Mindy Weisel Transcript

DR: Mindy, why don't we start a little bit with your family background. Tell us about the circumstances of your birth.

MW: Well, my mother and my father were both Eastern European Jews. My mother from Hungary; my father from Romania, Sighet. They both were taken to Auschwitz. My father was 19, my mother was 21. They survived the camps, and when they were liberated at Bergen-Belsen, they found each other and they got married. I was the first child born at Bergen-Belsen, January 7, 1947.

DR: You were an only child?

MW: I was an only child for six years, and then my brother was born. My mother gave birth to a stillborn after surviving Auschwitz, before. I think the bodies were so ravaged. David Grossman says that it's heroic that the survivors ever have children. I find it just physically miraculous that they could have children.

DR: How old were you when you became aware of your parents' background?

MW: That's a very interesting question because I'm currently reading journals. It turns out I started keeping journals when I was 13 years old, so I have 50 years of journals that I'm reading now for this memoir that I'm working on. It's not so much that I was aware of the Holocaust [but that] as I was slowly getting older I realized, Wait a minute. Some people have grandparents. Everybody I knew did not have grandparents and some people didn't have numbers on their arms, and things like that, so it was kind of an awareness [I had] as I was getting older. By 13 I know I knew because I record a conversation that I overheard, and I said, They were talking about the Holocaust.

DR: Did you feel comfortable asking your parents about it?

MW: I didn't even have a chance to because my father was so open about it. He would talk about it, and my mother—this is my emphasis in life—my mother did not want to talk about the tragedies of Auschwitz. She wanted to talk about the beauty that existed before the war, and her home, and her mother. She worked really hard in painting a real picture of my grandmother, and her sisters, and her family in Europe and how they lived. And she worked very hard to recreate that in America.

DR: Do you have photos of your parents' families?

MW: I have one picture of my grandmother. My father has a family picture. My father's family—the story is actually quite remarkable. There were eleven children and 9 survived the war. So the two youngest were killed, as were my grandparents. My mother's family, she was the only one of her sisters who survived, and a couple of brothers survived with her. Her parents were also killed.

DR: You said you started keeping journals when you were 13. Did you ever ask yourself, Why?

MW: Now I do. I was very very fortunate in my life. When I was 10 years old I moved to California, which was not an easy thing because I loved life in New York. I had aunts and uncles. There was public transportation. I was urban, raised as an urban kid. I could go to the library. When I was six already I was on the subways by myself. I was pretty independent. You go to LA in 1959-60 there's no public transportation. Your parents disappear, and it was a very lonely time. But I met a cousin who was 30 years old at the time, she's now 83, I'm 63. We have been friends for 50 years. And she was American. Her aunts and uncles had come over from the camps also. She always felt for me. She introduced me to Shelly, my husband, when I was 13. And she kept a journal, and for my 13th birthday, she gave me a journal. I felt like it became a place where I could write

without worrying about how what I was thinking and feeling was affecting anybody else around. When you're a holocaust survivor's child, there really isn't much room for your own emotional life, you're very busy trying to make life very perfect for these people who've been through so much.

DR: You've written and spoken about how you felt the need to be everything for them. Do you feel that that in some way has been transferred to your own children?

MW: I think, I worked very hard with my own three daughters to have them feel that their mother was working on her own happiness. I spent my entire life trying to make my mother happy and take away some of the sadness. And of course, that was a small impossibility. It was a big impossibility. I worked very hard at always trying to be... She wanted me to get married at 18 because they were Orthodox, and people didn't live together. I was already dating my husband for two years; we got married. Whatever [she wanted]; anything that fit into her vision. Except that she wanted me to be a dental hygienist because I had nice teeth. (laughter) I wanted to be an artist.

DR: You've spoken about your mother as being such an elegant and beautiful woman who appreciated the finer things in life, and the life that they had before the war was so beautiful. Did you grow up with an aesthetic sensibility?

