



# Basque Writing 22

## Joan Mari Torrealdai

### LANGUAGE AND CULTURE UNDER THREAT



Photo: Jon Orbe/Foku

This issue of **Basque Writing** pursues two objectives. The first and most important is to honor the memory of Joan Mari Torrealdai, since we can categorically say that Basque culture was orphaned when he passed away on July 31, 2020. The second aim of this issue is to draw attention to the threats that minority languages and cultures face, using Torrealdai's career as a case in point.

What is local is universal, and we firmly believe that any act in support of a minority language also benefits the rest of the languages. While the tongues may be different, the threats minority languages face are remarkably similar.

Urtzi Urrutikoetxea says that Torrealdai was "a giant ant". Urrutikoetxea recently took the post of Chair of International PEN's **Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee** (TaLRC), and he therefore knows full well how tragic the situation of some minority languages is.

In Urrutikoetxea's own words, "We needed it much earlier, but it was not until the crime against Egunkaria was committed that, with the help from our Catalan colleagues, we established Basque PEN. Thanks to the club, we have had the opportunity to make friends all around the world, first in our effort to raise awareness about the Egunkaria case, and then in our aspiration to, in collaboration with our Occitan counterparts, tell the world about the Basquephobic policies being developed by the governments of Navarre and France. Nevertheless, we have also learned and brought stories from other realities: the Kurdish people know perfectly well what it feels like to have a newspaper shuttered and to witness their cultural activists, researchers and

*journalists being arrested, tortured and killed, as happened to Musa Anter who once said 'If my mother tongue is shaking the foundations of your state, it probably means that you built your state on my land' when he was kidnapped by Diyarbakir paramilitaries and found dead the following day.*

*We intend to move around the world as you would, Joan Mari: with humility, avoiding lecturing altogether, and, whenever possible, with a smile on our face."*

The three articles comprising this issue were published in the newspaper BERRIA as part of the special issue printed on August 1, the day after Torrealdai's passing.



**Laura Mintegi**  
Basque PEN



# Liburugintza and Censorship

## PUBLISHING INDUSTRY

The main purpose of Torrealdai's research was to study the Basque publishing industry and chronicle the continuous political attacks against the sector. When it comes to the Basque publishing industry, his *Euskal Idazleak Gaur* (1977) and *Euskal Kultura Gaur* (1997) are undeniably essential. In the former, he presented an in-depth analysis of the literature of the time. In the latter, apart from updating the information from his first book, he expanded his field of study from literature to culture. He also carried out an annual study on the Basque publishing industry and shared it via the Basque magazine *Jakin*.



## JAKIN magazine

The Basque magazine *Jakin* symbolizes the resistance and endurance of Basque culture. The first steps towards the foundation of the magazine were taken in the Franciscan environment at the height of the Francoist regime, in 1956 to be precise. Torrealdai joined the team in 1963; in 1964, he took up the management of the periodical for a short period of time and then retook it in 1968. By the time he gave up his post as the editor-in-chief in 2014, he had held the position for a total of 42 years.



## CENSORSHIP

For almost 40 years, he devoted himself to studying and shining a light on censorship. When he was arrested by order of the Spanish government on February 20, 2003, all the work that he had done over the course of those years was confiscated. To him, losing all that work was as painful as the arrest itself.

However, that was not the first time that he was censored. In 1968, one of the articles he wrote for the magazine *JAKIN* was censored, and in 1969, the Spanish government outlawed the magazine altogether. The periodical was not able to be legally printed again until 1977.



# The Pillars of Culture

## THE ASSOCIATION OF BASQUE WRITERS

Torrealdai also participated in the creation of The Association of Basque Writers, which was founded in 1982. In the early years after its creation, he was the general secretary of this organization of writers who write in Basque, regardless of they were born or where they live. Today, the association has close to 400 members and, apart from defending writers' labor rights, it also aims to disseminate Basque literature locally and internationally, projecting our writers' careers and actively supporting the Basque language.



## ELKAR (publishing house)

Elkar was created in 1972 by 20 northern Basques. In 1974, Joseba Jaka, Joxe Azurmendi and Joan Mari Torrealdai met in Paris and decided to bring another 20 people from the southern Basque Country into the project in order to bolster the project. Elkar was thus relaunched in 1974 so that Jaka could bring his project of publishing a new book collection to fruition.

