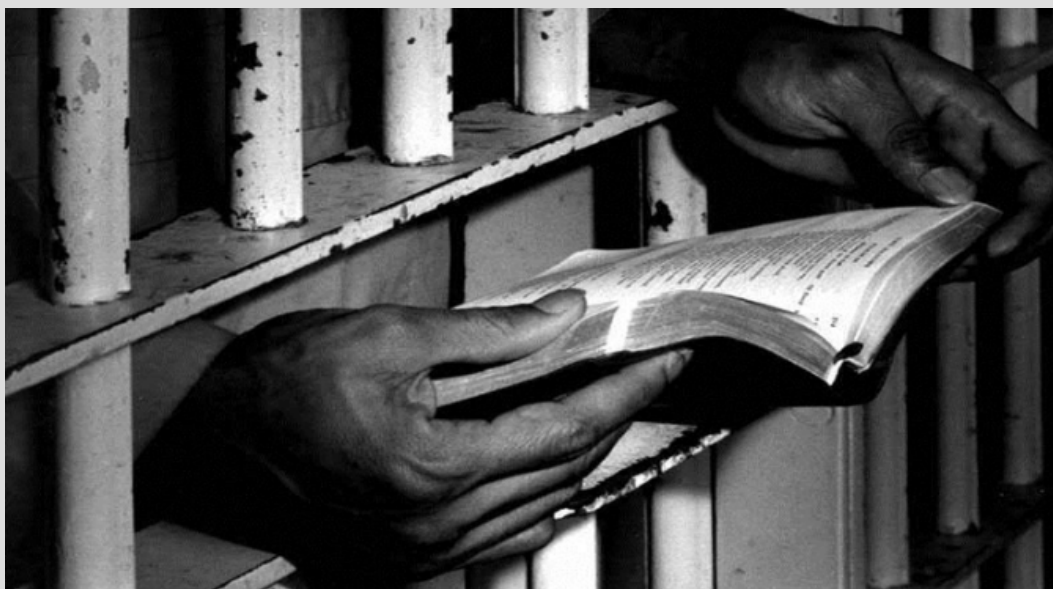


Basque Writing 17

Literature and PRISON



There is no shortage of writers that, throughout history, have either written in prison, have been imprisoned for writing or have become writers due to their experience in prison. The Nigerian writer **Ken Saro Wiwa**, who is a candidate to win the Literature Nobel Prize, experienced imprisonment before being hanged for peacefully defending the Ogoni people.

Other writers that have written while in prison are the British theologian **Thomas More** and the Spanish writer **Miguel de Cervantes**. **Donatien Alphonse-François, Marquis de Sade**, the author of numerous books, spent 27 years in prison and psychiatric hospitals. **Voltaire** was imprisoned several times, and the first time that he was incarcerated it was because he wrote a series of satiric texts against the Duke of Orleans.

The British writer **Oscar Wilde** was imprisoned under the accusation of indecency, after having informed against his lovers father for libel. The French poets **Paul**

Verlaine and **Arthur Rimbaud** were also lovers. Verlaine shot Rimbaud and was taken to prison. The Russian Literature Nobel awarded writer **Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn** served forced labour for eight years and was later exiled forever.

The aim of this publication is to approach that reality. The magazine **Ataramiñe** has been publishing literature written in prison for 16 years now. The Basque writer **Joseba Sarrionandia** has written for almost 40 years in prison and exile. The journalists **Iñaki Soto** and **Xabier Izaga** have told us about the book prohibition in prisons and the writer **Jokin Urain**, who has written various books from prison, will narrate his own experience.



Laura Mintegi
Basque PEN



Ataramiñe

The magazine of literatura made in prison



Ataramiñe (stick out your tongue) is what prison officers say to prisoners to see if they are hiding something in their mouth.

Ataramiñe was created in 2002 in the context of the Amnesty Movement in the Basque Country. The plan was to create a permanent group inside the organisation that would focus on publishing Basque prisoners' writings.

Historically, Basque prisoners' work has been naturally published by Basque publishing houses and also the Amnesty Movement, which apart from the publications of the organisation, has also published some books written by prisoners, although it did not follow any clear criterion to do so.

Thus, a group was created, and the parameters were set through collective reflection.

The aim of the project would be to promote literature among prisoners, to build a contact network in that context of dispersion and create links between those who were inside and outside, in both directions.