MW: Yes, although my mother didn't really have it I don't think. I think I grew up somewhat delusional. You would think listening to my mother that I grew up like Diane von Furstenburg or something. The truth is they owned a home, and they had servants, and they owned a bakery in Budapest. They were somewhat educated, but my mother longed for her only daughter to feel as if she was royalty. You would really think so. I grew up in this home, where only now looking back I realize that so much of it was in her imagination and the life she wanted me to have. But she had an aesthetic—she always loved fresh flowers. You know my mother worked very very hard. My mother and father bought a bakery and my mother worked in the front for 12 hours a day; my father worked

in the back for 14 hours a day. I had no idea what leisure was until I met this American cousin who had a chaise! A chaise lounge! I'd never seen one in my life!

DR: You first picked up a paintbrush or a drawing book as a young teenager?

MW: I brought something I'd like to show you that I think truly changed my life. When I was 12 I found a very old battered suitcase that my parents had brought with them on the boat from Europe. In it were these weathered pages from a notebook. There were Yiddish songs that my father had written. I found one drawing. [holds up drawing] I'll describe this drawing, because it probably had the greatest influence of anything in my whole life and I say this without any drama. I just think it did. I was 12 years old, and I find this drawing in pencil that my father did in Bergen-Belsen in 1946 a year before I was born of the barn in the distance and the animals, and a sun coming up. And I ran to my father and I said, I didn't know you knew how to draw, and my father said, I didn't, and I said, Here's this drawing and my father said, Mindele, I don't know what came over me, I had to get the sun coming up.

Well here my father, 1946, he was 21, and the sun was coming up. And here's my father with the number, and I know already at that age that he's a Holocaust survivor. I think that's when I realized it's something viable, that you can make a mark that can say something. Seeing this drawing, my father never had made a drawing before and has never made a drawing since. And this lives with me ever since I'm twelve.

DR: Did you take lessons?

MW: Yes, I was in high school. You always see or hear stories—there's one teacher—and there was one teacher. My art teacher in Fairfax High School, Mrs. Rose, who said, You know, you should be doing this. And I started drawing, and then started taking classes. I ended up majoring in art in college, and [did] graduate work in painting.

DR: Did you ever wonder if you had not become an artist, how you would have expressed everything that was inside you?

MW: I might have killed myself, and I don't say it lightly at all. I think there is a trauma. There's no other word. An inherited trauma at being a Holocaust survivor's child, knowing that your parents had endured this, knowing the loss that they're living with; feeling like, oh my God, your birth is nothing short of a miracle. How could you make every minute meaningful and important, and so there's always a little bit of a sense of, Have I done enough today?

DR: How do you feel when you're working in your studio?

MW: That's a very good question, because it has changed over the years. I've been painting since 1978, so that's 32 years. I mean really seriously painting, where I finished my graduate work, and my professor said to me in 1978, Helaine Hertzberg said,

12: "If you make work from yourself you'll be fine." And I became obsessed with my father's number from Auschwitz and did 30 paintings. I did a hundred out of which 30 [were for the series]. For one year I had a studio without any heat on 8th and F Streets. I felt it was so appropriate for this series I that was working on. And I would call my father in California every day and say, Tell me a story. I start each painting by writing what I'm thinking and feeling. So if you ask me about the experience of painting, in 1978-79, it was wanting to tell their story.

Then when I finished that series, I did a series called, Lily in Blue, about my mother being given a cobalt blue dress when she came to America. At that stage [it was] her favorite color. That was an explosion of color. And then, it shifted back. I did a series called Black Gifts. I felt like I was born into such darkness, but my life was such a gift. When you look at the work of the Black Gift series, there really is such a sense of color trying to come out of the darkness. It was as if two bodies of work had clashed, and I thought I

was rid of the darkness, and I thought I could move on with the color, but it didn't let me. I did a very strong painting which I have in my own private collection, called Who's the Driver? I felt driven. And then every year it just became a reflection of what I was experiencing.

DR: When your parents saw your work, how did they respond?

MW: That's a great question, because my parents had not a clue what it meant to be an artist. They thought I was crazy going down to 8th and F to this building with bums in the building. But my mother really had a sense that I was serious about it, and I think they understood that I could do something creatively. It took a long time. I don't think it was by accident that the first serious work I did had my father's number. Because my father at one point said, Monkeys could paint. Somebody in L.A. at the frame shop--I was 15--I had done a drawing--and the framer called and said, Somebody wants to buy your drawing. I'll never forget this. The framer said, Would you be willing to sell it for 35 dollars? And I said to my father, Tate, somebody wants to buy a painting of mine for 35 dollars, and my father said, What? Are they foolish? So I didn't grow up exactly with anybody understanding about art.