In 1996, they unanimously decided that the publishing house Elkar would join the Euskalgintza Elkarlanean foundation, whose main objective was to support Basque language through cooperation. From 1997 on, Joan Mari Torrealdai was a member of the foundation's board of trustees.



## EUSKALTZAINDIA (Academy of the Basque language)

Language itself was one of his biggest concerns, as he aimed to unify the language and teach the the population to read, write and speak Basque. He began working with Euskaltzaindia in the 1960s, and closely collaborated with them from then on. In 1975 he was named assistant member, and in 2007, he was appointed a full member of the Academy. From 2017 on, he bore the title of emeritus member. Always linked to the publishing world, in the speech he gave (*Bibliografatik Bibliotekara. Esperantzari leihoa*) at his inauguration as full member, he talked about bibliography, libraries and experience, and, as a matter fact, he was made director of the institution's Azkue Library in 2011.



**EUSKALTZAINDIA**  
REAL ACADEMIA DE LA LENGUA VASCA  
ACADEMIE DE LA LANGUE BASQUE

## PUNTU EUS

Although there are more than 6,000 languages in the world, less than 300 are present on the Internet. Basque is the 44<sup>th</sup> most-used language on the web, and it holds position 31 on the ranking of languages with the most Wikipedia articles written in them. In order to make a small language visible, a recognizable domain is essential. That is precisely why the domain .eus was created, to express identity. The project began in 2007, but it was not until 2014 that it went live. Torrealdai was the director of the PuntuEUS Foundation from 2015 to 2017.







# Euskaldunon Egunkaria Case

## History of the first newspaper in "euskera": *Euskaldunon Egunkaria*

*Euskaldunon Egunkaria* (thereafter *Egunkaria*) was the only newspaper published in Basque language. **December 6, 1990** is the date of inception of *Egunkaria*. *Egunkaria* is born out of the necessity to allot the Basque society a newspaper which, besides informing the Basques in "euskera" would contribute to the linguistic standardization of this language. Thousands of Basques contributed financially to create something which had until then been only a dream.

Distributed in the whole Basque territory (Spain and France), it was a daily in which all political, union, economic and social interests of the country were voiced. Nevertheless, on **20 February 2003**, the judge of the *Audiencia Nacional* decided to close the daily arguing presumed links with ETA.



Joan Mari Torrealdai (Editorial Board Director of Euskaldunon Egunkaria), Martin Ugalde (Editorial Board President) eta Joxemi Zumalabe (Managing Director).

Created on December 6, 1990 and forced to shutter on February 20, 2003; the 10 members of the board of directors were arrested at the same time.

On February 22, 2003, the biggest mass protest in the history of the Basque Country took place in Donostia (Gipuzkoa) to condemn the shutdown.

On August 2, 2004, Iñaki Uribe was released from prison, after more than a year inside.

On December 4, 2006, the prosecuting attorney of the Spanish National High Court concluded that there was no evidence that could justify the closure of *Egunkaria*.

## A case without legal grounds

The main accusations supported by the Spanish Civil Guard and endorsed by the judge in charge of the case are based on

**1. Funding ETA.** After seven years of inquiry (two years before and five after the closure), neither the magistrate nor the Spanish Civil Guard, author of the accusation, could demonstrate that ETA had financed the daily *Egunkaria*. More so, in the judicial order of 600 pages, the judge «forgot» the question of financing and thus omits to mention one of the principal reasons invoked to justify the closure of the newspaper.

**2. Control by ETA.** The judge accused the directors of the newspaper to be members and collaborators of ETA. Though, after seven years of inquiry, neither the judge nor the Spanish Civil Guard could demonstrate it.





### Indignation of the Basque society

The Basque society reacted immediately in an impressive and surprising manner launching a campaign of protest against the closure of *Egunkaria*. Two days after the closure, the streets of Donostia (San Sebastian) lived under the slogan ***Egunkaria aurrera*** (Egunkaria ahead), the biggest popular demonstration which ever took place in that city. The closure of the unique newspaper in “euskera” had been interpreted by the political, social, unionist and cultural majority as a direct attack on the Basque society. In fact, given the **popularity and the social prestige of the accused**, nobody in the Basque Country believed such accusations.