Oral and written communication is censored. "Prison officers search for papers in the cells".

The original idea was to publish a yearbook in the form of a book; a kind of literary magazine that would compile the writings that had been produced by Basque political prisoners. We named it **Ataramiñe** (stick out your tongue/pain) and it also became the name of the project: the name had a double meaning, on the one hand, it alluded to the

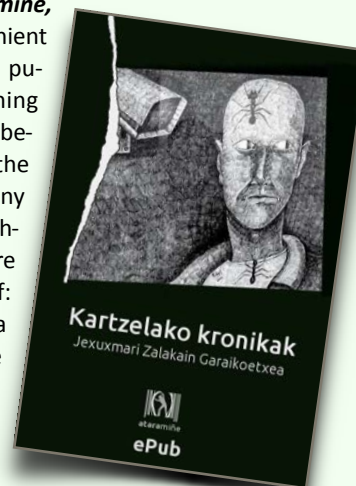
exercise of relieving pain through writing and, on the other hand, it referred to the act of sticking the tongue out.

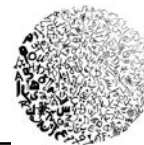
The first compilation was published in 2002 and, edition after edition, here we are in 2018. All sorts of genres have been compiled in **Ataramiñe**; however, they need to be short in both text and images.

We have also published some books throughout these years, 35 in total. Among those 35 books we will find all types of works: novels, prose fiction, essays, chronicles, poetry, verses, paintings, comics, children's literature, translations... Those works have been spread on several formats such as books, music CDs, board games etc. and apart from printing them on paper we have also used the ePub format.

The aim of the project is to build a contact network in the context of dispersion and create links between those who are inside and outside, in both directions.

However, it should be highlighted that our aim is not to publish all the works that Basque political prisoners write in prison. In fact, since the creation of **Ataramiñe**, 40 books written or translated by prisoners have been published in other houses. In **Ataramiñe**, we think it more convenient what prisoners' work is published by other publishing houses, on the one hand, because in that scenario the prisoner is treated as any other writer and, on the other hand, because it is more beneficial for the work itself: the publishing house has a solid structure to distribute books, a catalogue, they are present in bookshops... and, unlike us, they pay rights to the writers.





Therefore, when we get a piece of work made by a prisoner, we evaluate it and get in contact with a publishing house, so that they direct the rest of

There are some people who have spent long years in prison because of writing and that is case of some Egin journalists.

the process in the same way they do with the rest of the authors. However, there are

some pieces of work that, whatever the cause, would never be published by any publishing house and there are also some prisoners that want their work to be published in *Ataramiñe*. Those are the kinds of work that we publish, and we must admit that we have carried out some beautiful and memorable publications.

But, you may wonder, "You do not pay any money to the prisoners for their author rights?" The answer is "No, we don't". This is who we are. Besides, all our books have the free license *Copyleft*. No one involved in this project gets any money in return for their efforts. It is collective work: the prisoners write, their relatives and friends get them out of the prison (this part of the process is sometimes carried out in utterly incredible ways), we are sent the piece of work, we digitalise the texts, there are writers who make contact with the prisoners in order to edit their books, there are musicians who add music or voice to the written work, publishing houses also get involved in the process, we have assembled books through community work, those who are part of the prisoners' support group distribute the books, they go to markets, citizens and associations organise readings, concerts and talks that associate prison and literature...



through penitentiary sanctions, and some other priso-

Furthermore, it should be reminded that there are people **who have spent a long time incarcerated because of writing** and that is the **case of some Egin journalists**. It should also be reminded that some prisoners have been punished because for writing, usually

ners such as Iñaki de Juana have been given prison sentences for publishing their writings. Their oral and written communications are controlled and censored. *Prison officers search for papers in the cells.* Getting those literary works out of the prison is sometimes problematic, as the guards do not usually like the texts that are written by prisoners since prisons are a tool of the oppressive system and, inside that oppressive system, literature is a route of escape for many prisoners.

"When isolated, the prisoner creates life in the nothingness"



wrote a Basque political prisoner, a woman, in a soliloquy about life in isolated regime. When isolated, prisoners create life in the nothingness, but not from nothing. They create life from their inner life,

when they wake up in the morning and the day in front of them is a battle.

