March of the living
with the Israel Guide Dog Center

By Jane Klapper

WHEN Orna told me that the Israel Guide Dog Center was organizing a group to go to the March of the Living and suggested that maybe I would join them, my first thought was, “How can I do all that walking, together with so much emotion.” She told me that our president, Norman, and his wife Phyllis, were also coming from the States: we are in the same age group and have known each other for many years. and she added, “If they can do it, so can you.”

Only on our return did Phyllis tell me that Orna had used the same words to her about me joining, and we had a laugh. Orna certainly knows how to motivate us! I was also drawn by the idea of going with a group from the Center which has played a big part in my life for the last 23 years. My two daughters encouraged me, knowing that I would be in good hands.

It was very well organized, including a visit to Yad Vashem beforehand and a chance for everybody to become acquainted.

Our guide, Amir, was very knowledgeable, and our group leader, Zafrir, was an excellent organizer.

We were given warm clothing with the IGDCB logo which we wore with pride. The weather forecast was for snow, (that was putting it mildly), and we were advised to take “gatkes”.

We had to be at Ben Gurion at 4am for a 7am flight because we had six guide dog owners with their dogs in our group, and this required special arrangements.

Everything went smoothly and as we took our seats the dogs settled down at the feet of their owners as if it was an everyday occurrence – absolutely amazing.

As predicted, we arrived in Warsaw in snow and ice, with a bitter wind blowing. The first thing was to feed and water the dogs who had been many hours without, and then to take them to do “busy” – the name we use when training them. It works very well with humans too so we had “busy” stops throughout the trip.

Everything has to be explained in detail for the blind and they are given the chance to feel with their hands. Also their senses of smell and sound are greatly enhanced, something of which people not familiar with the blind are not aware.

Our first visit was to the Warsaw Jewish Cemetery. The snow was falling and it was freezing so Orna took me back to the bus, which had disappeared!

Eventually we were reunited with the bus and from there we drove to Zlota Street to see a small remnant of the Ghetto wall. There was also a contingent of Israeli police visiting, in black uniforms with the police emblem on their sleeves.

After eating a packed lunch in the Jewish Community Center we visited the Nozyk Synagogue and then went on to the Route of Heroism.

The next day we visited Tykocin, a typical Jewish hamlet with a beautifully preserved synagogue and museum. Round the walls were stands draped with talitot; making them the main occupation of the Jewish community. One of our group sang ‘El Melech Rachamim’ in a beautiful cantorial voice – very moving and made even more so as he was reading the words in Braille.

From there we drove to the nearby Lopuchowa Forest where we walked in half a meter of snow in some places. This was one of the most emotional experiences of the trip.

There are three fenced-off areas where 2,500 Jews from Tykocin were shot and thrown into three pits. The silence was made more poignant by the snow, broken only by the sound of jumps of it falling from the branches.

I could feel the 2,500 souls all around us as we listened to Amir in muted tones and he played two recordings of Israeli singers – the atmosphere was indescribable.

I lit a candle beside the stone with a memorial plaque and two wreaths laid by the Israeli police and Zahal.

Our next stop was Treblinka. After a walk through the forest, passing replicas of the railway lines and many other groups coming and going, the path led to a vast open space covered by various-sized rocks, each with the name of a Jewish community.

The Zahal group was holding a ceremony at which they sang the Hatikvah and the last post was sounded. We stood out in the snow, our six dogs covered in their orange raincoats (what a blessing they were for them) brought from the States by Norman.

The next day was a visit to Majdanek. As we walked around it was hard to comprehend what had happened there, even as we looked at the gas chambers, gas canisters and crematorium – all that we’ve seen on film over the years.

I stood outside and looked up – on the other side of the fence 75 meters away a housewife was beating her carpet over her balcony; it was incongruous. I wondered if she knew what had gone on there 70 years before.

As we walked away I looked back at the long square chimney of the crematorium and passed the Mausoleum and Memorial; a gigantic mound of ashes covered by a concrete dome on which was written “Let our fate be a warning to you”.

