

Joan Mari Torrealdai - Interview

"After being in hell, jail seemed heaven to me"

Joan Mari Torrealdai, president of the Administration Council of Egunkaria and editor of Jakin magazine, was released on March 15th, after five days in the Guardia Civil premises and another three weeks in Soto del Real prison, in Madrid. He answered these questions from his cell, two days before he was released from prison. Original in Basque in Egunero

What do you remember about your arrest?

Remember? The ordeal I underwent is so fresh in my mind that I don't have to try to remember anything. All the pain and suffering is in my heart. This is what happened.

In the early hours of February 20th, at about 1:30, they (The Civil Guard) broke into my house like Attila would have, breaking down the door and making a racket. The four of us (Torrealdai's family) woke up in fear. By the time we reached the top of the stairs, half a dozen civil guards were in the house, pointing their guns at us. The others came after. I don't know how many they were. I told them it had to be a mistake, but they denied it, and showed me the judge's papers (saying he was arrested for alleged links with ETA).

My wife and my 2 children aged 12 and 10 were put in the sitting room. I meanwhile had to stay with the Civil Guards while they searched the house. For four hours they looked at hundreds of my personal documents, dossiers, investigative work and so forth; they made a mess of everything and took hundreds of the papers. They didn't respect anything, not even my wife's private documents. After they finished, I could barely say goodbye to my wife and children. Since that moment, the fear in my children's eyes has been haunting me.

You have to be evil to ask a father, handcuffed and taken like a criminal in the night, whether I was worried about the image my children would have of me because I said goodbye in such a cold way. That was what a plain clothed policeman told me.

How did the searching of Jakin premises go?

They didn't need to break the door there, because I handed them the key. There were about 20 guards there, up and down the offices and corridors. I was the only one that couldn't move. What havoc they created in Jakin! They disconnected and emptied some of the computers and took the others away. They messed with everything and took thousands of documents and all kinds of papers. No respect at all. I complained, but it was in vain.

We were in Jakin for about seven hours. I was standing there, as if in a film, observing them ruining my life and professional career, my future. They took away papers connected to Egunkaria. I asked them to take only those, but they just took everything.

From Jakin, we moved to Euskalgintza Elkarlanean Fundazioa's offices (main Basque publisher, just across the corridor in the same building), and at that time they broke down the door. They were tired by then, and didn't bother so much with the search, although they took as much as they could. I told them a hundred of times that I had nothing to do with Euskalgintza Elkarlanean, but it was in vain. They answered that the judge's order allowed them to do it.

You were sent to Madrid then?

After the searches, I was handcuffed, put me in a car, forced to bend my head and driven to Madrid. Me, a criminal worse than Bin Laden! On the way I asked them three times to stop so that I could urinate, but they refused and forced me to keep talking. I told them twice that I wanted to be quiet, but

it was of not use.

When I, a father that doesn't let his children carry toy guns, asked them why they were arresting me –and why I was been treated in such a way–, the most perverted of them answered me, coldly and in a sour way: "Some arms kill more than guns". "Are you talking about me?", I asked and then remained quiet.

You were incommunicado for the next five days. Do you know who else had been arrested?

I didn't know my own whereabouts. It was hell, I was sure of it. In prison, they told me that I had been in the Civil Guard Headquarters (in Madrid). I was sent to that hole in the evening. God, when created life, distinguished day and night, but the civil guards tried to make us all the same: everything was dark in that dark cell. I was not aware of anybody else. I noticed that there were more people in the cells around, and they put more people in them, but I didn't know who they were. Suddenly, I heard Txema Auzmendi's voice (secretary of the Administration Council of Egunkaria, released on March 14th). Next day or on the third day, I heard Inaki Uria's and Martxelo Otamendi's voices while being interrogated. Even if I was five days in such a small space, I was not able to hear more voices. Fear was predominant, a killing silence.

How were you treated?

I was first interrogated the same day I was sent there. They covered my head and I was trembling with fear. I was standing up, with my hands against the wall and both legs open. They started questioning me. And along with the questions, they started beating me up: on the head, on the back and after they took off my jumper and shirt...They used a ruler or something like that to beat me between my legs and on my testicles. I don't exactly know if that was during the first interrogation or in another one, because I was six times in the same situation. They also put a piece of plastic in my ears, then in my arms, making noises and asking me if I knew what it was. When my hands were exhausted and I couldn't keep standing up, I was allowed to sit down. The first time, I could not sit for long. As I was not helping them, they told me that "privileges" were over and that I had to stand up, even when I was in my cell. It is so cruel to have to remain standing, with your head covered and waiting for the next punch! You are terrified stiff and shaking with fear. It is even worse when they let off fire-works behind you.

While I was in that situation, they kept on asking me, roaring and shouting in my ear: "Say yes or no". But, alongside, they were insulting me, threatening me, lying about me: saying that I was something I can't repeat here, that I was not going to be able to go to the hills again with my broken knees, that I had been betrayed by some friends, that I was lucky because I would get out of prison by the time I was 70 (Torrealdai is 60 years old), that they were to bring my wife too. Next day, they told me that they had just buried Martin (Martin Ugalde, president of honour of Egunkaria, 82 years old and suffering from Alzheimer). And I believed them.

How did you react?

I was not able to answer most of the questions, I didn't know them or I could not remember some details. As I told the judge later, I was mentally and psychologically blocked. I repeated so many times all the names and figures they forced me to say, that at the end, I knew them. I was forced to repeat the answers about 15 or 20 times. I didn't know what they were talking about. I couldn't see anything strange in the questions or the answers. Later, I realised what they were doing and what for: I was learning my declaration, and they were after the Basque culture world.

So, the policemen forced your declaration.

