

Artist and author Mindy Weisel in conversation during her visit to Berlin. March 14, 2007.

(Words that could not be identified are marked “???”)

Interviewer: The aftermath of the trauma of the Holocaust, and now you've returned to Germany for the first time. How do you like being in Berlin?

Mindy Weisel: First of all, Berlin is as international, as sophisticated, as elegant, as remarkable as I, even beyond what I anticipated, and the old and the new and the history, and..it's spectacular. It's—it's very exciting for me to be back in Germany where I was born.

Interviewer: So were there any downsides to it at all? Was it in any way difficult? [Difficult to hear, because two people are speaking at once]

Mindy Weisel: There's no—you know, that's an interesting question, it's a question I was asked a lot when I was in the States. It's not difficult because as I mentioned I wasn't raised with any hatred towards Germany. I don't feel any hatred. I this is where I was born, this was my first language, my mother kept the culture of this European, Eastern European background going and even the bedding. You know, I always had a down quilt, you know, I always had a dochanon(???) you know, I always, you know, I always had all these European things, and I was raised with a deep sadness over what had happened in my own personal history with my parents both being survivors and I was born in Bergen-Belsen, but somehow it feels very natural for me to be in Germany now, on my sixtieth birthday.

Interviewer: You've worked as an Artist for many years now, and your focus is on light and beauty. What are your resources, how have you been able to go beyond this legacy of loss?

Mindy Weisel: I think it's a very very good question, and it's been a life struggle. I carry around a tremendous sense of 'how do you live a meaningful life, and how do you live a life [sigh] in which you're entitled to your own feelings', because when you have parents who survived Auschwitz, the ??? for living is very high. You can't cry, because ... how can you cry, you're not—you didn't lose anyone in Auschwitz. You can't be cold, because ... you're not freezing in Auschwitz. There's no range for the normal human feelings, and I think that for most of my life, I was very busy protecting my parents' feelings, trying to make them happy and I think in that sphere pushing down all those feelings is what really prompted me ultimately to take my desire to make marks and become a painter. Because in the painting I could express what I was feeling and not bother

anybody with it and deal with what is meaningful in life and how do you live a life, and how do you be happy? To my mother, beauty gave her great joy, I mean, everything really beauty, and she talked about how in the camps the first day she was in Auschwitz, she was with her best friend from Hungary, and - you know, the Hungarian Jews were taken the last year of the war - and she was with her best friend, who was wearing a black scarf and it was raining in the camps and a Nazi looked at her friend and said 'you look halb tot' – 'you look half-dead' and shot her in front of my mother. The first day she was there. So my mother realized instantly that the idea was to look healthy and that every day they checked your hands. She pinched her hands, she pinched her cheeks, she pinched her hands, she pinched her cheeks, it was like that to look healthy, and the emphasis growing up was to always be very vibrant, and robust and healthy, and you could nev—I never sick, thank god, because you weren't...you weren't allowed to be sick, there was no room for anything weak. You survived, and... you know. And I found the light, and I'll talk about that in the talk tonight. Really, in 30 years of working, the light just kept surviving. It had a life of it's own in a way. And I felt better after I painted, so I kept painting [laughs].

Interviewer: Sounds like ??? (laughter). In 2001 you published *Daughters of Absence*, a book about the transformation of the legacy of loss. Can you talk about your writing and your goals when you write?

Mindy Weisel: Um...

Interviewer: As opposed to...

Mindy Weisel: May I read a perfect little quote, is that okay? Is that okay? It's just a--one minute, but it's because it's the quote that I'm gonna read it... It's by the writer Ahron Appelfeld, it's from his book 'Beyond Despair', and he says: 'Who can return the violated honor of the self? I cannot claim that art is all-powerful magic or pure faith, but one virtue can not be denied it: Its loyalty to the individual, its devotion to his suffering and fears and the bit of light which occasionally sparkles within him.' And when I read that, I thought, isn't it really incredible to...to make art out of, out of something that is dark. And I knew—And I was coming across all these women who were doing incredible things, who were the only daughters to Holocaust survivors. One made a film, Aviva Kempner, did *The Partisans of Vilna*, and Deb Filler from Australia thought it was her job, as the only daughter, to be—to make her parents laugh, and she became a comedian. And Pat—Patty Kopec, who is from the Head of Juilliard, the musical Juilliard, thought it was her job to make music for her parents, and all these women were doing such interesting things these Holocaust

survivors' daughters, but what we shared was that we were raised in a, in a realm of absence, where absence was a reality of our, of our parents' lives that we picked up. And out of that absence we all wanted to fill up their lives with something beautiful. So that, when I had that idea, and I literally was on the train when the idea came to me, and I didn't even have a notebook, and I took like little napkins, and wrote all the ideas, and by the time I got off the train I had contacted most of the women, and I kind of had the idea and then three weeks later had a publisher, just all was very magical.

Interviewer: These days, I mean, after you finished that book, and it was published, did you, or do you have I mean, is writing also...

