accompanied him to the pub, where he could make friends. But it was also there that he began to drink. Like so many broken men who start to drink early on in their lives, he was never really able to stop. At eighteen years old, Frédéric found himself a small studio flat, but even though he was working, he still found it challenging to make ends meet. A few years later, he met a young woman called Marie, who at nineteen years old was working in a shop as a retail assistant. Thanks to her, Frédéric gave up gambling completely. The young man forged a deep bond with his partner's parents, who would become pillars of strength for him throughout his life. Because of the distance, ties between Frédéric and his own mother and siblings weakened to the extent that he only learned of his mother's death several months after the fact. He had a strong bond with his stepfather's son and saw him as his own brother. His stepfather also remained a strong support until his death in 2008, which affected Frederic deeply.

Marie's family came from a modest background. Marie expressed her gratitude for the simple, happy childhood that her parents gave her and her brother and sister: "I had a golden childhood." Her parents continued to play an important role in her life and that of her family. They were all deeply affected by their dad's death in 2023 at the age of ninety-one.

Frédéric and Marie's family life

Shortly after meeting Frédéric, Marie became pregnant. They got married and Marie moved into Frédéric's studio apartment. Léa, their daughter, was born in 1985 when Frédéric was twenty-two and Marie was twenty. Finding their studio too cramped, they found a four-room apartment where they lived for the next thirty-five years. Thinking back to the birth of his daughter, Frédéric said: "It seemed to me at that moment that I had accomplished something solid between us. We had a connection between us, Marie and me. She was our child. And I was proud of that."

At this time, Frédéric had no trouble finding work, going from one company to another. Marie quit her job, as her husband preferred her to devote all her time to their family. As time passed, she still wanted to work and found a few small, relatively precarious jobs. The family lived frugally, with enough money to live with dignity, mainly because the pair were both very resourceful. They salvaged a lot from the street or from organisations and created a support network of family, friends, and neighbours.

Gradually, however, Frédéric and Marie began to accumulate debt. This drove Frédéric to apply for voluntary guardianship⁵ in the 90s to protect himself from creditors. Due to the legal jargon used by the judge, Marie also signed the papers without really understanding everything it entailed. From that point on, they have remained dependent on guardianship all their lives since it is so difficult to get out of the system. Marie spoke of the guardianship

as the leading cause of her difficult life, even to this day: "It's the guardianship that has ruined my life, yet it's supposed to be there to protect us."

A few years later, Marie was expecting another baby. As the family was now under the supervision of the state, the guardianship department reported them to the child-protection service for a follow-up. The reason for their report was unclear to Frédéric and Marie. They imagined that the reasons were linked to their family environment at the time, marked by financial difficulties and Frédéric's alcohol consumption. This caused tension and even violence, which their neighbours had picked up on. From that moment, the family was closely watched.

Their little boy, Maxime, was born at the end of 1993. Shortly afterwards, the child-protection service requested that Léa, who was nine years old at the time, should undergo some tests at the hospital. Marie took her there, but the following day, she learned that she was not allowed to visit her; she had to wait for the judge's decision before returning. Marie said that her world fell apart. No other information was given to her. It was a shock for Frédéric too. It felt like thirty years ago when the same thing happened to him. He told himself, "This can't happen again."

Léa's placement

After this time in hospital, the child-protection Service immediately placed Léa into care. According to the social workers, this was

done "as a precaution". Maxime, however, was allowed to stay with his family. Marie and Frédéric were not allowed to see their daughter again until three months later when they were finally able to tell her that they had never wanted her to be placed into care. Until then, they had no idea where Léa was and were not even allowed to phone her. Little by little, visiting rights were extended and Léa was able to return home every weekend. Marie told of an event that marked her for life. On Léa's thirteenth birthday, Marie decided to visit her at the children's home with a birthday present in hand. With no money for the bus, she had no choice but to walk up the long hill to where the home was perched at the top. She finally arrived two and a half hours later, only to find the door closed. "No, you cannot see her." The staff took the gift from her hands and told her to leave.

Léa was in that home for four years. Four long years, during which Frédéric and Marie fought to have their rights as parents and their right to live as a family recognised. Marie said she had banged her fists on the table several times to avoid giving in. The parents learned that the decision to place Léa in a children's home had been based on an accusation made against them by someone in their neighbourhood. This accusation of abuse turned out to be false, with no evidence, and thanks to the legal assistance the parents engaged, the Justice of the Peace recognised their innocence. However, this false accusation left a lasting mark on the family, weakening it considerably. The consequences of all this affected their physical health. When Léa finally left the home, her

mother had her first heart attack before suffering a second during a two-month stay in hospital. Marie was only thirty-five years old. The relationship between husband and wife was also affected, as Frédéric drank more and the tension between them intensified. Marie described how she suffered: "They should never have taken her away from us, it ruined everything."