But then when my father stood next to a 6 foot by 8 foot canvas at the Jewish Museum in New York with his number in it, it was pretty potent. I took myself very seriously from the beginning, and so it forced everyone around me [to], and I was very fortunate that I had a husband who really believed in my being a painter.

DR: How did your children and your husband respond to your work?

MW: They're the most supportive team that any artist in the world could have. It wasn't easy because there were years that I really felt like maybe I needed to leave my family. Maybe I needed to be alone, in New York and painting. It was hard. I would literally drop my three girls, five years apart, I would drop them at three different schools. I would run

to the studio and paint my heart out and very often—this is real—I would lie down on the cold wood floor just to close my eyes before I would have to carpool again. There was nothing romantic about my life as a painter. What was romantic was that I got to go exhibits, and I could say it was work. I got to go to New York and look at everything. I got to read everything. I got to see everything. Things that were my passion, for me they were my life as a painter. That was the romantic part. The actual living a life of a painter was not easy because I was mothering as seriously as I was painting.

DR: Your father is still living. Did your mother live to see your success?

MW: Yes, my mother did. My first successful show, I mean really the first show that was critically reviewed, to acclaim and sales and collectors and all of that, whatever you call success, it's a funny word for me, and I don't think I'll ever feel successful enough, but it was something that she saw, that I was being respected.

DR: You say it's a funny word.

MW: Success is very strange. You know, what's success? The Museum of Modern Art still doesn't have a painting of mine, so am I successful? It depends. You know, I mean, there's never enough. [laughter]

DR: Let me rephrase the question: Have you met your goals as an artist?

MW: No, never. I don't think until you die do you meet your goals. My mother came to my first show at the Jewish Museum in New York, and she came to every exhibition after. And a lot of them were named after her. The exhibition she missed which was probably the greatest exhibition I ever did was after she died. My mother was dying, and her doctor who had an aunt who was a survivor was very kind to my mother and said, Lily, let's dance. And I told my mother I would do an exhibition called Lily, Let's Dance, and I really didn't know how. How would I honor my mother? I'd already done all these paintings with her color. I'm the only daughter, and I'd gone home to deal with her

clothing. I found a factory where I could take her dresses, and have them ground down, and made into handmade paper. I used that handmade paper, made out of my mother's dresses, and did a series called, Lily, Let's Dance. What's wonderful about the "let's dance" is my mother's initials are L D so every border had L D L D Lily Deutsch Let's Dance, Lily Deutsch Let's Dance and the series was called, Lily, Let's Dance. One piece ended up in the Israel Museum. So that was nice.

DR: If you had to categorize yourself would you say that you are a Jewish artist, an American artist, Holocaust artist, post-Holocaust artist?

MW: I've been asked that a lot. I think being an artist is being an artist. Being an artist means that you bring to your work what is important to you. Because if your work is not about what's deep inside you it really doesn't have any potency. It doesn't have any meaning. What's very important to me is my Jewishness. I've never seen it though as a separate thing. It's not like I was raised any other way, [that] it was a choice, and I accepted my Jewishness, that I embraced it. There was none of that. I was raised in an Orthodox home. As I've become older, I've become less and less observant. (My children would say I've become less superstitious.) I never saw my Jewishness as a separateness.

As far as the Holocaust is concerned, I'm not interested as an artist in expressing the horrors. I am very interested in the survival of beauty. And I try to express that with the color and the light coming through. After thirty years of working, I started working with glass, which is the ultimate light coming through.

DR: Could you talk about your transition from working in paint and graphics to working in glass?

MW: It was purely fortuitous. For seven months I'd been walking around feeling like I needed something different from painting. I walked into a glass studio in downtown Silver

Spring and I saw this woman teaching somebody how to do fused glass. I was there the next day. I didn't have a clue what I was getting into. I'll never forget this: There was a woman who was learning there and she said, Listen, I think you should really make a chart, that this is opaque, and this is transparent, and this is darker and deeper, and I looked at her like, Are you kidding? I'm an abstract painter, I can no sooner follow a chart than follow a recipe any more! I still don't know what I'm doing, but the work is glorious because I'm totally free and very open to it.

