

Văn nghệ

Writer Isabelle Müller: Journey of Hope

10:50 20/03/2022

In mid-March 2022, writer Isabelle Müller - who has Vietnamese and French blood in her - returned to her motherland Vietnam to attend a meeting with readers, introduce her work *Daughter of the Phoenix - Hope is my path*, and continue to implement charity projects to help poor children. Van Nghe had a conversation with her on this meaningful return trip.



** Reporter: Nice to meet you again. I still remember our conversation in 2019. Your journey back to your motherland Vietnam left a strong impression on me. And this time, we have the opportunity to meet again, on the occasion of your second book launch in Vietnam with the title *Con gái của chim phoenix - Hy vọng là công đường của tôi* (first published in Germany in 2009). How are your feelings about the launch of this book different from the launch of *Loan - from the life of a phoenix*?*

- Writer Isabelle Müller: It is a great honor for me to meet you again on the occasion of the launch of *Con gái của chim phoenix - Hy vọng là công đường của tôi*. I still remember very clearly our first meeting. Compared to the first time - after the book *LOAN* (*Loan - from the life of a phoenix*) was published, my feelings are not much different: I am still deeply moved by the affection and warm attention that the press has given to this book. Of course, I am a little excited inside, because my writing career is now put to the test once again. In fact, I feel great because everything surrounding this book project is right. And I hardly dare to think that I will have the opportunity to share my thoughts with readers.

** I thought a lot about the title of the book "Hope is my path". You have really had a difficult and challenging journey to affirm your own value in the face of many*

adversities. In the path you have chosen, have you ever felt discouraged and wanted to give up?

- Yes, I know which times you are referring to. Actually, I suddenly want to replace your word “discouraged” with “despair”. I have been through such a heavy period several times in my life. I have a few stories that made me despair like that.



That was when my mother had to be absent from all the awards events at my school. Just because of her skin color, she had to stay away to avoid causing trouble. She sacrificed her joy as a mother in exchange for my peace. In those moments, I felt no more motivation to continue to perform well in school.

Of course, the most desperate moments were when my father abused me and I had to keep quiet. Those years almost made me commit suicide twice. Although I loved my mother very much, I was very ready to end my own life. I also felt discouraged when I repeatedly received offers of sex in exchange for jobs in France. It was also discouraging when my loved ones in my family became seriously ill and threatened to die. Finally, in the writing profession, it was really difficult to assert oneself among many other writers. I was rejected many times when I introduced my first book LOAN to publishers. Then I found out that my book had never been read and people just rejected it.

You see, my life has had enough times when I had reasons to be discouraged and hopeless. However, I have never lost faith in God and in myself. When I had a moment of weakness, someone came to my aid at the right time or something extraordinary happened and reminded me that God exists.

ACCEPTING AND OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

** Your book is a courageous voice, in which you do not shy away from discussing issues*

that many people would be afraid of, such as discrimination, psychological terror, sexual abuse since the age of 9 by your own family members... Why did you decide to speak up, which means rekindling your painful memories?

- I was first sexually abused when I was 8, not 9. It lasted for 9 years until I was 17. I really had no intention of writing my memoirs and sharing my story with others. I just wanted to publish LOAN, as I promised my mother when I was 6. But in 2008, the famous S. Fischer Verlag in Germany asked me to write a memoir about my life because they wanted a living protagonist (my mother Loan passed away in 2003). So I agreed, hoping that the publisher would later publish LOAN. When I decided to write my memoirs, I wanted them to be as honest as possible. My main goal was that no one would underestimate the issue of sexual abuse and the terrible experiences that shaped my life. I just wanted to tell you about how I went through everything, how I accepted and overcame the challenges. If I didn't mention sexual abuse among other things, I wouldn't be honest, because the person I am today is the result of all the experiences that life has given me.

It would also be a lie if I said that I wrote this book only for survivors of abuse. No. I just shared a part of my life to tell the story of a girl (ordinary and simple) who had to go through a lot. It took me a while to realize that my book could bring such strength and hope to readers. I had not realized my own strength before.

