

Martxelo Otamendi - Interview

This interview with Otamendi was released on Thursday February 27, in Egunero, Egunkaria's substitute paper.

What did they do to you during those days in isolation?

I was forced to do physical exercises until I was breathless and exhausted. I was insulted and threatened all the time. They even put a plastic bag on my head twice to try and suffocate me. They told me that interrogations were like a train: I had the chance to get off the train at the first stop in order to suffer less; they told me that in the end everyone speaks. I was not beaten up constantly, as Joan Mari Torrealdai (the CEO of Egunkaria) was. It was all gradual: first, I was forced to stand up for hours, then I had to bend down... Once I was kept like that for three hours.

Was that during the interrogations?

No, that was in the cell. In the cell beside me, there was another detainee, but in comparison with me, he was well treated. They were playing with us, in order to force us to loathe our friends.

While you were incommunicado, were you alone in the cell?

No, there were two of us in the cell, but we were not allowed to look at each other, nor to speak. In those five days, I didn't say a word to my cellmate, we were so terrified!

Were the Civil Guards with you?

No, they were outside, but they had a kind of spy-hole in the cell-door to keep an eye on us. You are so afraid of their possible reprisals that you don't even dare to look at your friend...

Did they put a bag over your head?

The interrogation is gradual, and they tell you that it is going to get worse every day. On Saturday, another group of Civil Guards came and put a bag over my head. They did it twice. I was so naive that I thought I would resist half a minute without breathing... You can't even resist three seconds! And you lose your head and say: "Yes, I will tell you". Later, when you say you can't remember or something like that, they answer: "Try to remember bastard! On the floor! Press ups!"

Were you beaten up?

They kicked me a few times in the testicles, as to remind me of what could come later. They were not very hard.

Were you naked?

Yes, totally naked. They insulted me about my sexual preferences. "Yes, lie down that way, we know you like it"... While I was naked, they inserted a piece of plastic into my asshole.

Did you tell the coroner about the tortures?

We were taken to the coroner every day. On the second day, I told him that Thursday [the day they were arrested] had been very hard, that I had been forced to do all sorts of physical exercises, that they had threatened me a hundred times, that I had been forced to stand up for the whole night..."If this goes on, I will lose consciousness", I told him. "Tell the judge to take me to the Spanish National Criminal Court [Audiencia Nacional, special Spanish court for terrorism and drug trafficking crimes], or I will bang my head against that iron column...". I was blindfolded again and 30 minutes later, some Civil Guards came to my cell, dragged me out, laid me down and told me: "If you tell the coroner again what we are doing here with you, we will shoot you". They knew it all within half an hour!!

Were there any Civil Guards in the coroner's office?

No, there were not. I mentioned to the judge that the Civil Guards knew about what we had been talking about. I meant to tell him that coroners are useless, because they offer no guarantee for those arrested.

What kind of information did they want from you?

They had two issues regarding me: On the one hand, the role ETA had in the founding of Egunkaria and in my appointment; and on the other hand the interviews with ETA I had made, the statements by ETA we had published, and the Zutabe publication (ETA's bulletin). I explained to them many times that we did not have anything to do with ETA, that I was appointed director by Inaki Uria, that Uria was not an ETA member and that I would have never accepted the appointment if I had known ETA was involved. I told the judge that a thousand times, when he eventually let me talk for 45 minutes. But when I said that to the Guardia Civil members they used to shut me up shouting "son of a bitch, son of a bitch". They told me many times they were going to kill me. When I told them I had the right not to declare, they answered "this place has nothing to do with democracy, nor with the fucking Constitution".

How much information did they have about you?

They reminded me of things I had said in radio talk-shows. They told me that they were there during the Lasa-Zabala trial: "Why did you laugh when you read the sentence?" They told me they had been looking forward to getting hold of me.

Were you tortured by different Guardia Civil teams?

Two teams took charge of me. They were young people in their 30's who had a strong hatred of Basques. They had an imperialist, centralist concept of Spain. Their favourite game started with the following question: "Which territory does Spain cover?" and I had to answer: "From Irun [Basque Country] to Algeciras (Andalucia), and from Finisterre (Galicia) to Rosas (Catalonia)". They forced me to repeat that again and again.

Did you see any of the Civil Guard members?

We were always blindfolded, with some kind of sock. Once it moved and some light started getting through, I even warned them, as I was terrified to think what they could do to me if they noticed I had seen someone.

Did you know who was in the other cells?

No. I could hear Torrealdei and Uria screaming. I suppose there were some other members of Egunkaria's current board.

