

"Why are you doing this? You have everything!"

"Phoenix Daughter" Isabelle Müller in conversation

By Werner Huemer

GRALSWELT: You wrote an impressive book entitled "Phoenix Daughter" about your life as the fifth child of a Vietnamese mother and a French father. In it, you describe the poor conditions in which you grew up, the xenophobia your family faced in France, and also how your father sexually abused you for nine years as a child. Such topics are often taboo—although turning a blind eye to them actually encourages negative developments. Why did you write this book? Was it therapy for you, to bring closure to a phase of your life, or did you want to achieve something socially from the start?

MÜLLER: I had reached a phase in my life where I felt that I carried much within me that I had never shared before. I began writing my mother's biography, and my own past naturally blended into hers. When I had finished this book about my mother, the publisher suggested that, for marketing reasons, it would be quite clever to publish the planned follow-up book first—my own story. That's how it all came about by chance, although I don't believe in coincidences.

GRALSWELT: So you actually wanted to write your mother's biography?

MÜLLER: Exactly, the book that is to be published next. It is particularly exotic and exciting because it also tells the story

Vietnam, France, and Algeria, although it's always important to me to report on the fate of ordinary people, especially to show what ordinary women can endure and achieve in life. I wouldn't want to write about celebrities. So the publisher persuaded me to write my autobiography, and it wasn't until after its publication that I realized that some of the topics in it were shocking. For example, I addressed the poverty that prevailed in rural France and the discrimination and exclusion that was practiced against foreigners. Many people were shocked and, I would say, speechless when they heard it in this form. And some, maybe five percent, were truly outraged. They almost attacked me and said, "Why are you doing this? You have everything!"

Many affected people are trapped in their own experiences because society taboos the topic of abuse!

GRALSWELT: You probably didn't want to bring the issue of sexual abuse to the public

MÜLLER: Yes, they wondered why I addressed intimate topics so openly and freely, and told them what I felt and experienced.

They said, "You don't talk about that, and you have everything, you have children, your husband is a...

Well-known entrepreneur, you don't do that. But I replied: "No, I see it differently, because precisely because many people think like you, such topics will always remain in the shadows, and that shouldn't be allowed to happen. If you want to fight against these things, you should bring them into the light."

During my readings, I then noticed how great the need is to do something in this area. Many people initially sat with their arms crossed at these readings, as skeptical observers, but after just a few words and stories, they relaxed, and I was able to witness how I touched their hearts. Many affected people are trapped in their own experiences because society taboos the topic of abuse. But as long as you do that, these people will isolate themselves in their victim role and suffer. I know exactly what I'm talking about, I know

exactly where it hurts, I know exactly how a victim feels, and I also know how an offender ticks. But unlike many other people, I have found enough strength to get out of the downward spiral and to say: There is so much more in life, so much beauty and goodness, that it would be a shame to simply moan all my life and say: "It's all your fault, I'm

the victim, I can't find friends, I can't find a job, my life is ruined!"

Seen this way, I embody the way out to happiness, hope.

GRALS WELT: So, in your readings, you repeatedly had the feeling that, with sexual abuse within the family, you were addressing a topic that touches many people personally...

Language of animals. My grandfather could talk to elephants. If you said something like that in Europe, you would only hear that there was still a place for it in psychiatry. I wanted to explore these nuances that I had picked up, which were part of my culture and upbringing, more deeply. My mother was a free spirit; she was truly a special person to me, and I wanted to

Caravans – the parents with 14 children... no running water, no heating... they cooked outdoors, built fires from old car tires, and regularly stole laundry hanging outside. This poverty was avoided by the better-off French, the proud representatives of the Grande Nation. They knew exactly where such people lived, and when they received visits from relatives, for example, they avoided driving on roads where this poverty would have been obvious. It was a deliberate turning away.

GRALS WELT: So it wasn't a fate that only your family experienced...

MULLER: There were certainly many similar fates.

GRALSWELT: I found it impressive how you portray your father in the book—namely, with the distance a novelist maintains from his protagonists. You describe very realistically how he and your mother met, even evoking sympathy for his difficult personal situation, but then describe in detail how he increasingly developed into a tyrant and began to ruthlessly abuse you. However, you leave open what your relationship with him is like today. Is he still alive?

MULLER: Yes, he's still alive. My mother died ten years ago. After her death, he learned that I had been asked to write down my own life story, and he wanted me to leave these things out. But I told him I couldn't leave them out, because they were nine years of my life; these experiences helped make me the person I am today. Since the book was published, he has broken off contact with me. Before, when I brought everything up again, he first tried to deny it, saying, "Well, what have I done to you?" I was close to throwing him out. Then I asked him to at least go back to his

"At two of my readings, men got up and left - and I'm sure they were perpetrators."

MOLLER: Yes, I've repeatedly experienced audience members outing themselves. At two of my 148 readings, men got up and left—and I'm sure they were perpetrators. I have a feeling for these people. They came out of interest; but then they noticed that my gaze penetrated them, and they left the room.