On May 7, 2007, **acting against the prosecuting attorney's legal opinion**, the Spanish National High Court decided to proceed with **oral arguments**.

**The trial ended** on February 1, 2010. The prosecuting attorney submitted a motion for the case to be dismissed, arguing that there **was no evidence of crime**.

On April 12, 2010, the **Spanish National High Court absolved** Joan Mari Torrealdai, Iñaki Uria, Txema Auzmendi, Martxelo Otamendi and Xabier Oleaga.

On October 16, 2012 the European Court of Human Rights reprimanded Spain **for not properly investigating** former *Egunkaria* editor-in-chief Martxelo Otamendi's **torture allegations**.

On October 14, 2014 the Provincial Court of Gipuzkoa closed the **fiscal case against *Egunkaria***. And that was when the *Egunkaria* case finally **came to an end**.

### International interest

Many **international human rights organizations** protested against the closure of the newspaper: PEN International, Amnesty International, Reporters Without Borders-International, Article 19, three parliamentary groups of the Parliament of Europe, Basque Parliament, etc. International media (*TIME Magazine*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *Le Monde*, *The Washington Post*, RAI, BBC, etc.) echoed with their publicization of the case and sent reporters to interview the detainees on bail.

**The issue of torture** committed by the Spanish Civil Guard on six of the ten detainees during the closure operation was too much for a great number of citizens and prompted numerous European medias to deal with the issue of the closure of the newspaper.



# A Journey Though Multiples Deserts

## Iñaki Uria

After a campaign with the motto *Prentsa Euskaraz!* (Press in Basque), those who of us founded Argia started to assert, dream and organize the next objective for the Basque press: Egunkaria, a daily newspaper that would be written entirely in Basque. That journey through the 1980s was certainly a long and arduous one.

Towards the end of the decade, the magazines Argia and Jakin decided to collaborate for the first time. We needed each other, and those of us at Argia knew it.

When the first issue of Egunkaria was distributed on December 6, 1990, Joan Mari Torrealdai led the editorial board. The people in charge of the editorial department needed protection, and he was our shelter. Then, we started a journey through a different desert. A fragile economy, an internal crisis, the boycott of the institutions, Joxemi's cancer... Those first few years were also tough for the paper. They thought we would fail. They thought it was a matter of time, that the lack of water in that desert would suffocate us.

When Joxemi died in January 1993, Joan Mari and I looked at each other and thought: you and me, me and you, that is all we've got left... But then we found Martxel. The best editor-in-chief that Egunkaria could ask for. We were still wandering through the subsidy-desert established by the Basque government, and resorted to "diplomacy" once again through Joan Mari and Martin. That is how we achieved the 1994 agreement.

We used to get ready for the meetings at meals. Or on long hikes. Ups and downs. I learned that strength was mainly a mental virtue. We used to talk a lot, and forged a bond quickly. We learned how to set our sights on distant goals and approach them step by step; how to define objectives and formulate new ones as we accomplish them. He was clever, shrewd, sharp.

Joan Mari became the chairman of the board of directors, and Martin was the honorary chair.

Euskaldunon Egunkaria was at its best. We had more readers and advertisers than ever and were preparing to take a leap forward. That was when they shut us down.

They caused us terrible suffering. Inma developed cancer and died. They pushed Pello to suicide, but he endured and metamorphized. Cancer also went after Martxelo, but he overcame it. However, in Juan Mari's case, they infected him with cancer down to his marrow. Torture, prison... For another eternal desert-like decade which we spent defending ourselves in the Spanish National High Court. We went through two trials, the criminal one and the fiscal one, suffocated by doubt and fear.

We were absolved by the court, but were still guilty. We had created Egunkaria. Without asking for permission. We had brought it to life and made it endure.



Managing Director of Euskaldunon Egunkaria (1993-2003). He is the Director-General of the Hamaika Telebista Hedatzeko Taldea broadcasting corporation since 2006.



# In this linguistic Amaiur\*

## Lorea Agirre

The way in which we connect with society gives us clues about the meaning of our lives. Joan Mari Torrealdai was connected to this ourness that aspires to be a country through a tireless fight in favor of the Basque language and our nation. To be precise, he was tied to our society by his efforts to place activism for the Basque language at the center of the process to build our country. And that is his life's meaning, that is the space he inhabited.

