

A Jewish girl and an unlikely Uruguayan soldier: memories that defy death

By Andrés Ricciardulli - 15 May, 2016 El Observador

***The girl who watched the trains depart*, by Ruperto Long, is a novel based on real events that moves us with its sensitivity and brings to light the story of a Belgian girl who survived the Holocaust and who has lived for decades in Uruguay.**

Sometimes, the most incredible story is in plain sight, but nobody sees it. It takes a different perspective, a certain sensitivity to unfold it in all its dimensions. When this happens, when the right man finds something that seems destined only for him, good things can happen, like the "*The girl who watched the trains depart*", a book in which Ruperto Long recreates the childhood of Charlotte S. de Grünberg, currently Director General of ORT University Uruguay and a survivor of the Second World War and the Holocaust.

The other main protagonist of the novel is the Uruguayan soldier Domingo López Delgado, who in 1941 decided to embark to Europe to combat the Nazis and ended up in the French Foreign Legion, fighting against Erwin Rommel, the famous Desert Fox and commander of the feared and unbeatable Afrika Korps.

Long's merit is to blend the two stories, in a parallel but simultaneous manner, and use them to construct a very interesting book, which includes several other voices that witness the savagery of a dark time, which generated history's most heinous events but also some of the most poignant expressions of solidarity.

Long is himself aware of this dichotomy: "Nazism revealed the best and the worst of human beings, in all the countries it touched. There were supremely reprehensible criminal actions (the unrelenting persecution and extermination of children, for example) and there were also acts of extreme solidarity: whoever hid victims of persecution, would pay with their lives. Everyone knew that. However, many people still did it. Because they felt they had to do so", explained the author in dialogue with El Observador.

This solidarity is clearly apparent in the detailed story of the endless flight of Charlotte's family across half of Europe, to escape Nazism. The many houses they lived in clandestinely, the false documents that allowed them to survive, the food that appeared one way or another or the precise information needed to escape at the last moment, are some examples.

Although it is based on real events, the book has a portion of fiction that is indispensable to complete Charlotte's memoirs, who at the time, aged 8, was the youngest of a family composed of her father Léon, mother Blima and elder brother Raymond.

Long believes that the writer's task is to fill the gaps in the story, but he must also respect the "hard facts", both historical ones and those lived in the flesh by the characters. Therefore, there are documented references to events as of the Night of Broken Glass, the invasion of Georgia by the Soviet Union, the German conquest of Holland and Belgium or the occupation of France.

Long is equally loyal when it comes to describing everything that Charlotte recalls precisely: that she had to sleep and live for months in a closet, which had two bunks camouflaged inside or that during Germans raids she hid among the waste bins in an alley, surrounded by rats, to avoid being captured. Her only toys were the coloured pamphlets dropped everywhere by the Nazis, which explained, precisely, why the Jews had to be eliminated.

The best aspect of the book is that Long is not bombastic or exaggerated when recounting the facts, but maintains a serene tone during the whole story, even in the hardest moments. He reveals the reasons for this: "I didn't want to fall into the beaten path of sensationalism or sentimentality. It would not have been respectful to the protagonists".

Yesterday's girl is an 82-year-old woman today with a prominent career in the educational field, who despite the time elapsed, will never forget the horrors she lived in her childhood: "I have managed to overcome the nightmares, but not forget. It would be impossible. The memories are indelible", she says convinced.

She also says that when reading the book she felt a mixture of fascination and sadness that is hard to explain. And, in addition to this personal odyssey, there always is the matter of those who did not survive. "Nazism left behind many orphans and many parents without children. How to face such violent and definitive situations? The reaction of the survivors was not easy, because they did not understand how fate had spared their lives, and that generated a feeling of guilt."

From Rocha to the Sahara

While Charlotte and her family were hiding in France trying to survive another day, in a rural bar in the Department of Rocha the young 24-year-old soldier Domingo López Delgado decided to join the allied forces to defend freedom.

The story told by Long of that Uruguayan's trek is one of the luminous points of the novel, which acquires an epic dimension in these chapters.

As a baptism of fire, López took part in the battle of Bir Hakeim, the bloody prologue to El Alamein, decisive in allowing the allies to regain control of North Africa. The fear of death, the endless thirst of the desert, his limited military instruction and the feeling of having gone directly to hell, are some of the trials that López overcame to survive the war and to be personally congratulated by Charles de Gaulle in 1964, in Montevideo.

To get to the desert the Uruguayan soldier first had to travel half-way around the world. First Trinidad, in the Caribbean, then on to Canada, from where convoys departed towards Belfast and London. From there to Cape Town and Durban, then crossing the Suez canal on a barge and travelling by train to Bir Hakeim, which marked the destination of all French Foreign Legion soldiers.

In addition to López, other soldiers of various nationalities lend their voices to this brief but thrilling war story. The same happens throughout the narrative which, thanks to a unique structure where every couple of pages the viewpoint and protagonist changes, manages to instil realism into this broad canvas of an era.

The secondary characters are very varied and as Long explains, they are essential to the narrative: "The choice of polyphony in terms of structure leads to many players speaking with their own voice, commenting situations they have witnessed, recalling intimate details, and supporting or contradicting the versions of the others. And that lends proximity, closeness, to the story," says Long.

This is not the only original aspect of the book that features 45 vintage photographs, many of which speak for themselves. They are the result of the author's determination, who spent three years compiling information and who personally negotiated the possibility of including them in the book. Many of them are striking, not because they show macabre scenes, but because they reveal the darker recesses of the Nazi machine. Its tendency to attempt to justify itself, the relentless pursuit of recruits, the reasoned, calculated madness.

Ruperto Long reproduces a couple of phrases from books written by survivors, illustrating the insanity of the Nazi regime, the harsh reality, for example, of the Treblinka concentration camp: "Life expectancy (as it was called by Reich technicians) was one hour and forty-five minutes". Or in the words of a senior

camp official: "1942 was the best year at our Treblinka camp: we achieved the figure of 713,555. Our efficiency was universally acknowledged".

For all this and more, for Ruperto Long, Charlotte S. de Grünberg symbolises the triumph of life over death itself. Long highlights "the determination of a girl facing adverse circumstances of colossal magnitude. Who in a short period went from childhood to adulthood. Who did what was necessary to survive".

Charlotte settled in Uruguay at the age of 20- where married and formed a family - but returned several times to Belgium to visit her birthplace, until one day she was amazed to discover that it was no longer there because a motorway had been built in its place. She still remembers watching the trains depart. Strange trains, which had arms, hands, and sometimes twisted faces emerging from its sides. No one knew for sure where they were going, but due to "the atmosphere surrounding us in those years, the mixture of fear, sadness and fatigue, we could not avoid sensing that they inevitably had a macabre destination".

A woman who is convinced that "hate destroys he who holds it inside his heart". And that, like Ruperto Long - who has written this book with great sensitivity - deeply believes in a phrase by writer André Gide: "The smallest moment of life is stronger than death and cancels it."