Breathing, doing exercise, writing... There are not many ways to create life in prison. That is why prisoners write a lot in prison, even though most of the writings are not produced to be published.

"When isolated, the prisoner creates life in nothingness" said a Basque political prisoner.

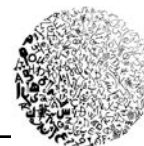
That is the perspective that we want to take when we talk about prison

and literature, about the literature written in prison, we want to see from the eyes of those who write from prison.

We bring to light those texts written by prisoners, that is what we are working on at the moment, always wondering what living in a prison must be like.



Mitxel Sarasketa



Writing in prison and in exile: Joseba Sarrionandia

Joseba Sarrionandia (1958) is one of the best and most emblematic Basque writers. He has written several poetry and story books and has also produced some novels, most of them in prison or in exile. In 1985 he escaped from prison, and from that moment on he spent **31 years hiding**. He wrote and sent his work from exile, from places with no name, and for many years his only identifiable picture was a black and white one that had been taken in prison a month before he escaped. In 2016, The Basque Institute Etxepare named him Basque language lecturer in Havana University (Cuba) and that is when it became known to all that he had been living in la Havana for many years. Some days later, for the first time in 31 years, an updated picture of him was published.



**...et je n'entendrai plus
les verrous se fermer sur
l'éternel reclus
Alfred de Vigny**

I would like to know who is now inhabiting
the cell that I left behind.

If they understand the little writing on the wall:
"Fallen into struggle"

If there is someone in the cell next door
who detaches the pipe of the toilet to call them
as if they were on the phone.

If the days there are still eternal, the nights frozen,
the dawns sour milk.

If the eye that peeps through the spyhole during the
head count /
surveiller et punir/
sees someone or not anymore/
everyone or nobody.

I would like to know if those who escaped
really escaped
or if escaping was just an excuse to stay alive.

The cell I left behind long ago, 1992

"So, this work is made with poems that were written throughout one year, 1980. I wrote most of them in September and October, but using reflections and notes that I have collected throughout the whole year. For me, this year, 1980, has been quite special: I turned twenty-two, and I have felt freer than ever from the 13th of November -when I had just finished composing this book that I am presenting right now-, to the moment when I have been imprisoned for, apparently, a very long time.

Through Dreads' Hiding Place, 1981

"On the 22nd of July 1981 we were taken to the new prison in Puerto de Santa Maria, a modern and dreadful prison. Then, on the afternoon of the 25th and the morning of the 26th about 20 of us were taken to punishment cells, for very long. We only had the clothes we were wearing and only a few books with us. The story called Inside a walnut shell is some sort of chronicle of my first twelve hours in one of those punishment cells, it was written some days later in those very cells, in little pieces of paper, and has lasted until now, almost in its entirety, although some pieces were seized during a frisk."

Inside a Walnut Shell and the Christmas Net, 1983



When the superintendent Angel Martinez introduces the
barrel
of his revolver in the anus of the naked prisoner and the muzzle comes
out
dirty, gory, pathetic,
what does the tortured boy care if the poet is
um fingidor?
Has *G.K. Chesterton* ever visited
La Salve?
Who knows *Hermann Broch* in the guardrooms of
Intxaurreondo?
How will the tortured boy explain
the exact meaning of *objective correlative* later
when he is put in front of a judge completely wrecked?
What does the needly dawn in Carabanchel mean to
Molly Bloom?
Who is *Michel Foucault* for someone who erodes for ten months
in a cell?
A five minute visit? A lyric encounter?
Do Basque prisoners
need to study *Jean Duvoisin's* Bible in order to spell
their *aitches* and *commas* correctly
in their forbidden letters?
What is for literature
the inexhaustible ethical value of
rebellion, revolution, adventure?
What is written about the endless hunger strikes of Basque prisoners
in the corners
of *Volprosi Letterati* or *Tel Quel* magazines?
What does the boy who
—not having a revolutionary flag as a hideout—, is escaping among
police shots
care about *commitment?*

Literature and Revolution, 1987

Maybe we were wrong from the very beginning,
when we were born Basque to this world.
Later we did not know how to move away from
the struggle for independence and revolution.
Let's say that we sang a wakening song
to the empty cot of our homeland.
And one morning we woke up in the prison
of Puerto de Santa María.