Several years later, when their son, Maxime, was eighteen, Frédéric and Marie separated and Marie left the family home — although they never divorced. Frédéric admitted to finding himself very much alone, despite the strong ties he maintained with his family. When Marie left their family home, she found a new place to live. However, following an administrative error on the part of the benefits agency, which failed to pay the rent, Marie was evicted from her accommodation and found herself homeless. She stayed here and there and lived on the street for three years. She was able to find an apartment and later moved to another one, where she still lives today.



Marie

Marie described how her life has never been easy. She lives on very little money and is under constant scrutiny from government agencies, especially the benefits agency and the guardianship service: "They're always cutting my monthly benefits, even though I'm already on the minimum. They think my phone bill is too high. But it's the only thing I have left. I have to justify everything. Social services need to

know everything." Frédéric was also dependent on government subsidies for several years before obtaining disability benefit,⁶ which provides him with a slightly higher income. He also has a less restrictive guardianship than before. But just like Marie, Frédéric has had to constantly fight these government agencies to ensure his dignity is respected. This also explains why they have remained so close and supportive, regardless of their separation.

Marie finds work from time to time despite her health problems. However, she has to declare all her income to the benefits agency, which withdraws a substantial part of it to pay off her debts. These odd jobs enable her to supplement her monthly income a little and, above all, they help Marie to know that "I'm still useful for something". She also talked about the energy it takes every day to resist the stigma of being on benefits and under guardianship. It makes everything more difficult, from finding a job to finding an apartment. "If you go and register with a housing association to find somewhere to live, and you tell them you're on benefits, lots of places will turn you away." Frédéric also spoke of the weight that these government agencies place on him: "It feels like I have a millstone around my neck because I'm under a guardianship."

Marie also feels this institutional weight on a daily basis. It causes her such suffering and worry that she has even thought: "The best solution would be to leave this world." You can tell that Marie's difficult life and daily struggles have taken their toll on her, despite the supportive network that she has created around herself all her

life. When she walks through town, Marie stops at every corner to say hello to someone and to listen to their worries. She has even been nicknamed "Mother Teresa", as neighbours, friends, and others speak of her boundless generosity and how she is always ready to help anyone in any way she can. Marie is a pillar of strength — an "Eiffel Tower" for her family, as Frédéric puts it — who places all her strength into keeping everyone together. She ensures that her children, grandchildren, and even Frédéric, never want for anything, sometimes at the risk of putting herself last.



Léa

Léa's childhood

Léa's childhood memories are bleak, especially those from her time spent in care, from which she still feels deeply hurt and rejected: "I don't want to hear any more about care; it was really one of the worst times of my life." She spoke a lot about her maternal grandparents, who gave her so much: "My grandparents have always held a special place in my heart." They regularly took her and her brother for walks, giving them a chance to breathe in fresh air and gain a love for the mountains.

At school, Léa suffered greatly from being stigmatised by teachers and classmates alike because of her disability, as she was hard of hearing from birth. She was even made to suffer due to her high intellectual potential and also because of her social background. So many of these differences were seen as obstacles for Léa, preventing her from accessing her school's preparation for higher

education. For example, during an appointment with a school guidance counsellor, Léa expressed her desire to become a nurse. The professional's response was brutal: "You know, studying is expensive." This exchange shattered Léa's dream. Her hope was finally extinguished when an institutional decision put her into the disability benefit⁷ system before she had even finished school. She found herself forced to find an apprenticeship, offered and financed by that agency rather than one she would have chosen herself.

As no training was available in the medical field, at sixteen years old, Léa was obliged to begin an apprenticeship as a cook. Once she had finished her apprenticeship, she worked in several different places, including the kitchens of various hospitals. Even though she enjoyed her job, she could not imagine herself doing it for the rest of her life and held on to the hope that one day she would work in the field of medicine.

Entering adulthood and the birth of Manon

At this time, Léa's parents were still together and she was still living with them. However, the relationship between Léa and her father was not an easy one, so at eighteen years old, Léa left to live in a home for young adults with family problems. The Justice of the Peace⁸ set up a management and representation guardianship to safeguard her interests. A friend of hers took on this responsibility, although without the necessary diligence, so Léa started to accumulate debts.