Things like that happen!

GRALS WELT: How did you research the biography? Did you travel to the places where your mother lived? And what motivated you to write her life story?

MOLLER: Yes, I took these trips with my mother. It was like this: Even at the age of six, I knew that I wanted to be a writer. It may seem a bit strange, but for years my mother told me about her life, and I know this story by heart. Later, I started taking notes, writing down dates and facts, because biography was always being discussed. This was very important to me because I am half French, half Vietnamese, I have Asian blood, I have a special attitude towards nature, towards the universe. For example, I feel the

First, I wanted to know if all Vietnamese people were like my mother. I quickly realized that not everyone was like her. My mother was a very special person with a special attitude.

GRALSWELT: Your mother followed your father, who was an occupation soldier, to France. In your book, you describe how she was socially ostracized there because of her ancestry and how your family grew up in the most impoverished circumstances, with your father bringing home many things from the garbage dump. Was that a special experience from your perspective? Fate, or have many people experienced something similar?

MOLLER: There was a huge difference between the provinces and the big city. In the city, there were bums and beggars, people who really had nothing to eat, but it wasn't as bad as in the provinces. There was practically no culture here. You drank a glass of red wine in the evening, you sat in front of the TV, the wife did the laundry and the garden, and you had four, five, six, seven children. We had contact with other social classes; there were a lot of Portuguese, Spanish, and there were also Roma. They were marginalized just like we were. One family, for example, lived in a



Isabelle Müller during the interview for "GralsWelt TV" in summer 2013

As a man, he had to stand up for his actions; otherwise, he would have had no business being here anymore. Finally, he burst into tears and begged my forgiveness. And I said, "You don't need to do that, because I forgave you long ago." But he didn't understand that; I think he's still struggling with the whole thing. I forgave him, and I had to. When I reflected on my own life, I was like a spectator in a movie theater, and that kind of distance is very important, because it stops it from hurting. It's a distance that protects me from suffering any longer.

GRAIL'S WORLD: You address spirituality in many places in your book. You describe how you "slipped out" of your body one night. For example, you also describe your mother's view of the correct way to pray: "Prayer simply means calling with your heart, no matter where you are!" At another point, you quote a clergyman who said to you, "You poor sheep, desperately need spiritual nourishment," because you didn't want to attend church services regularly. In summary, what is your relationship to religion and spirituality?

MÜLLER: Free spirit! My mother always said, "You have been given a tongue to ask questions, and you have been given a spirit

to think about it. Form your own picture of the world. Try to sense what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. And try to respect everything that surrounds us, because everything is alive." When you grow up with this awareness, you deal with everything you have differently, including words, for example. That's why I also speak of the "power of summoning." This power of the word—it really exists. Everything we think, feel, and say has

escaped a kidnapping: "My luck in having escaped was thanks solely to my heavenly protectors. They looked after me. Elsewhere you state that a rather rough divine kick finally made me awaken from my lethargy." Looking back, with regard to the many hurdles in your life: Do you have the impression that what you experienced lives has a deeper meaning?

MÖLLER: There are always situations that make you think about

"Try to sense what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. And try to respect everything that surrounds us!"

A force, it's signals we send, it's energy we send. That's why the prayers my mother spoke of have an effect. If you pray from the depths of your heart, with a completely honest and naked attitude, without calculation, then it will be heard, and at some point it will find us, reach us. It depends on what you feel from the depths of your heart.

GRALSWELT: In your book you describe, for example, in connection with your desperate suicide attempts or when you were

stimulate the meaning of life. You ask yourself the question "Why me? Why now?" - and so on. In the moment, you don't understand the blow of fate, but in retrospect, you do. And I can claim that I have experienced enough to say: Yes, we are guided, we have a destiny. And if we don't know what our destiny is, destiny will find us someday. is coming to us.

GRALSWELT: How do you assess the leadership



Isabelle Müller's book "Phoenix Daughter" was recently published as an e-book.

What about your father's fate? He had an incurable cancer, recovered mysteriously, and later, as you suggest, apparently indulged in the fantasy of having a special calling, of being chosen. One gets the impression that "dark forces," so to speak, were at play here.

MÜLLER: There are certainly dark and light forces in life, of course. But man is the master of his own destiny. Everyone is given opportunities to change something. I believe that through this miraculous healing, my father was given the chance to become a new person. What he did with it, you learn in the book. But I

A better world. It's very important for our descendants to be able to pass on this thought: I don't live selfishly just for myself, but I live in a way that expresses a feeling of love and gratitude for what I have. For example, peace. We have peace in Germany! Is that self-evident? Ask yourself what is truly self-evident. Life is not self-evident, living healthily is not self-evident, and living in peace is not self-evident either. That's the point that so many people forget. That's why it's important to draw attention to it.

GRALS WELT: But the general attitude is increasingly destructive. *rerisch...*

MÜLLER: Yes!