** What was the reaction of your family members when the book came out?*

- There were many different reactions in my family. My husband said that if he had known the truth before, he would never have shaken my father's hand or let that man into our house. I then explained to him how important it was to keep this secret until my mother died. He understood and completely respected it. It also opened my daughters' eyes. They were enlightened. They both expressed their love and pride for me. Two of the brothers and sisters turned away from me. Two others stood by me (one from the beginning, the other 28 years later, when he read my book). My father has not had any contact with me since the book was published in 2009 - even though I told him in advance that I would write a book with the truth about what happened to me and that I had forgiven him. My distant relatives have generally shown me respect.



** When the book was first published in Germany (in 2009), you spent three and a half years, going to many places to exchange and share with readers, participating in many programs in newspapers and on television. The issue at that time was no longer just a personal issue but had truly become a social issue, which was to call on victims of sexual violence to break the silence to expose the perpetrators. During that journey, did you realize that you had achieved what you wanted?*

- Many people approached and encouraged me to become the voice of victims of violence or vulnerable people. I was honored to take on this role when I realized that I had raised a taboo topic. I do not like taboo topics. I gradually realized that the need for education in our society is huge. Because many people didn't talk about it or didn't want to talk about it, the people around them couldn't see the signs. Society was not prepared and educated enough to face and deal with this kind of problem. 50 years ago, victims were punished if they said these shameful things. This taboo subject was deliberately suppressed. Then, after my book came out (2009), for example in Germany in 2010, for the first time, victims suddenly had a stronger voice, someone spoke up for them, and importantly, someone understood them. Within a few years, I was able to guide the community and victims on how to deal with the problem, how to recognize a victim or an abuser, what to do to protect themselves better and break the power of the perpetrator. But in the end, I knew that I had other work that was equally important. I don't want to spend my life on topics that are full of negative energy. Giving hope is an example. Today I give disadvantaged children in Vietnam a brighter future through education. With education, they have hope and move towards a better future. That's also a wonderful mission. And finally, I'm a writer/author. I want my stories to make others feel happy when reading my books. So today, I have two jobs/missions: doing good deeds and writing.

** Is there a story that has impressed you from readers' sharing?*

- Yes, there is a story that I will never forget. It was after I gave a lecture in a small town in Germany. There was a young man at the end of the line waiting for my autograph. When it was his turn, his eyes were a little blurry. He said to me: "Mrs. Müller, thank you very much. Tonight, you have been my savior with your book and your lecture. I am happily married. My wife and I have only one daughter. We love her very much. She was raped when she was two years old by her eleven-year-old cousin... She had to undergo treatment for several years and today she is fine. My wife has also accepted this fact and believed that everything will be fine again. But I, a husband and a father, could not forget her. And today I met you, Mrs. Müller, and listened to your words. You have been through and suffered so much, even more than my daughter. Before my eyes now, you are a radiant, happy and strong woman. That has given me great hope. Now I know that our daughter really has a chance to have a happy life. I thank you for that."

CONTINUE YOUR JOURNEY OF HOPE

** I love the spirit you convey in the book, which is: "take action and make a difference". What does making a difference mean in your life journey?*

- Just because someone else is doing something doesn't mean I should do it too. It's always easier to follow the crowd and not take action. The taboo topics I present in the book have been silenced by society for a long time out of shame, fear, and unfortunately, cowardice. It's quite common that accusations are made in all walks of life. I bet that every reader knows at least one person close to them who has been a victim of violence or abuse. All over the world, in every family, there are taboo topics like this. It has always been forced to be silent, but it cannot continue like that, for the sake of future generations. It is important for me to continue to question life. Above all, question yourself and be honest with yourself. Stop for a moment, analyze and ask yourself, are you happy? Are you happy with yourself and the people around you? If you are happy, you have achieved the highest goal and can bring happiness to others. If you are not happy, if you feel an inexplicable longing or you feel something is wrong, then it is time to act. Some people think they are too weak. Some people suppress their feelings and just go on with their life because it is easier for them. Others think why change anything when things are the way they are? People are afraid of change and forget that everything around them and inside them is constantly changing. Here I am talking about our standing in society: Everyone wants to be accepted, to save face. But should we live for others and forget about moral values? This behavior tortures the victim twice: They are tortured by the act of violence or abuse, and they are tortured by the deliberate indifference of society... Taboo topics are outside our comfort zone. Those who do nothing are ordinary people. Those who dare to do something to stop the cries for help are extraordinary. They really make a difference.