At twenty-one years old, Léa became pregnant with her first child. The Sudan family was still under the watchful eye of the child-protection service, which immediately learned of her pregnancy. They neither waited, nor consulted the young mother before drafting a report asking the judge to place her baby into care as soon as it was born, unless the mother agreed to go to a mother-and-baby home. Nobody ever told Léa why, but she understands that she was considered too young and her situation too unstable to look after a child. What she and her family experienced in the past undoubtedly also influenced the decision. An educational guardianship⁹ was imposed. At three months pregnant, Léa decided to go to the mother-and-baby home to avoid having her daughter placed in an institution from birth.

Léa gave birth prematurely to a little girl, Manon, who had to stay in the hospital's neonatal unit for several weeks. During this period, Léa was only allowed to see her daughter when accompanied by a doctor or nurse. When little Manon was discharged from hospital, she was allowed to join her mother in the mother-and-baby home. Léa described being constantly monitored by the staff while in this setting: "I didn't feel that they were treating me like a capable person. During the night, my daughter was not allowed in my room. If she cried, it was a member of staff who would go and give her a bottle. Nobody trusted me, and so I could not trust myself." So she decided she could not stay there any longer. "Having lived in care as a child, it brought back memories of the staff watching over me, and I

couldn't stand it anymore," she explained. But by then, she had no apartment and had to return to living with her parents. In light of the tension between Léa and her father, the child-protection service and the judge decided that little Manon could not live in that environment. So when she was less than a year old, it was decided that Manon would be placed into care. For the first few months, Léa could only visit her an hour per week. Then, she was allowed to visit for an additional two hours at weekends.

Sarah's birth

Two years after Manon's birth, and while still living with her parents, Léa found that she was expecting a second child. In 2008, she gave birth to a healthy baby girl, Sarah. Following a court decision, however, Léa was only allowed to hold her baby for an hour on the maternity ward before the baby was transferred to neonatal care. Léa did not understand the reasons for this measure, given that her new-born was in good health. An educational guardianship for Sarah was quickly put in place and, just as with Manon, Léa could never be left alone with her new-born daughter: "They wanted to make sure I wasn't hurting them," she said. "I told them, 'Of course I'm going to smother them — with love, with kisses, with hugs!'"

After this short period in the maternity ward, Léa agreed to go with Sarah to a facility for mothers and children in order to avoid her placement into care. Even though the support was somewhat better there since mothers could sleep with their children, Léa continued

to feel uncomfortable under the supervision. In addition, on the days she visited her elder daughter, who had been placed in care twenty miles away, Léa had to make the difficult choice to leave her baby at the facility, as she was not allowed to take her along. This meant that Manon, then two years old, could only see her younger sister once a month when her care workers accompanied her to the facility.

Léa talks about feeling torn between going to see her elder daughter, from whom she was separated, and staying with her second child in a facility where she did not feel at ease. In her opinion, it was this situation that caused her to sink into depression, making it difficult for her to care for her daughter. The judge then decided to place Sarah — not even a year old — into the children's home where her sister was already living, meaning they were both far from their mother. Léa was allowed to visit her two daughters three hours per week, always in the presence of a care worker. In these circumstances and despite all her efforts, she says that it was difficult to form a mother-child bond. This separation made Léa's depression worse, leading to her hospitalisation several times during a six-year period. Six years of fighting the illness, six years completely cut off from the world of work and living entirely on disability benefits, and six years of a continual hope to maintain the link with her daughters at all costs.

Léa's fight for her daughters

Manon and Sarah's father, with whom Léa wanted to settle down,

was not involved in his daughters' upbringing. However, he officially recognised them and paid Léa maintenance. The girls know who he is, although they rarely see him, even nowadays.

Léa contacted a lawyer to support her in her fight to get more access to her daughters. This lawyer also became her management and representation guardian. Léa gradually gained new visiting rights until she could have her daughters home every weekend and for half the school holidays. Then, Manon and Sarah were transferred to a different children's home. Léa liked the new director and the holistic approach to family support he cultivated, which offered parents a part to play within the facility. This positive development allowed Léa to create a stronger bond with her daughters and really helped her get back on track. In 2015 she emerged from her depression, even though she still had moments of fragility. Her mother, Marie, played a crucial role in this development and continued to give Léa unconditional support. They are very close, and over the years and with the trials they have gone through, they have created a bond described by Léa as "emotional fusion". Unfortunately, the professionals around them took a long time to recognise the importance of the unconditional support provided by Léa's mother, as she cannot count on the children's father's involvement. In fact, on several occasions, in written and spoken communication with Marie and Léa, the agencies have claimed that the grandmother's presence in the household is a sign of Léa's lack of independence and autonomy, indicating that she is unable to handle things by herself.