Torrealdai means a new beginning. He was a member of the generation that paved a new path in the 1950s, in that post-war fallow. An interruption and a continuation at the same time, a path that would construct a revivifying future. New paths, every path. Earthly paths as well as figurative paths to anywhere. Especially those to anywhere. That generation born without a legacy, Torrealdai included, unstintingly left us a garden with fertile soil.

Torrealdai represents awareness. A lesson brought from a time when there was no awareness, to a time in which it seems to be out of date. An awareness that keeps us holding the chain that represents both bond and rupture. An intention to innovate and reinvent. An awareness to respond to our times, to see the importance of certain issues, to comprehend the significance of the things that must be done and the processes being carried out.

Torrealdai represents commitment, an effort that is guided from a non-equidistant center and is rooted in civil society, self-sufficient activism for the Basque language and militant professionalism.

Torrealdai is collectiveness, an inability to stop creating projects – and structures, always structures – in which people developed their ability to work together. He devoted his life to setting the basis and erecting the pillars of so many plans. However, above all, Torrealdai is Jakin, as the way he conceived

the magazine was what enabled him to be active in another thousand projects.

Torrealdai is a question. What do the Basque language and nation need? He spent his days defending the freedom and prevalence of our language, creating and nourishing a world of his own, so that we could exist on our own terms: unsubordinated, sovereign and free.

Torrealdai is a source of pride for the Basque Country. Already a symbol. He earned this for having fought for the Basque language, for having been arrested, tortured and tried as a consequence of that fight, and having spent seven years waiting for a sentence in which he was fortunately absolved. He is a symbol, but it came at a price. In this linguistic Amaiur, Torrealdai is our stance.

\*Amaiur is a symbol of resistance for Basque people. It was one of the few fortresses in Navarre that made a stand against the Castilian invasion of 1512. It bore witness to frequent battles, with the most famous being the Battle of Amaïur (Maya) in 1522, and was the last Navarrese stronghold to resist the Spanish (Castilian-Aragonese) offensive.



Editor-in-chief of the Basque magazine **JAKIN**.





# No goodbyes

## Laura Mintegi

I received news I didn't want to hear, Joan Mari. What we want to ignore, however, does not disappear by simply ignoring it. You taught me that lesson a long time ago.

We were sharing a round table at the *Zentsura At! Censorship Festival* in 2010. We were talking about the political, social, and personal damage caused by censorship, and the Sami journalist and friend of mine Stein Torger, who came from Norway, told me he wanted to interview you. I asked you and you said yes, but you said you struggled with English and asked me to interpret. Of course.

He asked you at great length about the forced closure of Egunkaria in 2003, and about the treatment that the police gave you. The journalist mentioned Martxelo Otamendi's and Iñaki Uribe's testimonies. And you began to describe, calmly and gently, that you had been tortured as well. I hadn't heard what you told that journalist before, what they did to you and how you felt. As I translated this new testimony into English, your words and the look of your eyes got tangled in my throat. So brittle, so defenseless, I found you so frail at that moment. I cannot forget it. When the interview was over we stood face to face, quietly. What to say. There are no words. And you, with a sad smile, told me you felt liberated. That you needed time to tell yourself the evil truth, for the evil to be true.

Five years later you confessed to me, to us, that that hidden torment had caused you a vivid, cruel pain. A vivid pain that had gotten to your bones.

We love you, Joan Mari. Admiration, respect, complicity, intellectual feedback. I won't forget how you came to Txagorritxu in 1987, when I had spent a month in the hospital after an urgent surgery. You wanted to convince me to take part in the monographic "Woman and Literature". How could I say no? After criticizing the omnipresent masculinity and misogynistic traces at Jakin for years, I couldn't have done otherwise. When you presented the takeover in 2014, though, you told me, *See? A woman is director of Jakin. And what a woman*, I said, *Lorea Agirre, "turboflower"*, we gave her the nickname almost as a teenager. *Can't accuse us of misogyny now, uh, Laura?* You told me smiling, mockingly.

That happy and naughty smile is what I will always keep in mind.



Member of *Egunkaria Support Association* (Egunkaria-ren Aldeko Babes Taldea)