** Closing the book, I am sure many readers will have many thoughts about the path to finding happiness for themselves. However, not everyone can do what they want for many reasons. From your own experience, do you have any advice for young people, especially women, to help them find happiness for themselves?*

- The Germans have a saying "Where there is a will, there is a way". I know that in many countries there are long-standing customs. In fact, many of these customs were created to protect the family and society.

No one objects. It is only blameworthy when someone's happiness, and the happiness of children, is lost. It is blameworthy when someone creates those customs to demonstrate their strength to the weaker ones. It is blameworthy when abuse or oppression is systematically normalized. Of course, each country and each society has certain regulations. However, I believe that any regulation based on silence or suppression is wrong. Previous generations may have suffered themselves, but as I said, just because someone else did it doesn't mean we have to do the same. Isn't the child's happiness what matters? Should we let someone else's suffering be dumped on a child and then repeat it? No. That's why I suggest that young people be honest with themselves and follow their intuition. It's about happiness. Your life belongs to you, not anyone else's. A family that truly loves you will understand and agree.

In Vietnamese society where women have long proven their courage in the past, facing challenges and asserting themselves should not be a big issue. It takes great courage, skill and perseverance, but in the end it's all worth it. I'd like to add: If it were easy, everyone would do it. We are women, not "everyone". We are different/unique.

** I'm very interested in your volunteer work through the LOAN Foundation to help poor Vietnamese children go to school and have a better future. In nearly 6 years of operation, LOAN Stiftung has achieved quite impressive numbers: a total of 35 projects have been carried out, of which 29 have been completed and handed over. The amount of contributions is up to 1 million Euros from donors. Has the Covid-19 pandemic affected the fund's activities in the past time? What are the fund's plans for the coming time?*

- The global pandemic has limited our work. Due to many restrictions, our team in Vietnam cannot travel and reach projects as usual. However, from Germany, we can successfully implement and support ongoing projects through online meetings, although with some delays.

Because of the pandemic, we also receive fewer donations than usual. People are having difficulties with many other problems, sometimes their own destiny. We are still waiting for the limitations due to Covid to be lifted soon. Then we will be able to go to the most remote places in the North to carry out many new projects. We are targeting 2 districts in Ha Giang province that are in dire need of new dormitories. At the same time, smaller projects are taking place thanks to the Internet and enthusiastic supporters. For example, LOAN Foundation has collected old books (for children from grades 1 to 12, in project number 38) to create small libraries in the poorest areas of Ha Giang.

** Thank you for the chat!*

Isabelle Müller was born on 25/5/1964 in Tours (France) and is the youngest of 5 children.

Her mother is Vietnamese and her father is French. Since 1985, she has worked in Germany as an interpreter and translator. In 2009, the publisher Krüger (S. Fischer, Germany) published her autobiography "Daughter of the Phoenix - Hope is my path". One of the topics covered in the book is sexual abuse, which has created a wave in public opinion. In 2015, Isabelle Müller participated in the Kindle Storyteller Award and her book "LOAN- From the Life of a Phoenix" was one of the 5 finalists. In May 2016, Isabelle Müller founded the LOAN Stiftung Charitable Foundation, which specializes in implementing educational projects for ethnic minority children in the poorest mountainous areas of Northern Vietnam. All proceeds from the book copyrights are donated by the author to the LOAN Foundation (LOAN STIFTUNG).