After her depression, Léa was hopeful of getting a decent job, but various institutional obstacles stood in her way. Her guardian blocked her search for a hospital internship, saying that she was not in a position to hold down a job; the "disability benefit" label stuck to her. She says she lacked proper support from the agency that regularly reassessed her capacity to work and her changing situation. On the housing front, after spending several years in sheltered accommodation for people living with psychological problems, Léa found a small, independent apartment. Thanks to this and the actual improvement in her mental health, Léa managed to earn the right to be with her daughters—who were entering adolescence—every weekend as well as for the entire school holidays. Gradually, their care workers and the child-protection service even began to develop a plan for them to return home.

Before this plan materialised, however, there was a change in management at Manon and Sarah's children's home. Léa struggled to build a trusting relationship with the new director. She did not feel that he provided a comprehensive family support strategy. Amidst all this, her daughters' educational guardian also changed positions, leaving a new person in charge of their file. This change put the girl's return home on hold, waiting for the new guardian to get to know the situation and carry out the plan.

At the same time, the Covid-19 pandemic was beginning, which slowed things down again. To comply with the government's

guidelines in the face of this crisis, the children could not return home for an indefinite period, and parents were unable to visit them in care. Care workers found it difficult to set up a video link, so the only means of communication during all this time was a single phone call a day. The consequences were serious, and Leah was haunted by the feeling that she was abandoning her children. To avoid falling into depression, she walked for miles each day in the nearby forest. "Fortunately, I have faith; it helps me", she said. She joined other mothers in writing to Simonetta Sommaruga, then Swiss president,¹⁰ who quickly sent them an understanding and comforting reply: "[...] Anguish cannot be classified, but the suffering of parents separated from their children for an indefinite time is certainly one of the greatest. [...]" With the support of a press release issued by ATD Fourth World and more than twenty other associations in the country, these young parents denounced the practice by making statements on the radio and in newspapers. Thanks to this, the home was obliged to establish more regular video calls between parents and children.

Yoan's birth

During this time, Léa made the joyful announcement that she was expecting a third child twelve years after the birth of her second daughter. Now that she had completely recovered from her depression, she felt ready to welcome a new child. This pregnancy brought immense happiness but, unfortunately, was also accompanied by overwhelming fear. Manon and Sarah's new educational guardian asked the judge to place the baby into care

from birth. This new guardian had only met Léa, Manon, and Sarah once. Despite the documents in the family file written by child protection officers and care workers fifteen years earlier, the educational guardian's report to the judge portrayed her as a negligent mother, fabricating stories and willing to lie to the professionals involved in her case. "It's possible that Ms Sudan, not knowing how to manage her child and the girls, is totally overwhelmed, putting the child in a situation of great danger."

At seven months pregnant, Léa had to appear before the Justice of the Peace to plead for a chance to keep her child. At the hearing, the judge let her speak first, inviting her to comment on the educational guardian's report. Léa had prepared all night to speak convincingly about how she had changed since the birth of her daughters. This is how Léa described everything she was prepared to do to welcome her baby home: "In fifteen years, I have matured. I know my abilities and I recognise that I have my limitations and shortcomings. Where I have them, I don't hesitate to ask for help." Despite the extremely negative comments of the guardian, who reiterated his concerns, the judge listened to Léa. Acknowledging the great importance of the "mother-child relationship that must develop from birth", he gave her custody of her child. This decision was accompanied by a condition: daily home visits by a paediatric nurse. Léa came out of court with tears in her eyes. "The judge will let me keep my child at the maternity hospital and at home!"

Nevertheless, the guardian remained convinced of Léa's inability

to look after her children. Despite the judge's decision, he continued to exert pressure and control over the family. Several times, even just a few days before she gave birth, he repeated to Léa that a place was reserved for her baby in care "just in case".