When I was brought up, I was so naive that I thought I was going to see the judge. There were two men in the front and a woman in the back. They took my mask off. They assured me that the one behind me was a lawyer, but that I was not allowed to talk to him, as I was incommunicado. I

declared everything I had been forced to learn. When they asked me to sign it, I took some strength from I don't know where, read it and said I wanted to chance some things. They were not happy. I corrected some things, in total fear. I don't know if they took them in consideration. I was terrified after that, waiting for them to come to my cell and make me pay for what had happened with the declaration, because they had told me they would destroy me if I dared change something. But nothing happened. I declared at 5:30, after being three days and three nights with no sleep or rest, psychologically destroyed and every fibre of my being completely terrified.

All the other people arrested and later released have declared that they were terrified.

Fear has different degrees in that hell. From time to time, that mortal silence broke up, when they started interrogating someone. I could hear the policemen roaring, shouting, asking, punching noises...During the first three days, that happened about three or four times. In prison I was told that that racket might be from some recordings. I don't know. Every time I heard some steps I was terrified, wondering if they were coming for me. And fear was greater when they opened the cell door, banging it violently. Twice at least, a couple of civil guards came to cells whistling Eusko Gudariak (The Hymn of the Basque Soldier, a Basque nationalist song) or saying words in Basque. I don't know whether it was that officer or another one who came and called us "gudari" (Basque soldier) or told us that he was looking forward to beating us.

Silence was broken at other times. At the beginning, two cells up from mine, a prisoner started banging his head on the wall, asking them to leave him in peace. The keeper answered that they never hit anybody, while some real or recorded bangs could be heard. It was Pello (Pello Zubiria, first editor of Egunkaria, released on March 18th, in very serious condition), but I could not recognise his voice, because I didn't think it possible that he might be there. Later, they brought a woman from interrogation, sobbing. I was afraid again.

What did they ask you about?

They tried three different subjects: Egunkaria, Elkar-Zabaltzen and the Basque Government. With regard to Egunkaria, they wanted to know who took the decisions, and the way it raised the money to start working. I told them the truth, my truth: that proper boards took the decisions and that we financed ourselves from two main sources: money citizens had given us, and financial help from Basque institutions. I told them many times that there was no manipulation from outside and that if I had suspect there was any, I would not stay in Egunkaria for a single second. I told them, in vain though, that I have always worked on cultural projects, keeping myself out of politics.

I noticed that they were willing to incriminate Elkar-Zabaltzen (main book publisher in Basque language). And, alongside, Martin Ugalde culture-park (where Egunkaria's main premises and other groups related to Basque language and culture are).

They also have an explanation about the money that the Basque government has given us: financing Egunkaria, the Basque Government helps ETA, and by the way, the Ikastolas too (Basque medium schools).

Their scheme is very simple: everyone who is in favour of a Basque-speaking Basque Country contributes to ETA's strategy. "Why?", I asked them. It is clear: Doesn't ETA want an independent, socialist, unified and Basque-speaking Basque Country? The Basque cultural world is trying to achieve that last point, and Basque Government too.

What is your understanding of the Egunkaria raid?

You can read it from different aspects: forth coming elections, politics, ideologies...All may be right, but, I think that the main one is related to the Basque language. They have hit the heart of the Basque cultural world, because Egunkaria is more than a mere newspaper. It is the main force that joins that

world, it educates and informs, it treats the Basque culture in an autonomous way and helps to create it. They have closed Egunkaria at its strongest. Along with Egunkaria, they have hit the Basque cultural world, because those are the pillars of a Basque speaking Basque Country. All the other reasons are just cheap excuses.

They have hit Egunkaria directly, but they have touched others: Jakin, Argia (weekly magazine in Basque), Euskalgintza Elkarlanean Fundazioa, Partaide-Ikastolen Elkarte (Federation of Basque Schools), Herri Irratia (radio from Donostia-San Sebastian). I am afraid that this raid has a perfect design behind.

What do you know about the Basque answer to this operation?

It has been great. It has been like breath of fresh air for the ones in prison, and I expect it has been exactly the same for Egunkaria's workers. But I don't rely too much on reactions made in the heat of the moment. My mind is set on the future. I am worried about the calm after the storm. Now, I have no reasons to worry, that's true. From this bleak hole, looking at the reactions from politicians, unions, cultural representatives and social ones, I think the Basque speaking community has realised how deep the attack has been. People have understood that unless we answer back together, there is nothing we can do to avoid culture groups falling one by one.

What do you feel when you get Egunero (Egunkaria's provisional substitute)?

Happy and sad at the same time. I am happy because I see that workers have been fast and ready to react. Sad too, seeing what we have been forced too. Egunkaria was a standard newspaper, a good one. But the damage has already been done. Fortunately, we are more prepared than in 1990: we know and you know, how to make a paper. Now it is in your hands.

How was your time in prison?

At the beginning, after being in hell, jail seemed heaven to me. I am getting used to. We are held in a short chain, and everything we love is far away: family, friends, work, the hills, our land, our country. Only my body is here: my spirit is there....

Do you have anything else to add?

Yes. Apart from Egunkaria's related issues, there is my personal situation. They have hurt me and my family, my children especially. Taking thousands of documents, they have deleted my historic memory, and they have cut my professional future. Apart from treating me like an animal, they have criminalized me in front of the public, they have destroyed and sullied my professional and personal honour. Without any proof. It is hard for someone like me, my entire life spent trying to defend the independence of Basque language and culture, to see myself involved in this nasty deluge. What kind of state is this one? What kind of justice?

I have been a couple of weeks in prison and believe me I will never forget what I have undergone. How could I possibly forget the worst days of my life?