

One-on-one with Ruperto Long, author of "*The girl who watched the trains depart*"

by Janet Rudman – JAI – May 13, 2016

I knew that the central character was Charlotte de Grunberg, and that the book concerned her journey across Europe during the Second World War. My surprise and excitement began with the foreword and concluded with the list of characters. I've known Charlotte's brother, Raymond, for twenty-five years, and his French accent always caught my attention.

In three nights, I devoured all 371 pages, almost without breathing. I was impressed by the story's respect for the smallest historical details. The characters interacted even without crossing, their stories intermingling while narrating what life was like in Belgium, France or Poland in those years. The author's research and the photos that accompany the texts reveal the non-fictional background.

This is the work of Uruguayan writer through-and-through, who has built a puzzle with the stories of Charlotte, Domingo Delgado López, a Georgian soldier who fought with the Free French Forces, Charlotte's uncle and other characters whose stories were spun as the story progressed.

I contacted Ruperto Long via Twitter for this article while I imagined what I would ask him.

He kindly welcomed me in his office at the Court of Auditors, and I went along with my copy of the book in tow, just like any reader who wants an autograph of their chosen author.

I started the interview with the most obvious question:

Janet Rudman (J.R.) - How did you get the idea of writing this story about Charlotte de Grunberg?

Ruperto Long (R.L.)- I met Charlotte at work-related meetings. At the time I was director of the LATU¹ and she was Director General of ORT, as she is today. We had many opportunities to meet. Once, she invited me to her house for a work meeting. I arrived first and she told me the story of her life: at the age of eight she left Belgium with her family and hid from the Nazis during the war. When I suggested the idea of writing a book about her, at first she refused, but, because I am persevering, in the end I managed to convince her. I remember the exact moment when she called me to tell me she had accepted, I was at a

¹ LATU: Technological Laboratory of Uruguay; created in 1965 as a joint effort of the government and the private sector. Its goals include promoting the sustainable development of the country and its international insertion through innovation.

meeting here in the Court. So, we got together once a month, in sessions of an hour and a half, where she recalled the memories of those days.

J.R.- This research can be felt in the story.

R.L.- I went to museums and to institutions, to "impregnate myself " as Charlotte would say in reference to my trips to the places where the story occurs. During this search, I went to the Yad Vashem, along with the Shoah Museum in Paris and Grenoble Museum. Her memories are those of a girl aged 8 to 11. A few years earlier, I had met Domingo López Delgado. Alongside another seventy Uruguayans, he went to fight for France. He was quite a character in Rocha. He fought at the battle of El Alamein in the desert, famous for being the scene of Rommel's first setback. I'd like to add that, when Charlotte appeared, I had the material on Domingo stored and that allowed me to assemble the second character. Furthermore, I drew the character of Alter, Charlotte's uncle. Her memories of him are when he left Liège to return to his native Poland. I checked this with data that I found at Yad Vashem. He had been executed in the Konskie ghetto. A panorama emerged with information from real life, like the shoemaker character who actually existed and hid many Jews. Despite the horrors of the war, I tried to convey the stories of light that I glimpsed amid those dark times in Europe. There were people who knew how to take a step forward and help, this strength and courage prevailed. Many risked everything by hiding Jews, fully aware of the consequences. Cafés were the only safe places for communication, that's where the Resistance operated best. There are historical coincidences, such as the arrival of Klaus Barbie in Lyon and later on, the death of forty school children at hands of the Germans. What strikes me is how in a report Klaus Barbie described this massacre as milestone in his career. All this is contrasted with the struggle of Charlotte and her family who never gave up. The character of the forger, who recalls that when he warned people that the Nazis would come and get them, they did not believe him. There was a resistance to seeing the reality happening before their eyes.

J.R.- Charlotte's story is a story of resilience, of how to overcome adversities. A young girl, used to living comfortably, spends part of the war hidden in a closet and comes out at night to watch the trains leave. This can teach us a lot today. Did she actually watch the trains depart?

R.L.- Yes, she even enjoyed watching them, until she found out what was going on. The people were crammed into trains headed for the extermination camps. She saw people screaming and crying behind the bars. I constructed the characters with the information at hand, for example, Dimitri's famous cape. He played a key role in the battle against Rommel. I found information on Dimitri's daughter. He died in the desert battle. He was thirty-six. Two years later a tribute was held in London, where his wife later died in an accident. Their

children were placed under the guardianship of the French state. I managed to find out that his daughter Tamar got married in France and now lives in the Czech Republic. Through connections with the Uruguayan Ambassador I managed to contact her by mail. We met in Paris. She has received many tributes in honour of her father in his native Georgia. There was a street named after Stalin and today called Dimitri.

J.R.- I think the book should be read several times. There are many details that mix history and fiction, intensely capturing the reader's interest. What would you say to readers to invite them to read the book?

R.L.- The differentiating element here is the characters are human beings, just like any of us, except Dimitri, who was somewhat magical with his cape in the middle of the desert. We would be represented by Charlotte, Alter and Domingo, along with many others. I evoke the steely determination to overcome adversity.

J.R.- In my mind, this book aspires to universal values.

R.L.- The book highlights how during the worst scenarios in the history of mankind, there were people who faced hatred and cruelty and overcame it. The issue of the boundary between fact and fiction is worth highlighting, since the narration is based on historical facts. I cannot invent the moment when Klaus Barbie arrived in Lyon. This is a known fact, this is why I wrote it. For events where not much is known, like the story of certain characters, for example Alter (Charlotte's uncle), I created the story with the few facts I had.

J.R.- We grew up with the motto "Never again", it is interesting that there are different ways of telling the story. To continue recalling the atrocities that existed, but on this occasion they are transmitted through these characters who give us hope. This book represents another contribution to "Never again".