In early 2021, Léa gave birth to a little boy, Yoan. For the very first time, she had the joy of keeping her new-born with her at the maternity hospital and returning home with him without constant supervision. She says the judge's trust in her gave her confidence as a mother. Léa quickly established a good relationship with the paediatric nurses, viewing them as a valuable support. Moreover, noting that everything was going well, they made a request to the judge a few weeks later to space out their home visits. They also gave very good feedback to Léa and the educational guardian.

Léa's struggle to be recognised as a participant in her dealings with institutions

Despite this, shortly after Yoan's birth, the educational guardian managed to obtain a guardianship warrant from the judge. He justified it on the grounds of Léa's "educational shortcomings", proven by her daughters' previous placement into care. So the threat of placement remained strong — and was constantly referred to by the guardian — which prevented Léa from settling comfortably into her role as a mother. The constant fear of making the slightest mistake enveloped her. "I'm under a hell of a lot of pressure, and it's killing me; it's horrible." And Leah could not

count on the dad either, who was no more present for Yoan than he was for his daughters.

But Léa held up and continued to fight for her daughters too. The announcement of her pregnancy put a stop to the plan for Manon and Sarah to return home. Their educational guardian, the care workers, and the director of the children's home believed that it was inconceivable at that time, expressing concern about Léa's ability to care for both a baby and two teenagers. Asking for educational support (AEMO)¹¹ to enable her daughters to come home, Léa also wrote several times to the judge, reiterating her right to live with her family. She spoke about her suffering in one of her letters: "Every day separated from my daughters is a day missed to strengthen our bonds." But her pleas for a relaxation of the measures imposed on the family were no match for the words of the professionals.

Knowing the power that the youth workers had over her situation, Léa tried her best to nurture her relationships with them. She also worked hard for the good of her daughters so that these difficulties did not affect their development. But it was not always easy because her situation undermined her role as a mother. "When there are case conferences,¹² instead of hearing the negative things about my daughters, I asked them for positive things. But they said: 'There is no point in talking about the positive, we already know about that. It's better to talk about what's wrong.' The thing is, if you only hear what's wrong, you're going to feel stupid and

incapable. The positive makes us want to move forward." It did not make things easier for Léa when she had to appear alone in front of professionals at case conferences. The right to be accompanied by a trusted third party is not recognised in Switzerland, which leaves it up to the professionals to decide whether or not to allow it. However, for Léa, as for many other parents, the presence of a trusted third party is essential to gain confidence in the presence of professionals and to show the professionals that the person is receiving support.

For Léa, it is also important to count on people who can witness her dealings with professionals, especially when a serious event shakes this already fragile relationship. On 1 September 2022, Manon, her sixteen-year-old eldest daughter, was punished and had to spend a night sleeping on a bed base. Léa was alerted by marks on her daughter's ribs when she came home crying. Because Manon had not tidied up and cleaned her room despite several reminders, her youth workers had decided to remove her mattress until their request was carried out. After hearing the youth workers' explanation on the phone that this was an 'educational measure', Léa immediately wrote to the judge to ensure that this serious incident, which amounted to institutional abuse,¹³ did not stay within four walls. Upon receipt of a copy of the letter, the director of care organised a meeting to clarify the situation. During this meeting, Léa demanded that her daughter receive an apology from the youth workers. Although this calmed the teenager down a little, her unhappiness at being in care became even more acute.

But at least this allowed Léa to rebalance the power a little between herself and the professionals, confirming her determination not to let such acts go unreported.

At the end of summer 2021, Léa had a new guardian. Her former guardian had been relieved of his duties effective immediately. Thanks to the close follow-up that Léa received from an organisation for young adults in difficulty, an alert was sent to the judge, highlighting the former guardian's many shortcomings, especially concerning finances. This mismanagement of Léa's disability benefit caused her considerable harm, including a very high increase in her debts. To guarantee the safeguarding of Léa's interests, this time, the judge appointed a professional guardian who took over the management of Léa's assets and administration with great care and transparency, with the objective that Léa would gradually regain her financial and administrative independence. "It's a victory for me to gradually succeed in lifting my guardianship, to get out of it, to prove that I can manage myself without someone following me."

