

Lives Beyond War (El País – Apr. 10, 2016 – Luis Prats)

Ruperto Long's novel is an account of the non-fictional memories of real people in times of war and Nazi persecution.

Major History - for example, that of World War II- is often mistaken to be a chronicle of battles, leaders' actions, famous speeches, landings, bombing and liberations. However, history is formed by a mosaic of millions of anonymous personal memories, of ordinary men, women and even children, who fought their battles or suffered them, who died or lived to tell the tale. The survivors rebuilt their lives and went on to build new memories.

Ruperto Long took some of those small pieces to discover how many of them fit into a greater picture. When there were no records he filled in the gaps with his imagination. The result is a non-fiction novel, which follows the paths of two people who achieved renown in Uruguay only to discover that one day their fates had crossed during the war.

"The girl who watched the trains depart" (Aguilar, 376 pages, \$490) is the Long's latest work, an engineer and politician with long-standing passion and skill in his third vocation as an author. In his book, 34 real wartime characters lend their fictitious voices to form this mosaic. From Nazi criminals to those who suffered their insanity and from heroes to ordinary citizens. The two characters who take centre-stage are Charlotte, the girl in the title and on the cover, and Domingo López Delgado, a Uruguayan soldier who enlisted in the Foreign Legion to fight for France. Other characters include Alter, the girl's uncle, who met quite a different fate. There is also a special place for Dimitri Amilakvari, a war hero revered in France despite the fact that little is known of his life.

A girl.

Charlotte was born in Liège (Belgium) and was just eight years old at the outbreak of WWII and the Nazi occupation of her country. She was forced to adopt a false identity and hide with her family. To survive, they travelled via different points in France, to a village in the mountains called Saint-Pierre-de-Chartreuse, although they suffered Gestapo raids and her father was captured and held in a concentration camp. The liberation of Saint-Pierre was the beginning of a new life. Then, she immigrated to Uruguay where she lives today, holding a senior academic position.

"I never imagined that I would end up being a character in a novel," says Charlotte de Grünberg, today at the age of 82. "It is not that I was reluctant to talk about my life, but I thought that in this world, today, yesterday, and always, it is hard to transfer individual cases to history. History consists of greater processes. But Long convinced me it was worth it, because my life was going to be part of the story of an era," she adds.

The book covers the years 1940-1945, a short period but that, by her own admission, marked the rest of her life. "They stole four years of my life, although I must say I have learned many things from that experience", she says. In that sense, she believes that although she was 11 years old when the war ended, in many ways she thought like a 40-year-old.

She remembers that in 1939 her family gave shelter to an Austrian refugee, rescued by a Jewish organization. "She was a teenager", she recalls, "but in many ways she had already aged. It was through her that we knew what to expect in the event of a Nazi occupation. And the strangest thing is that she came to us carrying a suitcase with dresses more suited for going dancing. Imagine the incongruity between what went on in her head and the contents of the suitcase. But people are the age they are, and she was still a teenager". The girl was transferred again by the same organisation and Charlotte only knew that she had reached another country.

"It is painful to remember all that, because I don't see many changes in the world. It is true that many human rights institutions have been created, along with organisations that try to limit the catastrophe of wars, but I am not optimistic," says Charlotte.

Research.

The various characters tell their part of the story in the first person, but their words ring true thanks to the thorough research carried out by Long. He studied that period carefully, with particular focus on the atmosphere of occupied France. In Europe he visited most of the places featured in the book and went to the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem (Yad Vashem), the Resistance Museum in Grenoble and the Foreign Legion Museum in Marseilles. He also obtained rare vintage photographs, including some of the book's protagonists. The novel involved three years of work.

"I wanted to reflect the facts with great objectivity. I didn't want a rhetorical or simplistic viewpoint, but instead to present the episodes seen through the eyes of the common man", explains Long.

The author met Charlotte by chance, at a reception. There he learnt of some events from her childhood that suggested there was a story to tell. However, it took months of effort to persuade her to recount her experiences. "I then discovered a person with wonderful sensitivity, intelligence, and bravery," he says.

Long knew about the vicissitudes of López Delgado, and had even met him in person. When he found links between his adventures and Charlotte's, he knew that he had the whole story.

A photo.

"When I started to write the first drafts of the book, some guiding phrases came to mind", says Long. "I even incorporated some as epigraphs at the beginning, which accompanied me throughout the writing process. One of the phrases, which is well-known (and with many versions), quotes George Santayana: *Those who cannot recall the past are condemned to repeat it*".

"At the time the Paris attacks had not happened, nor had many others around the world, including the latest in Brussels. ISIS was an almost unknown and far away name for all of us. And much less could we imagine that a Uruguayan man in Paysandu would be killed because of his Jewish creed" he adds.

"With this I do not mean that we are going to return to the times of Nazism and the Holocaust", he points out. "But it is impossible to ignore that humanity seems intent on keeping its more sinister side alive: war, xenophobia, racism...Perhaps the book also help us to reflect on the destiny faced by our society".

Charlotte adds, "It was hard for Ruperto to convince me to tell him everything, but by remembering that Austrian girl, I gained an insight into the spirit of an era and how that time violently interrupted the lives of all those involved."

Until now, she had told her family very little about those terrible childhood years. She quotes French novelist Patrick Modiano, arguing that "*it is difficult to bring to light what has been buried for so long*".

However, the photo of her uncle Alter, who she hardly knew, always accompanied her family in their journey to escape the Nazis and is given

pride of place in her Montevideo home. "Alter was my physical memory of those years. I clung to that, along with the memory of my maternal grandparents, who died in Auschwitz. Those three people, though not didn't know them closely because I was too young, accompanied my adult life and shaped my personal experiences".

From the Legion to Councillor in Rocha.

The other main character in Ruperto Long's book is Domingo López Delgado. In Rocha, where he was born, he was a celebrity: decorated with five medals, one bestowed by Charles de Gaulle himself, for his heroic actions during WWII. Domingo enlisted as volunteer in the Free French forces and after his training was assigned to the Foreign Legion, the infamously harsh backdrop for many novels and films. He was initially posted in Bir Hakeim, a remote spot in Libya, lost in the vastness of the Sahara desert which became a decisive and strategic enclave in the desert campaign and in the course of WWII. There, the Uruguayan soldier fought under the command of Dimitri Amilakvari; a legend in France.

Later, the Foreign Legion was instrumental in the liberation of the South of France. It was then that his destiny crossed that of Charlotte.

He returned in 1945 to Uruguay and his home department of Rocha. He wrote a book about his adventure, "*Diary of a volunteer from Rocha on the battlefield*". He then devoted himself to politics and became Chairman of Rocha Regional Council. He died in 2012, at the age of 94. "I knew about his existence during the dictatorship. He was an institution in Rocha and was not afraid of anything. He ran a newspaper, *El Civismo*, which was shut down several times by the military regime. In 2011 I spoke at length with him and he told me many things about his life," explains Long.