

INTERVIEW WITH CHARLOTTE GRÜNBERG (by Ana Jerozolimski)

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Intact Memories

"Luck and chance surely played a major part, but the determination to live is a fundamental ingredient," says Charlotte Grünberg, recalling her experience of the Shoah. Interview by Ana Jerozolimski.

To most people she has been the respected general director for many years of Universidad ORT Uruguay. Not many outside her family and closest friends knew the personal history of Charlotte Grünberg, which is revealed to a large extent in the new book by Ruperto Long. "*The girl who watched the trains depart*".

How do you ask someone who lived through that horror as a child, about the meaning of it all, about the struggle for life and the fear of dying? We even felt somewhat ridiculous trying to write well-worded questions for Charlotte to share and explain what she had lived.

The most important thing is that, among the memories of her loved ones who never returned, of the dead she never met and who were also hers, and all of ours, is that life triumphed.

This Thursday marks Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, so this story, important in itself, is of special relevance.

This interview was originally conducted for *Seminario Hebreo* which publishes it on Thursday.

Charlotte, I am writing this questionnaire minutes after having read, for the third time I think, the poignant and emotional article by Dr. Leonardo Guzmán published a few days ago in El País entitled "Our girl, our train". Of the several key messages transmitted, what stands out for me is the strong commitment to life that he highlights at the end. In reference to Charlotte, he writes: "She is a remarkable example of fortitude and maximum expression of resilience with the ability to lift her head high despite such fatal and inexorable events... She is proof that despite everything we can say yes to life". And I can imagine that the decision to carry on, despite all the hardships and dangers,

arrived later. And I wonder if you remember how it felt as an eight-year-old, hidden in a wardrobe, without toys and afraid, perhaps knowing you couldn't decide anything.

It's interesting that you say that possibly "the decision to carry on, despite all the hardships and dangers, arrived later." In fact this is not necessarily what can be learned from reading the book. The opposite occurred, we were never more firmly determined to carry on than at that very moment, which lasted almost four years and where the only certainty was that we had to fight against what was inevitable at that time and in that context: death. We had to fight against that with all the energy required to try and survive.

We tend to highlight, speaking of the Shoah, the six million dead, the terrible suffering and cruelty in the extermination camps and in daily life. There are inconceivable aspects which perhaps are mentioned less, but which are undoubtedly another form of torture. How do the parents of an 8-year-old girl explain that if she doesn't stay in the wardrobe without making noise she could be killed? It is not even normal to propound such a situation...

It's true, we mostly tend to refer to the unthinkable, 6 million dead! But over the years the classification "hidden children" has appeared within the literature devoted to the story of the Shoah, and this story contains variants, such as the children hidden mainly in specific places or institutions, such as convents or similar sites, or in the case of my personal experience, permanent displacement as stable element with all the tribulations this involves. Hence the 1000 days and nights I referred to in my reflections during the presentation of the book. Fifteen years later, when at the beginning of the 1960s, I saw the film *À bout de souffle* by Jean-Luc Godard, I clearly relived the experienced the feeling of being out of breath during our whole trek across France. Godard's character was a wandering criminal, while we had to run merely because we were guilty of existing. That feeling has never completely abandoned me. How can parents explain this to their 8-year-old daughter? Exile is rife with silence and mutism. This was understood by parents and children alike, at least in our case we did,

your metabolism runs at minimum, because what was on the other side of the barrier of silence was much worse to assimilate.

Is it too simplistic to ask what is the worst memory of those years, what makes your heart flinch most?

When from my second floor room, high in the mountains of St Pierre de Chartreuse, I heard the boots of the Nazi army taking away the only friend I had made for a few weeks, a girl of my age who lived on the first floor and was captured together with her parents a few days before the war ended, never to return again. How could I forget?

Do you have a specific memory that symbolises what you went through as a girl?

The only thing I can remember that could belong to a child's point of view is when we finally stayed for a few weeks in place with a window that could sometimes be opened at night, I used to look at the surrounding houses their lights on, imagining what went on inside and what these families might be like.

Ruperto Long, who recorded your story in his new book, entitled it "*The girl who watched the trains depart*". Trains have always been a symbol of the horror of the Shoah. From your hiding place, did you understand what to associate them with or was that impossible?

Unfortunately it became very possible to imagine what those trains meant the day I saw a young man jumping from the train at full speed...

The trains transported Jews to the extermination camps. Including your own family. Who did you lose in the Shoah?

Those trains took my maternal grandparents, the Talmud teacher in the village of Konskie, 3 uncles and 2 cousins. None of them returned. My youngest uncle, Alter, who was studying Engineering in Belgium,

returned to Poland in 1939 to help his parents and was shot dead in the Ghetto of Konese for opposing the measures imposed by the Nazis.

Do you remember when you understood the scale of what had happened, of the catastrophic murder of six million Jews?

It's almost impossible, at any age, to comprehend the scale of a criminal industry organised to kill millions, even now. I think that all Jews continue to live with the weight of that figure.

Of course, after your physical salvation, there comes a time when, in addition to luck and chance, perhaps a lot depends on the decisions that one takes. Did you ever doubt about how to live after the Shoah, what needs to be done?

Luck and chance surely played a major part, but the determination to live is a fundamental ingredient. André Gide has a phrase in his book *Les Nourritures Terrestres* that reflects my feeling: "Le plus petit instant de la vie est plus fort que la mort, et la nie" (*The smallest moment of life is stronger than death and cancels it*). And that is what I did. I was also fortunate to attend the birth of the State of Israel, which gave me an even greater boost of life. Regarding your question on how to live after the Shoah, I can only answer that it still accompanies me from when I get up and until I go to bed. The photos of our deceased have accompanied us all our lives and throughout our adventures, not in an album, but in picture frames and prominently displayed in all the homes we lived in after the war.

How do you summarise why you finally built your life in Uruguay? When did you arrive?

My father had his parents and all his siblings in Uruguay. They came at the beginning of the 1920s when my father decided to leave Poland for Belgium. I suppose he wanted to see his family again. He visited them in 1949 and then a couple of years later decided to return with the whole family so we could meet them. I was 18 years old and met José. My parents did not want to be an obstacle in the relationship and

decided to stay to keep the family together. This is one of the forms of love Ruperto Long refers to in his interviews about the book.

Did your experience during those years, the fear of dying and losing your loved ones, also form part of your life after the war?

Yes, of course. This feeling never abandons you along with a certain sense of guilt that, as you can see in the book, some of the survivors made us feel, especially those who emerged as orphans.

Charlotte, you formed your family in Uruguay, with your husband, my beloved paediatrician Dr. José Grünberg and you devoted your life to teaching, as the highly respected Director General of Universidad ORT and where your son Jorge is the Rector, respected as an educational thinker in addition to his formal duties. You are a wife, mother and grandmother. I don't think an exaggerating if I say that life really won, didn't it?

Yes, of course. The best answer is the photo of the three generations of the family, Carolina, Florencia, Victoria, Charlotte, Matías, Jorge and José, after the launch of the book *"The girl who watched the trains depart"* on 7 April at the Teatro Solís.

That's right. Continuity and life, all together. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Just my grateful thanks.