



COOL4CLIMATE

GRETA THUNBERG



Malena Ernman and Greta Thunberg
(Photograph: Malin Hoelstad/SvD/TT/TT/PA Images)

This portrait is about Greta Thunberg's journey to becoming a global phenomenon and leader in the ever-growing youth movement against climate change. It is mainly based on (the German edition of) *Scener ur hjärtat* (Scenes from the heart), a book authored by Greta's family, written as a first person 92-scene narrative in the voice of Greta's mother. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are translations from the German edition of this family narrative, references with the scene number.

Overture.

Solidarity & Justice. Greta Tintin Eleonora Ernman Thunberg is born on 3 January 2003 in Stockholm Sweden. Her mother, Malena Ernman is an internationally renowned opera singer with engagements at a number of European opera houses. Her father, Svante Thunberg is an actor, as were his father Olof Thunberg and mother Mona Andersson. Before Greta's birth, Svante works in three Stockholm theatres simultaneously. On a long-distance call he and Malena try to figure out how re-organise their life to care for the baby. Svante decides to quit acting and look after the baby full time, or as he told Maestro Barenboim and Cecilia Bartoli in Berlin: "So now I'm a housewife." [S.3]

Malena was born in Sandvik, a small town 200 km north of Stockholm. "By and large, we were a perfectly normal Swedish small-town family. The only thing that might have set us apart was the extraordinary engagement of my parents for people in need." [S.2] This may be the reason for Malena's strong sense of social (in-) justice: "The richest ten percent in the world are responsible for half of the emitted greenhouse gasses ... The poorer half of the global population is only responsible for ten percent. Looking for role models, we are probably more likely to find someone there than with celebrities like me." [S.89]

Greta is equally, if not more, indignant when confronted with positions she considers to be unjust or unjustifiable. When confronted with the argument that the real problem behind climate change is population size, Greta replies: "if you are of the opinion that the population should be reduced in order to save resources, you should start a campaign for the elimination of billionaires. ... It could be somewhat difficult to get the UN to pass such a resolution, which is why I would instead recommend you reduce your own carbon emissions. Or help educate girls in poor countries, for that would be the most effective way to stem population growth" [S.62], which of course links her directly with the cause of another global superstar activist portrayed in this showcase: Malala!

The extraordinary engagement for people in need continues to be practised in Greta's family. When in 2015 millions of Syrians were forced to flee their homeland because of war, the family, on suggestion by Greta and her younger sister Beata open their summer home to a refugee family to stay while they are seeking asylum.

Flying Celebrities.

Malena is pursuing her vocation as an opera singer. Between 2004 and 2011 alone she sings in Brussels, Aix en Provence, Vienna, Paris, Vienna, Aix, Brussels, Berlin, Brussels, Vienna, Salzburg, Vienna, Aix, Amsterdam, Stockholm, Paris, Frankfurt, Stockholm, Vienna, Amsterdam, Brussels, Stockholm, Vienna. She also does concert performances in Rome, Madrid, Paris, London, Los Angeles, Berlin and Tokyo. While she was well-known before, she becomes "famous"[S.15], a "celebrity", when she is chosen to represent Sweden in the 2009 Eurovision Song Contest in Moscow.

The second part of family narrative, entitled *Burnt-out People on a Burnt-out Planet* begins [S.27] with a frank account of Greta's views of her mother's life-style. "At breakfast, Greta tells me 'you celebrities are for the environment what Jimmie Åkesson' – the right-wing populist – 'is to multiculturalism!'" While concurring that "from an environmental perspective people like me are among the worst" Malena is still hurt by the comparison and counters that without touring she has no income. But Greta insists: "Name me one celebrity who is engaged in fighting climate change? Name me one celebrity willing to give up the luxury to crisscross the globe by air?"

Greta's total and persistent rejection of air travel ("by far the worst that an individual can do to climate"[S.53]) is home grown and leads Malena, who gave up flying in 2016, and others to publicly renouncing air travel in June 2017, marking the beginning of what has become a global phenomenon: flygskam (flight shame), "the feeling of climate guilt associated with airline travel" as the Financial Times explained it.

Into the Abyss.