At the end of summer 2022, Léa received a letter she was not expecting. The owner of her apartment ended her lease for no apparent reason, giving her three months to find alternative accommodation. For several months, she had been looking for a bigger apartment in order to increase the chances of her daughters returning to live with her, but her financial situation was not deemed viable, so many doors closed. She had even found two

guarantors to support her application, but Léa was turned down despite this. Shortly afterwards, she received a letter from the judge calling her for a hearing "to review the situation with regard to her housing and her three children". Without further details, Léa did not know the nature of this hearing. She also discovered from this letter that she now had a different judge. The one who had listened to her and granted her custody of Yoan had been replaced by a new person. The pressure was increasing. Léa was afraid that she would not find accommodation in time, which would cause her to lose custody of Yoan. Finally, after much effort, and with the support of her guardian and a registered letter of support signed by ATD Fourth World, Léa obtained a four-room apartment available from the day of the hearing. What a relief!

A decisive court hearing

With her housing situation secure, Léa could appear at the hearing with one less thing on her mind. She had requested to be accompanied by a trusted third party, which the judge approved, while specifying that this person could not intervene at the hearing. The judge began the hearing by stating that he wanted to meet with Léa to get to know her rather than forming an opinion based on what he had read in the files. He let her speak first and she was able to reassure him about her housing and tell him how she had changed since the placement of her daughters sixteen years ago. With a firm resolve, she spoke of wanting to get her daughters back home: gradually, and with the support of educational assistance at home. The children's guardian pointed

out that their association with Ms Sudan had improved, as had her relationship with the care workers. Likewise, the judge was positive about Ms Sudan's request to be accompanied by a trusted third party. According to him, this showed that she had access to resources and knew how to ask for support when needed. Later in the hearing, the judge mentioned how much Ms Sudan's request for support had helped him improve his own practice. Since then, in all his letters to parents, he offers them the opportunity to bring along a trusted third party. "Before the hearing, the judge sent me the care workers' reports on my daughters. This was important, as it helped me to prepare what I wanted to say. And if the judge lets us speak first, as he did, we don't have the burden of hearing all the negative things about us or our children right from the start. You can say what you have prepared."

Léa came out of this hearing feeling relieved at the prospect of her daughters' return, and no longer worried by the threat of her son's removal. Even though she knows that all is not yet won and that the battle continues, to have been recognised as a partner by the judge and the children's guardian amounted to a victory. Léa's confidence in the support and care structures grew, as did her confidence in the nursery Yoan attends twice a week. There, she successfully fought to ensure that she, not child services, would be the first to be informed of any difficulties her son might encounter. Léa also accepted the support of the mobile educational service that comes to the house two hours a week to help Yoan. "In three months, he has made more progress than in a year. He knows lots

of new words. This service is real support, not control. The person who comes does not judge me, she gives advice and not judgments. She has no power over me."

From an individual struggle to a collective one

Léa is sharing her struggle to be recognised as an active participant in her interactions with government institutions. She participates in ATD Fourth World's People's University session. "There you can express yourself freely, listen to others who have the same experiences, feel that you're not alone, and, above all, learn how to say things in a group to strengthen each other." With her experience of poverty, Léa is also a co-researcher of the Poverty–Identity–Society project,¹⁴ with other co-researchers from the professional and academic world. She raised an important point, endorsed by all her co-researchers: that people living in poverty do not dare to assert their rights, mainly because of power issues. "We have the right to see our children, to ask to see them more often. But we only say, 'I would like to see them more often.' This is because the youth department and the director of the children's home are a level above us, and if you say 'I have the right to see them more often,' you're afraid of getting pushed down even more." Thus, through dialogue and research, Léa is proud to contribute to a better understanding of poverty in Switzerland and to the highlighting of institutional dysfunctions that still to this day cause violence to people living in poverty and spark forms of resistance on their part. At the symposium to present the final report of this research, held in Bern on 9 May 2023, Léa was part

of the delegation that met personally with the Federal Councillor, Minister of Justice, who said in her address:¹⁵ "Your commitment, your thinking, and your work deserve and receive our recognition [...] We are enriched by new knowledge, new questions, new energies: and we are ready to put our trust in the contribution that citizen participation will make to ensure that poverty is no longer an endless cycle."

For more than two years, Léa has also been part of a group of young parents from French-speaking Switzerland who support one another in their common struggle to have their right to live a dignified and respected family life with their children heard and recognised. This group is taking part in the international Family Advocacy Project,¹⁶ a research project that enables them to identify with a wider struggle elsewhere in the world, and to collaborate with others to bring about the changes necessary in order to build a better future for children and their families.