The chimney will always be etched in my memory, so much so that as we continued to drive to Krakow, when I suddenly saw a little building the size of a large dog kennel with such a chimney in someone’s garden it made my heart miss a beat. Orna also saw it and felt the
same way; we thought it must be a smoke house.

That evening in Krakow we enjoyed a festive Shabbat dinner starting with Kiddush, which cemented our feeling of being one family even more. Afterwards we sat and shared our feelings.

Shabbat was a real “rest day”. A few of us took ourselves off in a taxi, leaving the youngsters and the dogs to tour Krakow by foot.

The dogs were also given the chance for a free run in a park which they greatly deserved.

First we went to a beautiful synagogue, then to the Ghetto with its large square dotted with chairs made of metal: a memorial to all the Jewish furniture thrown from the windows by the Nazis, then on to the Schindler factory.

My late husband was born in Krakow, so it was very special for me to be there.

In the evening we had a wonderful ‘heimishe’ meal in the Ghetto, complete with Klezmer music and Israeli wine.

Sunday morning was a visit to Auschwitz, not easy to see in reality, all rather unreal.

We met a young American couple with their baby who were Mormons; they were interested to learn about the Holocaust and said they wanted to pass it on to their children. It was a most memorable encounter.

On then to Birkenau, where Noach placed a wreath in the name of the Center.

Monday began with a visit to a military cemetery where there are two Jewish graves – a contrast to all we’d seen till then, with grass, flowers and a few snowdrops, all beautifully cared for.

From there we returned to Auschwitz to assemble for the March. What an uplifting feeling – so many groups from all over the world, including Polish and German Gentiles who came to identify with us.

Our group with the dogs was a great attraction. We eventually moved off for the three-kilometer walk, proudly holding our placard and flag high in the air, and the sun shone as the seemingly endless line of blue and white marched to Birkenau, remembering the six million.

That night we flew back home together with hundreds of others all exhausted by the trip, which had nevertheless been worth every minute of it.

Even more so when I spoke to my eight-year old grandson who said “Savta Jane, I’m proud of you”.

- Jane Klapper, originally from the U.K., is a State Registered Nurse, midwife and health visitor.
SOME ART shouts out: “I’m famous!” and we recognize it with a jolt of satisfaction – that’s a Mondrian, or a Monet. Some paintings exclaim: “I’m expensive; possess me and feel rich” – collectors amass Picassos galore. And then there is the work that enters your eyes and snuggles in your heart and whispers, “I’m talking to YOU!” These rare creations call out to the soul; we need them nearby – hanging on bedroom walls – so they can comfort us and lift our mood.

That’s Mindy Weisel’s magic – her pictures and glasswork and metal pieces smile straight at us and cut to the essence of our emotions. Yes!, we nod, that’s JUST how we feel; and we wish we could express ourselves exactly like that.

Weisel’s wonderful swirling colors and beautiful bright canvases do not spring from a life of unmitigated sunshine. Born in Bergen-Belsen in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, the artist is achingly aware of human suffering and pain.

“My parents, who were cousins, both survived Auschwitz,” she explains. “They reunited straight after the Holocaust in Bergen-Belsen when it was turned into a Displaced Persons Center, and they married in 1946. I was one of the first babies born in Bergen-Belsen.”

Weisel and her parents (who are related to Eli Wiesel), relocated to the United States when Mindy was four, but the witnessing of grief and her earliest years inform her life and art.

The Holocaust brutally decimated her family: on her father’s side, 9 of 11 siblings survived; 7 of her mother’s 11 siblings were murdered.

According to Weisel, after sadness like that the bar for living is placed very high.

“A child of Holocaust survivors has to walk in a constant state of gratitude for just being alive. You can never complain of being hungry or tired or sad … what is the hunger or fatigue or sadness of an American kid compared to what her parents had to endure? We had food in the fridge, and a bed – what could possibly be wrong?” This feeling of needing to compensate for your parents’ past, and the helplessness of never being able to do enough, can be an enormous strain on a child, not easily surmountable.