August 2015. Greta is 12 and enters 5th grade. "She is not well. She cries in the evening when she goes to bed. She cries on the way to school. She cries during the lessons and in the breaks."[S.4] One evening in late October, Malena and Svante "sit on the floor of their bathroom. It is late. The kids are asleep. All around us collapses. ... Our daughter disappears into a sort of darkness and practically stops functioning. She stops playing the piano. She stops laughing. She stops talking. She stops eating."[S.4] Malena decides to quit opera and on 2 November gives her last performance in Sweden.

A psychologist at Greta's school calls her parents and tells them that she has clear signs of autism. There follows a long series of consultations including the clinic for child and adolescent psychology, and the centre for eating disorders. "After two months of not eating, Greta has lost almost ten kilogrammes, which is a lot for someone of a small and delicate stature. She is too weak to climb stairs, and has reached astronomical levels in the depression tests administered to her."[S.9] 2015, mid-November. There is another crisis meeting with doctors, who are telling Greta that if there is no improvement by the weekend, she will have to be hospitalised.

The Phoenix.

Greta is diagnosed with High Functioning Autism (Asperger Syndrome). She starts eating again. "Half a year after Greta's diagnosis our life has calmed down a bit ... Greta is going to a new school. I have cut down my engagements to the absolute minimum."[S.18] In 2016, Beata is diagnosed as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity disorder (ADHS), and at the age of 45, so is Malena. Greta manages to extricate herself from her crippling depression by taking up the fight against climate change, beginning at home by convincing her parents to stop flying and become vegan. This is when she first realised that, as she later put it in the title of her 2019 book:

NO ONE IS TOO SMALL TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

In her own words (courtesy of a recent Guardian interview): I overthink. Some people can just let things go, but I can't, especially if there's something that worries me or makes me sad. I remember when I was younger, and in school, our teachers showed us films of plastic in the ocean, starving polar bears and so on. I cried through all the movies. My classmates were concerned when they watched the film, but when it stopped, they started thinking about other things. I couldn't do that. Those pictures were stuck in my head. I kept thinking about it and I just wondered if I am going to have a future. And I kept that to myself because I'm not very much of a talker, and that wasn't healthy. I became very depressed and stopped going to school. When I was home, my parents took care of me, and we started talking because we had nothing else to do. And then I told them about my worries and concerns about the climate crisis and the environment. And it felt good to just get that off my chest.

They just told me everything will be all right. That didn't help, of course, but it was good to talk. And then I kept on going, talking about this all the time and showing my parents pictures, graphs and films, articles and reports. And, after a while, they started listening to what I actually said. That's when I kind of realized I could make a difference. And how I got out of that depression was that I thought: it is just a waste of time feeling this way because I can do so much good with my life. I am trying to do that still now.

If anything, the Thunberg-Ernman family have demonstrated that a condition, which in the absence of a supportive environment may be disabling, can be a super-power in the right enabling circumstances. Given the right environment, people afflicted are not dis- but differently-abled!

Going Global. In 2018, Greta participated in a phone conference about initiating a Swedish variant of the US "Zero Hour" movement launched in 2017 by Jamie Margolin, a 16-year old Colombian-American climate change activist from Seattle, out of frustration about "the inaction of elected officials and the fact that youth voices were almost always ignored in the conversation around climate change and the profound impact that it would have on young people." "Greta feels that protesting alone is no longer sufficient. What is needed is some form of civil disobedience." [S.83] This is when she had the idea on the beginning of the new school year in August, which happened to coincide with Swedish parliamentary election campaign, to go on strike for climate in front of the Riksdag in Stockholm from 20 August until election day on 9 September.

The rest is history.

Her lonely Skolstrejk för Klimatet (school strike for climate) practically exploded over night into a global movement called 'Fridays for Future' (see story on our campaign showcase). On 4 December, Greta addresses the UN Climate Change Conference (COP24) in Katowice, Poland. At the January 2019 World Economic Forum, Thunberg gave a speech in which she declared: "Our house is on fire". In mid-August 2019, she sets sail from Plymouth to attend the UN Secretary General's Climate Action Summit in New York. On 23 September, she now famously starts her address in the General Assembly by saying:

"This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope? How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction. And all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!"

Story by Benito Müller