Did they force you to say something that was not true?

No, because you did not dare lie them, as you know that they already know the answers. I spent hours saying that I did not know what to answer. Eventually they believe you. I denied having any links with ETA so many times, that they got bored and started asking me about other things, like the times I had interviewed ETA members or the statements we had published. However, the judge was not worried about those things. The magistrate said that was another judge's case, and that he was not involved.

Did the civil guards tell you about extending the time in isolation and arrest time?

Yes, they did. They forced me to sign a paper whereby I acknowledged the fact that the judge had agreed that the isolation be extended for 8 days. That was on Saturday, so I thought I was going to be held incommunicado until Thursday. I thought I could not stand it. Then a door opens itself, the door of suicide. I begged them to shoot me, so that everything would end soon.

Did you ask them to shoot you?

Yes, a few times. I even told the coroner that if he didn't consider my protests, I would break my head against a column. You don't want to die, but there is a force inside you that pushes you to say it. That shows that you can't bear any more.

After 5 days incommunicado, what did you say to Judge Del Olmo?

I defended Egunkaria and myself. I made it plain to him that Egunkaria has no links with ETA, that ETA has never taken part in Egunkaria, and that the only thing I have done with ETA are three interviews, professional work. I explained that at length. Another point was the shareholders of Egunkaria. The judge couldn't understand how having about 1,000 shareholders only about 30 of them used to go to the meetings, and why the shareholders didn't demand that Egunkaria should make a profit. The judge asked me about all that and I told him I would explain the Basque philosophy if he wanted. So I then told him that the shareholders put up the money with two conditions: to take Egunkaria forward and not to be arguing whenever we gather. I told him that the BBVA (Bilbao-Vizcaya & Argentaria Bank) has more than one million shareholders and that no more than 1.500 go to the meetings; I've been invited to a BBVA meeting and I've seen that. The Football Club Barcelona has 100.000 members and only 3.000-4.000 go to the annual meeting. I told the judge that the Basque cultural products are loss-making, that we go on thanks to the economic aids, that there are gaps in the business and economic infrastructures. I had to explain all that to make him understand why most of shareholders don't go to the annual meetings.

In fact, they argue that they are false shareholders...

They argue that ETA has put up the money and that the shareholders are just an umbrella. Then I told them they are genuine, nominal shareholders. He asked me if I knew them and I told him I did know some of them. It took me 45 minutes to explain this kind of thing: that ETA did not appoint me, that ETA had not had any sort of involvement in Egunkaria, that there were no ETA members in Egunkaria and that I had been appointed by the CEO. The only debt I have is with our readers, our workers and our advertisers. I told him I don't know anything about my name being in some ETA paper, but if so, I must have a passive role there; they'd be talking about me without my knowledge.

Do you mean that it is like finding comments about Egunkaria in political parties' documents?

I told him so: "I am sure that Egunkaria's name, and our names too, appears in a lot of Government or political parties" documents, and that maybe our names are registered in records, but that doesn't mean we have any contact with them. Some of the papers may mention Egunkaria, for example referring to a meeting with us; others to evaluate that someone is writing about an issue in a good or a bad way.

How did the judge react to your denunciation of torture?

Neither the judge nor the attorney asked anything, they didn't even demand details. I told them that it is not possible to treat a media professional that way, to treat a human being in such a way... And besides that I told the judge: "When I mentioned my rights to the Civil Guard they said horrible things about you, about the Spanish National Court, the Basque Autonomous Government...". I also said this: "Out of respect, I won't repeat the things they said about these institutions".

When you were released, did you expect that you would find Egunkaria again on the newspaper stands everyday?

I had no doubt. Two things have satisfied me especially: you [the workers] have been able to structure and release a new newspaper, without the editor, the CEO and the chairman being present, and, on the other hand, the impressive demonstration last Saturday. As I've been told it was a broad, massive and spontaneous one... people went wholeheartedly, many of them with tears in their eyes... Now we have to use this wave of sympathy to launch a better newspaper.

After being released, you mentioned three tasks ahead.

First of all, we have to keep on working to get our friends out of prison. Second, Egunkaria has to survive. Third, we have to use the fact that well-known people have been tortured, in order to create a national and institutional wall to prevent torture against Basque people. As our revelations will be credible for a majority, we should use it to prevent torture. Authorities should regard it as an extremely urgent problem.

A senior member of the Spanish Government (Angel Acebes, Home affairs minister) has ordered you to be sued for denouncing tortures.

We will see each other in Court, but I have been tortured, and I can't prove it, because I have no way of proving it. It is my word against theirs.