So when Weisel’s art teacher told her to “paint what you know”, the pain came spilling out.

In an age before Holocaust museums in the States, and pre-Spielberg’s “Schindler’s List”, Weisel did a ground-breaking series of paintings featuring her father’s concentration camp number: A3146.

Often a thin line of red infuses her art – a reference to the rare blood type that saved her mother’s life. “My mother had
no number on her arm because she was not chosen to live,” Mindy recalls. “But Mengele was interested in testing her blood each day. So every day they came to take a vial, and gave her a tiny bit of soup to keep her alive until the following blood test. For a year she thought that every day was her last.”

The cobalt blue that shimmers recurrently throughout the work references the first dress that Mindy’s mom received from her surviving aunts when she reached America; from that day she only wore blue.

Mindy, who married at 18 and is the mother of three daughters, has had a glittering career.

Assistant Professor of Fine Arts at Corcoran College of Art in Washington DC and a visiting artist at Haifa University in the 80s, her artworks hang in art museums throughout the world, including Washington’s Holocaust Museum and Yad Vashem, and grace the cover of one of Primo Levy’s books. And, despite the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, her creations are testimony to the survival of beauty – a mantra that she learnt from her dad.

“My father says that if you live a life, things happen,” says Weisel, “and it’s what we do with our lives that counts.”

In this spirit she has channeled her art into collaborating with IsraAID all over the globe, wherever there are people in need of support.

“In Japan, for example, I met with survivors of the Tsunami and helped them work through their trauma through art,” she explains.

At the same time Weisel herself absorbed some of the Japanese style and culture which culminated in a series of etchings of cherry blossoms and collages to add to her eclectic collection.

In a life filled with other lives with beauty, Weisel, (who is very beautiful herself), has experienced many, many ‘things that happen’.

Take, for example, the strange interlude that occurred in Washington DC during an interview, when the journalist suddenly admitted that her own father had been a Nazi during World War Two. Or the time when the artist was invited to Berlin for the opening of a show, and given a surprise trip to Bergen-Belsen, where she was shown her mother’s original identification papers and her own birth certificate written in her mother’s distinctive handwriting.

The US State Department sponsored Weisel’s trip to Germany and appointed her a cultural ambassador, giving rise to one of the most surreal conversations of her life.

“Someone from the U.S. Embassy reviewed my itinerary and called me up to ask if I’d like to visit Dachau,” she recalls. “She said ‘Dachau is closed on Mondays, but the mayor would like to open it for you.’ I thought that was the most ironic, strange sentence I could ever imagine.”

Dachau is closed on Mondays, but the mayor would like to open it for you. It’s a book waiting to be written.

And now, after over 60 years in the States, Mindy and Sheldon, her lawyer husband of almost 50 years, have come home to Israel where she continues to create her magic in a high-ceilinged studio in a century-old house flooded with Jerusalem light.

One daughter already lives here with her Israeli husband, and they have one child and another on the way. “It’s an ancient dream come true to be here at last,” proclaims Weisel.

Not yet a year in the country, Weisel is now working on a new dream. “Come and MaP with me,” is an exciting concept of helping others to find their creative voices through painting and writing – a workshop that Mindy will host together with an author in her Jerusalem studio.

“Everyone has an authentic and valuable story to tell,” says Mindy, “and we aim to give them the tools to do so.”

Watch this space for new reports of magic coming to us, from Jerusalem.

Pamela Peled teaches literature at Beit Berl and also teaches at the Herzliya Interdisciplinary Center.

See her work at Yad Vashem

WEISEL’S art is on show in Israel at Yad Vashem, the Israel Museum and at the American Ambassador’s residence in Herzliya Pituach. Or Google her at www.mindyweisel.com But be warned: you will want a piece of it to call your own.