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Abused, tortured and yet today at the top: Bestselling author Isabelle Müller

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Like a phoenix rising from the ashes: abuse victim Isabelle Müller did not let herself be defeated. Today she is shaking up the public with readings and discussions and is trying to raise awareness of the topic Raising awareness about child abuse: "Speak up, that takes away the power of the perpetrators."
(Photo: cli)

Landau. Deep emotion was palpable in the district hall's cafeteria as author Isabelle Müller read passages from her bestseller "Phoenix Daughter." Müller, exotically beautiful, with a warm voice and a barely noticeable French accent, had traveled to Landau from her hometown of Kapfenhardt near Pforzheim for a panel discussion at the invitation of Soroptimist Landau. Soroptimist is a global organization for professionally engaged women.

Isabelle Müller's book is an autobiography in which she writes about the severe emotional trauma of her childhood. Born in 1964 in Tours, France, the daughter of a Vietnamese mother and a French occupation soldier, she was exposed to the daily struggle for survival of the lower class: clothes from the garbage dump, a septic tank in front of the house, poverty, cold and illness, because there was no money for medical treatment and coal for heating. The mother, exposed to discrimination as an Asian, fought tirelessly and She persistently worked to ensure the financial survival of her five children and husband by opening a Vietnamese restaurant. Her father was brutal and violent. When little Isabelle was eight years old, her own father began sexually abusing her, beginning a nine-year, agonizing ordeal. Her father put pressure on her, instilled guilt complexes in her, and threatened her.

Isabelle remained silent and suffered, and those around her remained oblivious. Only at the age of 17, after two suicide attempts, did she manage to fight back and put an end to the abuse – after training in karate. Today, she is happily married and the mother of two daughters.

Also participating in the panel discussion were psychologists Annegret Fink and Mareike Ott from the Aradia Landau Women's Center, Chief Inspector Bernhard Odenwald from the Landau Police Department, and Judge Klaus Michael Böhm, who himself developed a project for treating offenders, the BIOS (Victim Protection Treatment Initiative). "Locking them up alone doesn't help – treating offenders is preventative victim protection," said Böhm. The event was moderated by Dagmar Zimmermann-Baum, senior staff member at the Landau Women's Shelter. District Administrator Theresia Riedmaier, a former Equal Opportunities Commissioner, also made an opening speech.

The **Pfalz-Express** spoke with the author about intimidation, her wounded soul and how she managed to live a normal life today.

Mrs. Müller – how did your father silence you and ensure that nothing came to light over all these years?

"Through threats and guilt trips. He said it would be my fault if it got out and he was put in jail. Because it would plunge our family into another financial crisis. My mother would also never forgive me and would be very angry with me, not loving me anymore."

How could it be that your mother didn't notice anything about it all these years?

"Firstly, because my father had developed a sophisticated system with bells on the doors: He knew exactly who came in and out and when, and thus how much time he had left

We had two buildings, the parents' house and the restaurant. The abuse always happened in my parents' house when my mother was in the other building.

I had also resolved to keep everything secret because I knew Mother would kill him. She had a completely different understanding of justice. In Vietnam, child molesters are publicly lynched and killed. If she had done that, she would have ended up in prison, and I would have ended up in a home, and living with that guilt would have been impossible for me. So I protected her from that."

Why couldn't you reveal yourself to anyone, a teacher, a friend's mother, for example?

"When you're the victim, revealing it takes too much energy. You're simply not capable of it. As an adult, hardly at all, and as a child, even less so. It's simply impossible to describe it. You tend to 'rewrite,' if at all. Besides, people didn't pay attention to the little signs I sent from time to time. And at that time, there were no helplines, no mentors, no phone numbers, no one. The subject was much more deeply taboo than it is today."

What were your feelings and sensations when your father first nurtured you in this way – what goes through the mind of a little girl whose parental trust is destroyed in this way?

"I was shocked and stiff with fear. From the beginning, I knew that what was happening was not right and not normal. But I was so afraid of his authority that I was paralyzed. It

It was uncomfortable. I felt like he was using me for something I couldn't understand and didn't want to do. For the first time, I also asked myself a lot of questions about why he was doing this and felt like I wasn't a good child because he was punishing me. I blamed myself, not him.

How did you survive this mentally?

"By building myself up, holding on to small, beautiful, positive things, and telling myself that I was lovable. I was prepared to accept this time consistently. I also set goals that encouraged me to continue living. I actually outsmarted myself, believing in something that wasn't yet true. Today I would say I visualized and many of my wishes have gradually come true."

How mentally stable are you today?

"So stable that I can give courage and hope to an entire nation."

What's your relationship with your father like now? How do you feel about him?

"After my book was published, he broke off contact himself. I don't have a problem with that, because what I feel toward him is compassion. I also wouldn't have a problem talking openly and in detail with him about it. I've moved on from these things now, which I consider a painful, yet helpful experience."

Are your parents still together?

"My mother died in 2003. She was with him until her death—and never found out. My father still lives in his parents' house and has a partner." (cli)

www.isabellemueller.de