DR: It's very beautiful.

MW: Thank you. My husband says, How can you say your work is beautiful? And I'll say because once I've done it, it's somebody else's. I'm not talking about my work anymore. I'll be the first to say, Oh, I don't like it. Or God, it's wonderful. In the same wonder that somebody else might say, How did that get done? I'm a vehicle, I'm just a vehicle. I don't feel very conscious when I'm working.

DR: On the spectrum of darkness and light and beauty, and things that are not beautiful, where do you put yourself in terms of your outlook toward life?

MW: I'm very optimistic. I'm a great believer in you pick yourself up, you figure it out, you move forward. I have worked very very hard at finding a self, and living a life. I had a nervous breakdown when I was 27. It took moving 3000 miles away from my parents to have space where I could even have a nervous breakdown because when I was around them I had to be perfect and make them happy. I'd watched their face all the time and I had very little feeling of how I felt.

When I was six years old, I was already taking the subways by myself from my school in Borough Park to my parents' bakery in Bensonhurst. I'd get to the bakery. I was an anxious wreck on that train. Would the doors close too quickly? Would I miss my stop? Would I leave my homework? Once I left my eyeglasses. I'd get to my parents' business

and nobody said, the way I would say to my children now, So how was your day, darling? How are you? They'd say, Say hi to Rose, the salesgirl, and Be nice, You can wait, Mindele understands. There was always being treated like an adult. So there was no childhood, which Helen Epstein has written about at great length in Children of the Holocaust.

DR: Yet, it sounds like they loved you very much.

MW: I think that was the saving factor. I had damaged parents. There is no one who survived the camps who isn't damaged. Did they love me? Probably fiercely. Beyond. If I got hurt, my mother would hit me. She wouldn't embrace me; she would really hit me. Because how could I let myself be hurt? I remember being 11 years old, I was being sent from Los Angeles back to New York to visit my cousins and aunts and uncles, and it was a very very bumpy flight. I kept praying, Oh please God, don't let the plane go down because my parents won't survive. Not that I'm going to die. There was not an ounce of fear for myself, it was just like Please, don't make them go through anything more. So there was that early awareness of what they had gone through.

DR: Can we talk about your Jewish identity? I know growing up in an Orthodox home, it was something "everyday". What level of observance did you bring to your home when you were raising your children?

MW: It changed also over the course of 45 years. When I got married, I married somebody who was Modern Orthodox and we created our own home together. I became more and more liberal. My husband is still pretty much the same dedicated, Modern Orthodox [person] and we always kept Shabbat. We always kept holidays, we always kept Kosher. We would only eat fish out, things like that. When I was a child, we would tear the toilet paper before Shabbat so as not to tear, not to do any activity at all on Shabbat.

DR: Your kids don't do that?

MW: My kids don't do it.

DR: As the child of survivors, did you ever have the sense that being Jewish was something you'd rather not have to deal with?

MW: Never. Not only that, I'm so proud. It was very shocking to me to learn that most Israelis who are my age who are Holocaust survivors' children don't acknowledge it because when their parents came to Israel after the camps, they didn't want their children to feel that they were like lambs taken to the slaughter. They were going to be Israelis, and Zionist, and tough. We went to New York, and everybody I knew was a Holocaust survivor's child and I was very proud, and I'm still very proud. My father's my hero. He never complains.

DR: So it was a legacy you accepted.

MW: I was proud of it. I never knew differently. The only thing I'm sorry about is I have to be so anxious. I grew up with such a sense of the knock on the door, or of impending doom. It's taken years, literally 30 years of therapy, of really devoted work and believing in living in this moment, that that's all we have.

DR: What's the secret? I've learned how to live in the moment. You can't change anything that you can't control. There's a great quote in the Talmud—I love this quote—"At the end of one's life, one is held responsible for the permissible pleasures that one has not allowed oneself." My mother and father with everything they went through all they wanted was I should be happy. Now that can be a real burden because there's no room for feeling low or feeling angry or feeling upset. I mean who can be happy all the time? You don't want to recognize your emotional life. You have to want to be happy. Ever since I was a child, I really wanted to be happy. By nature I'm very optimistic. I have friends who call me a force for the good. To me that's the highest compliment, just the

highest.

