

ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF OLGA CONNOR'S ARTICLE IN THE MIAMI HERALD

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ROBERT LANDORI, A HUNGARIAN PROBING THE ENTRAILS OF A REVOLUTIONARY CUBA

What made Robert Landori, a Hungaro-Canadian, decide to write a thriller that delves deeply into one of the most intriguing cases of the Cuban revolutionary government's judicial history?

"I wrote *Havana Harvest*, my fifth book, after Dania Flores – who had been Raul Castro's assistant in the Sierra Maestra – gave me a book entitled 'Case Number 1 of 1989: The Trial and Execution of Arnaldo Ochoa and his Collaborators'. Having read the book I decided to retell the story in a fictional form because I felt that these men should never have been executed". In 1989 the Ochoa case exploded into international headlines as one of the most improbable trials because the accused, charged with treason, was a legendary Cuban military officer, decorated by Fidel Castro himself as 'Hero of the Cuban Republic': Arnaldo Ochoa Sanchez.

But how did Landori meet Dania Flores? Since 1959 the author regularly visited Cuba on business. "I left Price Waterhouse where I had been working since graduation and started my own firm in 1958" he says. "My first client was a book dealer named Davies who sent me to Cuba to negotiate book exchange deals for him."

That's how he started to build relationships with people in power, and continued to do so by doing deals in various commodities until he was arrested for espionage in 1968 while he was having lunch with Flores who was working for him in Havana. By then his office had 60 employees. "As Canadians we could deal with Cuba freely," the author explains. "I took advantage of this situation and sold used aircraft tires for sugarcane carts, tires for the Havana police and even for Fidel Castro's fleet of Oldsmobiles that he and his commanders used. I also sold fertilizers, spare parts and medicines," he continues.

One day a telecommunications engineer, Jose Otero, approached him for spare parts to be used in building Cuban computers. He asked him how many units were needed so as to be able to quote a price. "After my arrest (in 1968) I discovered that this question was considered to be an act of espionage," says Landori. "I denied all espionage charges (they were never formalized), and many years later – in the Spring of 2010 – the engineer's son, who now lives in Montreal, showed me a transcript of his father's trial in which they accused him of 'having put in danger the integrity and stability of the nation' by giving me secret economic information,

that is to say how many radios and computers the Cubans were planning to build. Mr. Otero was condemned to nine years of prison. Me they kept in solitary for 66 days in Naranjito Prison.”

The action in the novel *Havana Harvest* takes place in the capital with which Landori is familiar because he had lived there from time to time. But he also alters whatever is necessary to place his protagonists where the story requires them to be. The plot is about the rescue of the fictitious heroes of the novel, Brigadier General Patricio Casas Rojo, commander of Cuban forces in Africa, and Oscar de la Fuente y Bravo, Deputy Minister of the Interior. The two may be considered as the personifications of Ochoa and Tony de la Guardia, the latter executed in real life – like Ochoa – for the same crime. Robert Lonsdale, a fictitious character, is the Deputy Director of the Antidrug and Antiterrorism Unit of the CIA in the novel.

The story starts with Captain Francisco Fernandez Ochoa, a subordinate of General Casas, arriving in Miami with a million dollars in his suitcase. But money does not always mean safety. And not all relatives and friends are reliable. From the very start the plot has more traps than can be found in a warehouse full of rats and is full of surprises, one of the biggest of which is Raul Castro Ruz’s appearance as a fictitious character, but sporting his own name. Dangerous scenes follow each-other in rapid succession which means that the author manages the suspense well and that the action is fast. As the story unfolds one gets a glimpse of how far the CIA has become penetrated by Cuban intelligence agents, of how the CIA is running drug operations in Cuba, of how the Cayman Islands are used by one and all to launder money, of how ivory is trafficked in Africa and Budapest by a mysterious international dealer, Abraham Schwartz. Traffickers and officials die under mysterious circumstances. And the feints in all these goings-on are manipulated as if they were a gigantic spatial chess-game interspersed with bits of eroticism to soften the surroundings. The plot flits from Montreal to Budapest with the velocity of a gust of wind and from Washington to Havana at the speed of lightning.

Lonsdale is a humane James Bond with real feelings who agonizes over the mistakes he has made during his lifetime. He is an intelligent risk-taker who, like all good agents, is familiar with tricks and weapons. He has already appeared in the author’s previous books. “Up to now all my books have had Robert Lonsdale as the principal protagonist and hero,” Landori explains “When I’m asked after whom I modeled him I respond that it was on Bernard Samson, (Len Deighton’s hero), with a bit of John Le Carré’s Smiley and Tom Clancy’s Ryan, as played by Harrison Ford in the movies, mixed into him. My next book will be a sequel to *Fatal Greed*, again featuring Lonsdale, which was the name of the only Soviet spy ever to escape from a British jail, Gordon Lonsdale, and because my name is Robert.” Since 1980 Landori has written: *Galindo’s Turn*, *Tacho’s Money*, *Byzantine Minds* and *Fatal Greed*, the latter being the only book published before *Havana Harvest*.

Landori was born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1934. His father was descended from Sicilians, his mother from Austrians.

“We lived in a comfortably fashionable area in Budapest near Heros’ Square, says Landori.

The German Army marched into Hungary in March 1944. With it came the Gestapo, and the persecution of the Jews and leftists began in earnest. Then came the Red (Soviet) Army at the end of the same year.

“By early January 1945 I was literally starving. By late February I was so desperately hungry that I gave my winter overcoat away for a loaf of bread.”

In 1946, his parents, seeing that the Communists were going to take over, left for Switzerland. “They inscribed me in a French-only school that made my life sheer hell because for six months I understood nothing of what was going on around me,” Landori recounts.

From there they moved to Paris where they lived on the Left Bank (corner Boulevard Raspail and Boulevard Montparnasse) and would have breakfast every day at either la Coupole or le Dome, two very fashionable eating places much favoured by the French intellectual *avant garde*, where they would meet some outstanding luminaries (like Cocteau, Camus, Braque, Piaf, Van Dongen). His mother, Eva Landori, was a painter.

“By now I was reading books in French, English and German: Goethe and Schiller, Skakespeare, Corneille, Racine and Moliere and lighter stuff in English by Nevil Shute, Fenimore Cooper, Mark Twain,” explains the author. “Towards the end of my stay in England (where I had been sent to Boarding School in late 1949) I read lots and lots of Hemmingway. I also played soccer, but my *forte* was running the mile and the five mile steeplechase (cross-country running).”

“In 1951 my parents emigrated to Canada and in 1952 they made me follow them. I enrolled at McGill University in an Honours Economics and Accountancy programme.”

After obtaining his Bachelor’ Degree Landori went to work for Price Waterhouse and obtained his Chartered Accountancy Diploma (equivalent to CPA) in 1958, the year he got married.

He was 24 and a voracious reader. He mentions the following books, among others: *The Cruel Sea*, by Nicholas Monsarrat, *In Praise of Older Women*, by Stephen Vizinczey, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, by Mordechai Richler, and books by Follett, Higgins, Deighton, Forsythe and Le Carré.

He was also on the verge of embarking on his Cuban adventure the following – and fateful – year: 1959.