GRALS WELT: How do you assess the development of our society as a whole? Is everything heading in the wrong direction, or is there hope?

MÖLLER: What keeps me alive is love. And what keeps me alive is the sincerity of heart. I still believe in the good in people. That's what actually encourages me to go to people and talk to them. Even if only 0.000001 percent are good, it's always worth it. The overall development is not at all to my liking. People are trapped in a spiral of fast-paced life, always wanting more insatiable instead of being grateful for what they have. This attitude destroys people without them realizing it. Or they realize it when it's too late. But there is always hope.

"Affluence lethargy? No, that term isn't bad enough. It's about affluence madness!"

I'm not the judge, I don't condemn—he has to get along with his life. In the end, I'm convinced that everyone will have to answer for everything anyway. Some will be able to sleep well, some won't. I really believe that you can work on yourself. You can improve your life. By trying to be a good person yourself, you simultaneously create a

GRALS WELT: Do you feel that there is a kind of prosperity lethargy in our society because people do not sufficiently appreciate what they have?

MÖLLER: Lethargy? No, that term isn't bad enough. It's about the madness of prosperity. It would be nice if it were just lethargic, then it would stop growing.

GRALS WELT: What is the most important message you want to convey? There are some good pointers in your book. For example, the sentence: "A future only presents itself when you take it into your own hands." Or: "From every stone they throw at our feet, we will build our way." Or your open shield-

How difficult, yet important, it can be to learn to accept help. What is your core concern?

MÜLLER: I would say: Even if life is risky, it's worth taking the risk. You can fall flat on your face, and there are always bad people, but life is worth living. And above all, you should try to fill it with love. I think if people had this feeling and didn't claim power, everything would be different. Just look at the world situation: Over 120 wars are fought every day around the world—it's been like this since I was a baby. Why? Because there's always someone who says, "I'm more powerful than you—and you do what I want!" That should stop. Trying to patronize others always shows a lack of love.

GRALSWELT: What can the individual do to change something and not just watch resignedly?

MÜLLER: First, you can try to be a role model, for example, by passing on a positive attitude to the next generation as a parent. And you can consciously choose your environment and work within it. As for me personally: I'm not afraid to speak in front of crowds; I want to go public with my issues and provide inspiration. But of course, the press plays a role in that. If the press doesn't stand by you, it can destroy you; if the press loves you, it makes you a hero.

GRALSWELT: What has changed in your life since the publication of your book "Phoenix Daughter"?

Looking back on the readings and reactions, do you have the impression that you did everything right? Or would you perhaps not say some things today, or would you say them differently?

MÜLLER: No, I would do it the same way. I might not let myself be so abused by a publisher when it comes to shortening and editing texts, but

but simply write what I think.

But in terms of content, I don't regret anything: I stand by it, and I feel good about it because I've seen the gratitude in people's eyes. I've received so many emails, so many letters that I can't answer them all, and what people write to me is wonderful. It gives me hope. An example: During a business event at the Hockenheimerling, about half a year after the book's publication, a man approaches me, very neatly dressed, a businessman, and speaks to me: "Are you Mrs. Müller?" - "Yes." - "I've read your book," he tells me. "Oh, really?" And as a joke, I add: "Your wife bought it, and you read it on the toilet!" - "No," he says seriously, "I'm interested in the subject matter. Could I speak with you?"

"This experience sustained me, and I thought: You didn't write this book for nothing. You give people hope!"

chen?" Uppsala, hmm, I think, faux pas! It can happen... Then we walked around the corner, and this man told me about his life: He and his wife had a two-year-old daughter who had been raped by her eleven-year-old cousin. It was a one-time incident, but bad enough. The child had several therapists and got through it all fairly well, certainly not subconsciously yet. The mother processed it better, but he, as a father, had a huge problem with it. And then he said to me: "Mrs. Müller, I read your book. For you, it was nine terrible years, and today I meet you by chance, and I see a beautiful, happy woman standing before me. And you know what? I know now that my daughter will make it!"

What

Did I want more? I made this man, this father, happy, just like - that! This experience sustained me, and I thought: You see, it's not in vain that you wrote this book. You're giving people hope in an area where they desperately need it!

GRALSWELT: That's nice! What are your further plans? The next book to be published will be your mother's biography, I assume.

MÜLLER: Yes, exactly, I hope this year! I'm looking for a publisher because I'm leaving my current publisher. We can't get along. ...

GRALSWELT: Despite its success? The second edition of the book was published in 2011.

MÜLLER: Let's put it this way: A second edition in hardcover is

Yes, wonderful, no question! The problem is that the marketing people don't pay attention. For them, success counts from 100,000 books sold. Those are clear words... It's not about the value of the book, it's about money. That's why I'm looking for another publisher. It's a very special book for me, and I'd like to become better known with it. It's about the fate of a child in a strange, exotic, and harsh world. The path this person took should certainly serve as an example today. The book contains a good message that I want to pass on, like my mother's path. carried me ...

GRALSWELT: Good luck with it and all the best!