DR: Do you remember your first visit to Israel?

MW: Yes, I got married very young, I was 18 and my husband was 19 and I knew that I had a lot of uncles who had gone to Israel after the war, so Israel was something I grew up with hearing about in my home. But I had never gone with my parents. It wasn't like I sent my kids on youth groups, but when my husband and I got married we actually thought we were going to go live in Israel for a year. The Vietnam War broke out and he had to go to law school, and we never did have our year in Israel. But we started going every year in 1968. His whole family is very Zionistic and they actually moved to Israel about 28 years ago. Everyone. We're the only ones here. We used to schlep all three kids, every year, put them in summer programs. It's not by accident that one of our daughters ended up in Israel.

DR: It sounds like you're not upset about it?

MW: It took one year. For one whole year after she made aliya, I would wake up at three o'clock in the morning and I could not wrap my brain around the fact that my University of Chicago kid was in Israel. How did that happen so fast? She'd gone to Israel her junior year, but we never really thought she'd end up in Israel. It took a year, and now I'm thrilled, because hopefully my husband and I will be spending more and more time [there], which has always been a dream of ours. At least we'll have one daughter there. And that feels good.

DR: So you feel connected to Israel?

MW: Yes, and I'm proud of her, she has more courage.

DR: I know you've travelled a lot with your art. Talk a little bit about your visit to Germany.

MW: I have travelled a lot. In Cairo I spoke to a whole group of Egyptian women who cried when I talked about the Holocaust. I've talked to a lot of cultures. The most unusual trip was this trip in 2009 to Germany. I had an exhibition in Berlin, and the United States State Department sent me almost like a cultural ambassador. They put together an itinerary of me speaking to Germans in Hamburg, Berlin, a burnt-out bunker in Kiel, at Dachau, to groups of students and [they] ended up taking me to Bergen-Belsen where I was born.

What's unusual about this trip is that a lot of the people I spoke with were Nazis' descendents—children, grandchildren—and I spoke very strongly about how we can't move forward in hate. I've developed some really genuinely close friendships, where we email, and visit each other, and it's just part of my life.

DR: What's the lesson you take away from this?

MW: I always, even as a kid, I remember, I really want to know who somebody is. When I was a visiting artist at Haifa University in 1986, I had a class full that felt like truly what Israel was. I had an Arab student, I had a British soldier, in his 70's, who was in the British Army, I had an Israeli crippled soldier who painted with his mouth, I had a Shalom Achshav Peace Now woman. I think that experience, teaching a world in a class, [you learn that] people are people. I try to connect on a very human level to people.

It's not an accident that my daughter is such a humanitarian. At her wedding in Israel under her chuppah there was a Palestinian, a Jordanian, an American, an Israeli.

DR: Do you see yourself as a player in the story of the Jews?

MW: In a way our world is bigger than ever and in a way our world is smaller than ever. I could be at Bergen-Belsen talking to my father in California, and I can be in Israel, talking to my husband in Washington and I can be connected in a dialogue with artists and writers and people all over the country with the world of technology that we live in. To see

myself as a player assumes a certain significance. All I can hope is that my very strong belief in the survival of beauty and the necessity for beauty [will endure]. What does beauty mean? It means when my children growing up asked me if I believed in God, I said I don't know. It's very hard to believe in a God, after your whole family was killed in Auschwitz. But, look at the flowers. So flowers could make me believe in God.

My message has always been that I don't know--I'm not a philosopher, I'm not a scientist, I'm not a historian. I have in me the gift of being able to make art. The word, talent, by the way, is Greek, and it means responsibility. So when I teach and students ask me, Am I talented? I really will say, Do you accept the responsibility of being alone in a room, and feeling what you have to feel, and being honest with your materials? I would hope [that] as much as I can speak about the importance of moving on, proud to be Jewish, believing in staying open to other cultures and other dialogues, with people who were your enemies, I think that's the only way we can move forward.

[END OF INTERVIEW]