Mindy Weisel: Well, I've written several books. Just by chance, I've had another book published a year after this, and it was actually not meant to be a book. I had a fellowship in the countryside in Virginia, where it was very very quiet, and I had a month fellowship to paint, and it was very quiet, and I'm very urban, and thought I was gonna go crazy with all this quiet, so I decided to make the subject of each day's work quiet. So one painting was called the Storm of Solitude, another was Touching Quiet, and the series, these paintings, were called Touching Quiet was an exhibition in Washington, D.C. and then traveled, and I kept a journal during this time, so when I had this book published, the publisher said, do you have any other writings, and I said, I have this journal that I kept during touching quiet, so that became a book. I find sometimes that the painting I need the painting instead of language, and sometimes I need the words alone, but I actually start each painting by writing. Every Painting starts with writing

Interviewer: It starts with writing...

Mindy Weisel: Yeah.

Interviewer: ...it's like the thinking, the words...

Mindy Weisel: Yeah.

Interviewer: ...introduce you to the visual...

Mindy Weisel: Yeah, and it kind of strips away language, I write and write and write till there's nothing left to write on the painting and then I just have to start making marks with color and it...

Interviewer: ...makes perfect sense.

Mindy Weisel: Yeah, I have to strip away the language.

Interviewer: So we're thinking like, there are words on our minds all the time...

Mindy Weisel: Yeah

Interviewer: ...so get them out of the way

Mindy Weisel: Yeah. And you can get to a deeper level, I think, of the creative process.

Interviewer: I understand that recently, you're starting to work with glass?

Mindy Weisel: Mmh.

Interviewer: How did that come about, and how is it different to work on glass as opposed to oil on canvas?

Mindy Weisel: That is the best question because it's totally magical. I went to visit—I've never done anything other than paint, I'm at the faculty of the Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington D.C., I teach abstract works on paper, I've always only dealt with canvas, paints, brushes, I've never even taken a class of sculpture. I went to visit a new art center in Washington D.C. and I walked in and there was a glass studio, and instantly felt as if I had known this my whole life and asked the woman running the studio if she taught, and the next day I...I literally the next day, I came and started learning how to work with glass, and by three months later I was at the Corning Museum of Art in New York, doing the fellowship, and then I was at Seattle at the Pilchuk Glass School, and I just took to it. And it's a wonderful method for somebody like me, who is—I don't have a tremendous amount of patience, and the emotions surface like very strong and very quick and I have to work quickly and also in the context of my life, for an artist I think I live a very traditional life: I'm married, I have children, I'm a wife, a mother, a grandmother, and very family oriented, so I don't have the luxury that a lot of artists have of time, so I'm always in a rush, and with the glass, it's incredibly immediate. And you can work twelve pieces of glass and layer, and then there is light, you know

Interviewer: So the light is certainly a criterion when working with glass?

Mindy Weisel: It's amazing to me, going from the dark paintings with my father's number where little teeny bits of poster stamp amounts of light came through to the current work full of light. Just amazing. Thirty years. But you see, I didn't know that I was looking. I don't know what I'm doing when I'm painting, it's not like I say okay, I'm going to, I do the work and then it tells me, and only now looking back thirty years later do I see that... God, I've been looking for light, all these years. And I found it, after thirty years of working.

Interviewer: Well, we started out talking about Berlin let me come back to that. You've been selected to participate in the Berlin Wall Project...

Mindy Weisel: Yes...

Interviewer: ...for the twentieth anniversary of the Fall of the Wall. Can you tell us a little bit about the project and what your contribution is going to be?

Mindy Weisel: Yes they selected twenty artists from around the world actually, there's an artist from Australia, and South Africa and Europe, and the States, and Canada and each of us will be given a three foot by four foot section of the face-to of the original Berlin Wall and we can do with it whatever we like and then it'll be touring and then I think it's going to be housed ultimately on November 9th twothousand...eight is the anniversary

Interviewer: 2009

Mindy Weisel: 2009 is the twentieth anniversary, that's right, it's going to tour for two years, 2007 to 2009, and I'm getting to... my time slot that I have chosen to work on the Berlin Wall is in June, and I don't know yet in my heart what I want to do is Kristallnacht, you know how in Kristallnacht there was broken glass. What I want to do is create glass that is beautiful and complete. Then I wanna break it. And then I want to rebuild it, because that's what I feel my life is about. My parents had a beautiful life before the war, it was broken, and they recreated it, and I feel that's also about German history. You know, there was a beautiful Germany, then there was all this division, and broken glass and a war, and then it was rebuilt after 1989, so I feel like this idea of mine will reflect this, the three-the three parts of our-of all of our history, but I don't know how I'm gonna go about it, if I'm

gonna end up painting it of if I'm doing the glass, I'm gonna see in the process. I'm very process-oriented. I don't really know. I don't think too much, I don't trust in thinking. I have to feel my way into it and out of it and through it. Yeah. And I will see what happens. Yeah.

Interviewer: Well, thank you very much

Mindy Weisel: Well, thank you, it's a pleasure