The fact that she feels so connected to people who are living a similar reality and to others who are not, but who believe in their common goal, gives Léa a lot of strength to continue fighting back. Today, she is a woman who has grown in confidence, who stands up straight and speaks proudly. "I'm not the same person any more. Before, I kept my mouth shut. Now I dare to speak up when something is wrong. I have become — in quotation marks — 'like any other parent'." Léa was also able to fulfil her hopes of spending holidays with her family in settings where she was able to

experience an atmosphere of non-judgment and regain confidence in herself as a mother. Other social spaces bring her a breath of fresh air where she can share her passion for ice hockey, playing pétanque or singing in a choir. She seeks to connect with other parents in her city to talk about children being bullied in school. Léa also reads and likes to learn, and she has a strong desire to continue to educate herself.

Léa's father, Frédéric, has also found in ATD Fourth World a space for self-expression, listening, and sharing his knowledge, especially with young people as part of recruitment training days. But he continues to worry about poverty that repeats itself from generation to generation. "I was placed into care, my daughter was placed into care, my granddaughters were placed into care... For goodness' sake, when will it stop? Why does it repeat itself? Because we're unemployed, because we have no money, because we're living on benefits, we are immediately judged." This is why Frédéric places a lot of hope in his daughter, Léa, believing that she and her children can "break this cycle — so they don't have to suffer all the injustices I have suffered."



Manon

Léa is worried that her eldest daughter is currently being prevented from following her dreams, just as she was in her youth. In fact, after steps taken by the school and the educational guardian, Manon was enrolled at a specialised vocational training centre for young people entitled to

disability benefits at the end of their schooling. This centre offers young people support that should enable them to find work in the open job market. But even if this decision was made by professionals to secure what, in their eyes, would be a better future for Manon, one thing is certain: in addition to the "disability benefit" label that will stick to her for life, her ambitions and choices have also been limited. Manon was very disappointed to learn from the disability benefit office that the institution she was attending did not offer her the opportunity to do an apprenticeship as a learning support assistant, the job she would love to do.

A bridge to freedom

Despite these obstacles, Léa wants to offer her children the best. During a meeting with other parents, she used an image of a long bridge that continues to the horizon. "Being in poverty right now, I'm doing everything to get out of it: to cross a bridge to freedom. I don't want my children to go through what I've been through. This bridge to freedom speaks to me because this is the path I am taking. I'm only at the beginning of the bridge, but step by step I'll gain my freedom."

Family ties permeate this search for freedom. Strong ties can help to achieve it. On the other hand, when family ties are weakened the goal moves farther away. Manon, the elder daughter who is now sixteen, has joined other young people who aspire to a more open world without discrimination. While emphasising that "being in care is not family", she expresses what family does mean for her

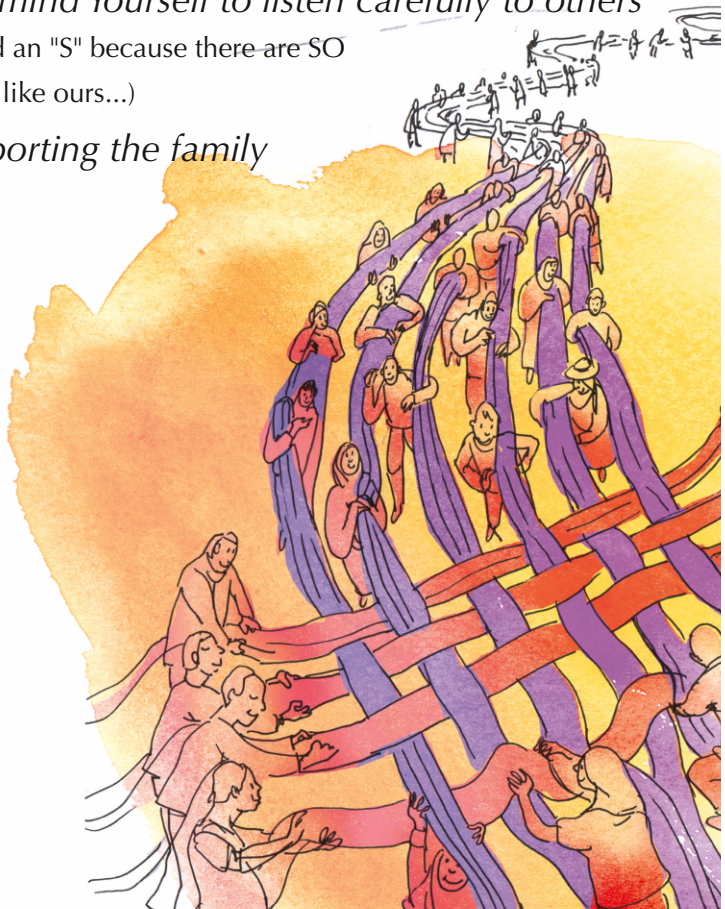
with this acrostic:

F for Fortitude together, A for taking Action together, M for being a Mum, I for not being Impolite, L for the Links that bind us together, Y to remind Yourself to listen carefully to others, (And if we add an "S" because there are SO many families like ours...), S for Supporting the family



FAMILY

- F** *Fortitude together*
 - A** *taking Action together*
 - M** *being a Mum*
 - I** *not being Impolite*
 - L** *the Links that bind us together*
 - Y** *to remind Yourself to listen carefully to others*
- (And if we add an "S" because there are SO many families like ours...)
- S** *Supporting the family*



Notes

¹ Speech by Federal Councillor Simonetta Sommaruga (FDJP, 11/04/2013): <https://www.bj.admin.ch/bj/fr/home/aktuell/reden/reden.msg-id-91125.html>

² Research report "Relationships between institutions, society and people living in poverty in Switzerland: an ongoing experience of violence" (ATD Fourth World, 2023): <https://atd.ch/nos-actions/project-poverty-identity-society/research-report-project-poverty-identity-society/>

³ Merging of Knowledge : <https://www.atd-fourthworld.org/what-we-do/participation/merging-knowledge/>

⁴ Federal Act on Coercive Measures for Assistance Purposes and Out-of-Home Placements Prior to 1981 (LMCFA), 30 September 2016 (RS 211.223.13)

⁵ A guardianship is a measure designed to safeguard an adult's interest, paying particular attention to their financial interests. There are several types of guardianship, which mandate the guardian to perform more or fewer tasks on behalf of the person under the guardianship, depending on their needs. A guardianship may be requested voluntarily or imposed by the State.

⁶ In Switzerland this is known as Assurance Invalidité (AI). It is a Swiss social security benefit that provides financial support to people who are unable to work for health reasons.

⁷ In Switzerland this benefit (known as Assurance Invalidité or AI) is also designed to support young people through specialised training courses, with the aim of helping them to make the transition to a working life, to avoid having to receive any welfare payments.

⁸ As an authority for the protection of adults and children, the Justice of the Peace handles and monitors all protective measures provided by the Civil Code for adults and minors. It appoints and supervises the guardians, who may be professionals from the state guardianship service or private individuals if they meet the conditions required by law.

⁹ An educational guardianship is a measure implemented by the judge for parents whose children are suspected of being at risk in their development. The person appointed as the child's guardian is (in this canton) the child protection worker in charge of the family's file. They have the power to ask the judge for other measures to be taken, such as a placement in care or with a foster family if they consider that the child's development is threatened.

¹⁰ Simonetta Sommaruga is the same Federal Councillor who in 2013 expressed on behalf of Switzerland — when she was in charge of the Federal Department of Justice and Police — the request for pardon to the victims of coercive social measures and forced placements.

¹¹ AEMO (aide éducative en milieu ouvert) is a measure that assists parents by providing their children with educational support in the home, delivered by professionals.

¹² More or less regular meetings between the person concerned and the professionals who work with them.

¹³ Final report of the research project "Poverty–Identity–Society" 2019–2023 entitled "Relationships between institutions, society, and people living in poverty in Switzerland: An experience of violence that continues". What Merging of Knowledge between people with lived experience of poverty, professionals and scientists reveals: <https://atd.ch/nos-actions/projet-pauvrete-identite-societe/rapport-de-recherche-projet-pauvrete-identite-societe/>

¹⁴ Research report "Relationships between institutions, society and people living in poverty in Switzerland: An experience of violence that continues"(ATD Fourth World, 2023)

¹⁵ Speech by Federal Councillor Elisabeth Baume Schneider, Head of the Department of Justice and Police, at the symposium convened by ATD Fourth World on 9 May 2023 in Bern under the title: "Poverty — an endless cycle: What responsibility does our society have?" Link: <https://atd.ch/nos-actions/projet-pauvrete-identite-societe/colloque-la-pauvrete-une-boucle-sans-fin-quelle-responsabilite-pour-notre-societe/>

¹⁶ Family Advocacy Project: Building a future without poverty for children: Parents and society together", participatory research conducted by ATD Fourth World International from 2019 to 2023, with parents living in poverty and academics, conducted in Europe in seven countries, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.
<http://atdfw.org/FamilyAdvocacyProject>

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