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CHARLOTTE DE GRUNBERG, THE GIRL WHO WATCHED THE TRAINS DEPART

"I AM ESSENTIALLY SOMEONE WHO NEEDS TO CREATE"

Charlotte de Grünberg is the girl in the title of Ruperto Long's book, "*The girl who watched the trains depart*", one of the four protagonists of the story that takes readers back to the years of War World II. Her odyssey - like that of many others - did not end with the war, but continued in the following decades - as for others - outside of Europe. Charlotte came to Uruguay and built another life here.

When Ruperto Long suggested you tell your story, you didn't want to, did you?

No I didn't. I opened up a little more to the idea 10 years ago, when Ilan Halimi, a young French Jew, who sold mobile phones in Paris store was tricked by a girl, kidnapped and tortured for eight days until he died. I saw parallels with this and the role played by the canary in the mine (warning of danger), and thought that something serious would occur with anti-Semitism in France. And that's what happened. Since then I realised that what I believed had been reduced to a minimum, just a fantasy. This feeling made me more likely to accept, if someone insisted enough.

What you think of the current situation of Judaism in the world?

Hidden behind anti-Zionism lies all the rubbish going through the heads of many people and individually there is very little that can be done. Collectively, it isn't easy either. After 1945, one could think that something sufficiently dramatic had passed for us to expect a better world. But this has not happened, despite all the human rights laws. Just look at all the boats sinking with refugees on board. In the book I recall how some "people-smugglers" treated us. I would have never thought that this expression would survive World War II, and is now part of the daily vocabulary.

What was life like after the war?

The book stops in 1945. In Belgium my father returned to his profession, in the textile sector, and soon recovered. Anyway, it was very difficult to return to Belgium. Not from the economic point of view, but somehow we were reproached for being alive. And that is very hard, and it is something that I have

not personally assimilated, even today. In 1949 or 1950, my father decided to come to Uruguay to visit his four brothers and his parents who had left Poland to come here in the 1920s. They were not seeking to improve economically, but rather they disliked certain things in Poland such as the "Numerus clausus" (a law that limited the amount of Jews in universities), for example. So they came to Uruguay and very soon opened a textile factory. My father, on the other hand, went to Belgium, near Liège, and continued with his profession. When he came to visit Uruguay, my father stayed for a month and returned to Belgium. But in the end his family convinced him to return with all of us. We came in 1952, when we met our grandparents, uncles and cousins who we had never seen.

When we arrived, fate led me to meet José (Grünberg, a paediatrician and nephrologist), my husband, almost immediately. A cousin took me to a dance organised by the Jewish students' organisation, Kadima, and there I met him. A few months later my parents wanted to return to Belgium, but when they saw that I had a strong relationship, they did not want to get in the way. So my father sold everything we had in Belgium and we stayed.

Here I started training to teach French and English. I wanted financial freedom from my parents and applied for a job in a company that imported cars from East Germany and products from the People's Republic of China. In the meantime I qualified as a teacher and went to Paris to specialise in the audio-visual teaching of second languages. They were very productive years, because I am essentially someone who needs to produce. And I don't mean money, but ideas, changes, entrepreneurship *avant la date*.

Then, because of my expertise in audio-visual methods, I got a call from a small organisation I did not know, called ORT. They had a laboratory for teaching second languages but it wasn't working well, and they asked me to analyse the situation. I studied the case and prepared a report which was finally sent to France for evaluation.

In the meantime I went into the Clínicas Hospital in Montevideo, in the Speech Department with doctors Carlos Mendilaharsu and Sélíka Acevedo de Mendilaharsu, two neurologists. I had a very particular ear for detecting the slightest differences between a word spoken by one person or by another, and they thought this could help them diagnose problems in children's speech. I worked with them voluntarily for three years, until the results of the report that had gone to France finally came back. One day a man called me to say he had liked my work and that's how my contact with ORT began. At the same time as my work at the Clínicas hospital, I was setting up the Language Department at ORT. They had no students so I got together 100 in a year to teach them a

second language. From that moment I had to devote all my time to transforming this into the project which I already had in mind.

Thirty-eight years have passed since then. I am now Director General of ORT Uruguay [*no longer involved with academic content, she continues to work on projects, especially in the Judaic Studies Department*]. Furthermore, I have sat on the main organisation committees in the world ORT network and in the 90's I was on the general coordination committee for Latin America - which I only gave up because I could not handle so many trips throughout the region. I travelled around the US lecturing; I was also offered the post of Director General for Asia, especially to deal with women's issues, but I didn't want it. I had my family [she has a son, Jorge Grünberg, currently Rector the ORT], and didn't want that for my life. I travelled a lot, but spending a month in India, for example, was not something that I wanted for my life. For the same reason I refused the post of Director General of World ORT. Because I had found my reason for being right here.

When I arrived there were about 150 students and I took this as an open book to start with. I got to work, rolled up my sleeves and spent years working, until the university project was complete.

And what happened to your family in the meantime?

My brother adapted quickly, had children and devoted himself to the real estate business. My mother died young, a few years after arriving. She never recovered from losing part of her family. Her heart couldn't take it anymore and she died of sadness. Dad lived another 15 years, he had a different character. My mother came from a very religious family, while my father's side were more secular. Somehow she must have had the permanent feeling that she was letting her parents down. But at the same time she was a woman with great resilience. My brother and I owe a lot to our parents for our survival.

After so much silence. What has been the impact of you appearance in the book, which has already sold out the first edition?

I have a folder full of things that people have sent me, they call me by phone, stop me on staircases. It's amazing. I wasn't expecting it.