

Txema Auzmendi - Interview

"Humiliation was constant"

Txema Auzmendi, vice director of Herri Irratia radio, was released from jail last Friday (March 14th), after paying a bail of 12,000 euros. After being released, Auzmendi declared that his three weeks in prison had been like staying in a hotel, when compared to his five days of interrogation by the Civil Guards.

How do you feel?

I feel fine now. While I was isolated (in the Civil Guard HQ) I felt awful, exhausted and feeling down; but inside I continued to feel well and very strong. I knew where I was, and was not worried at all.

Did you know from the beginning that your arrest was connected to Egunkaria?

Yes, I did, and I knew also that I was accused of being either a member or a collaborator of ETA.

Surprising accusations, are they not?

A civil guard asked me whether I was surprised or not when they came after me. I answered him that I was not surprised, but shocked. I never thought that this could ever happen to me, and least of all for something connected to Egunkaria.

You are a member of the Administration Council of Egunkaria?

That's it. I took part in the meetings and as the secretary, I signed the papers and sent them to the notary.

Civil Guards sent you to Madrid. How was that?

They forced me to keep my head down at all times and close my eyes. En route to Madrid, they removed my handcuffs. I was interrogated all the way to Madrid, but it was not like the typical police interrogation, it was more like a conversation between friends that had not seen each other for a long time. They asked me about my political ideology, about the theology of liberation and The Basque Country in general.

When you arrived in Madrid, they put you in a cell.

Yes. We were forced to remain with our eyes closed, lowered heads facing the wall but without touching it. Humiliation was constant. They don't allow you to raise your head, to look at their faces or eyes. The iron door was banging incessantly. There was a lot of tension, especially when they took you out of the cell not knowing what for. We could not sleep and once you were half asleep, they started banging the doors again. In my case, torture has not been physical, but psychological. I was not beaten up, and the civil guards told me that that was a privilege. I told them I didn't want any privileges. But I think they have respected me a little because I am a Jesuit priest, and if something happened to me, then there would be more pressure on them.

You shared the cell with Xabier Oleaga, former deputy editor of Egunkaria?

I think that I was with Pello Zubiria (former editor) on the first day, even if I was not able to see or hear him. From the second day (of isolation) on, though, I shared the cell with Xabier Oleaga. Xabier realised it was me, and asked me how I was. I said I was OK and he answered back the same. That was our only conversation for four days. We didn't dare look at each other.

Do you know what happened to Pello Zubiria?

I heard the civil guards laughing about Zubiria, and that hurt me. Pello needed suppositories, and they teased him saying that he liked them.

Had you any contact or idea about the how the others were being treated?

One day I heard someone screaming: "You deserve no mercy", "leave me alone", "I know you are going to beat me up like you do to everybody and then I will talk"...I don't know who he was. On the third day, I thought someone had died; that ETA had killed a policeman or the civil guards had killed someone whilst being tortured. I could hear someone being beaten up; then, they gave him a tranquiliser and silenced him. Later, he woke up and the banging and screaming started again. "Bring me to the judge", he was saying. A civil guard answered back: "Do you think that you can see him whenever you want? We will bring you when it is necessary".

How did you cope with the interrogations?

I was at peace with myself and calm enough to answer. During one interrogation, I couldn't stand for any longer, and I told them I was going to fall.. They allowed me to do some stretching exercises, and the interrogation went on. I was in control of my faculties.

What did they ask you about?

Almost everything was connected to Egunkaria. They wanted me to say who was the ETA delegate in the newspaper. I told them that I could only tell what I knew, never what they wanted me to say: that there is no ETA delegate, that we took the decisions, that although Egunkaria was created by people of the nationalist left, it was open and plural...I told them about Joxemi Zumalabe and Joseba Jaka (two of Egunkaria's founders, both dead), but they replied that mentioning dead people was no good, and that they wanted names of those living.

You refused to declare before the judge. Why?

I told the judge that I could not trust him, that I could not trust someone that had treated me like an animal: incommunicado, without any rights. I made it very clear that I would not declare unless a lawyer I trusted was present. He said that everything he had done was legal under a law of right, and that everything was democratic. I answered that nobody had the right to treat us as they had done.

What do you think about the raid?

This operation shows very clearly that they can't accept a media in Basque, because it gives strength to the people, it strengthens their right to be different. Egunkaria represented such a pillar of strength for the basque speaking community and this weakens the spanish idea. This operation has been totally political.