Fortunately or unfortunately, numerous wrong
Basque people were brought here
to this last arsehole of Spain, to live
or die.
Live... we nearly survive, cramped,
in anguish, almost miraculously.
And life will never again be
as it used to be for us.
Uniformed guards will bury us
in the furthest and darkest pits
uniformed secretaries
will erase our footprints.
But we can promise with the habit
and bravery
of the wrong ones: it was for things that we loved
that
we ended up in prison
but our love is not yet
imprisoned.

Here we are and here we will stay,
1992



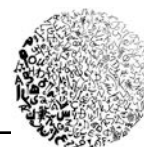
Poems selected by
Eider Rodriguez

The mind of those who have been imprisoned
always goes back to prison.
In the streets they run into judges and
lawyers, and the police officers,
even though they don't identify them,
stare at them more intensely,
because their pace is not calm,
or because it is too calm.
Inside their hearts,
they feel convicted to perpetuity.

*The mind of those who have
been imprisoned, 1992*

Four, five, six walls around us
as a heart inside another.
The song the rain wrote to happiness
drowned in some old lake,
the wind does not bring anything. Look at the
unattainable shadows of the birds
on the floor. What can we do? Wander,
leaving a little bit of dust on each step;
the world also twirls around like us,
unable to find its own key.

Four Five Six Walls, 1992



NO BOOKS!!



It is not unusual that penitentiary authorities decide to censor books alleging that they are harmful for the prisoners. That has happened in Guantanamo, for example. Books are banned and having some copies in one's cell is considered a privilege. Also in Britain, the authorities decided to ban books in prison in 2014, a decision that caused controversy in British society and was criticised by several writers and social activists.

Dostievski said that you can judge the level of civilisation of a society by seeing what happens in its prisons. England showed its level of civilisation when decided that no books would be allowed in prison.

Penitentiary administrations are arbitrary all around the world and they come to make absurd decisions. Even though those decisions are absurd, they can be very harmful those who are imprisoned. In western countries, fine words are spoken, but the reality of

their prisons is usually dark and cruel, and the tough situation that is lived inside hardly ever get out of the walls.

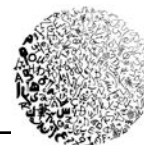
Books were considered as privileges and the value they could have in order to reintegrate prisoners was not taken into consideration, as writer and editor of *Independent Voices* Memphis Barker claimed.

The Justice Secretary **Chris Grayling** wanted to prevent reoccurrence and took some measures to do so. Firstly, he implemented changes in the probation system, he reduced it. Moreover, he made it hard for prisoners to get books and, in order to aggravate the punishment, he reduced the viewings of films and the prisoners' chances to do exercise in the gym.

A spokesperson of the justice ministry declared that the reason of the prohibition was to promote the incentive system, the system that praises good behaviour, and that, those who would want to, could find the books in the library of the prison anyway.

However, the studies that have been carried out on this topic show that worsening the conditions does not prevent reoccurrence and, additionally, they remark that the cause of youth crime is usually "a lack of moral and cognitive development", and not opportunism. It is also well known that arts, including literature, help intellectual development.

Nonetheless the biggest problem in prisons is not, obviously, if books are allowed or not. The causes of difficulties are others: overcrowding, lack of activity, lack of resources to maintain mental health etc. Even though I understand that trying to tackle those problems is tiring and expensive, it is not convenient to add one more difficulty to the situation by denying prisoners the benefits of reading.



In Spanish prisons prohibition has also been the rule for some prisoners and books are specially forbidden. The aim of this rule is not the security of the imprisoned person, but their destruction. It has been banned to sing in the shower, to show one's arms, to play the flute and to have a radio, tobacco or books in the cell.

Those who have been sentenced for terrorism –and it must be said that, apart from those who were involved in armed struggle, journalists, social activists and those friends and relatives that sympathised with the prisoners were also considered terrorists–, were told that they could not have more than two books at a time in their cells. If they had a dictionary, then they could only have one book and if they were carrying out some kind of regulated studies, they could only keep the book of one of their courses. They were only allowed to ask for another coursebook when they had finished the previous one, but above all, they could not have more than two books at the same time under any condition.

Prisoners have carried out long and hard fights against that prohibition and have suffered harsh punishments and prosecutions for doing



so, but, in the end, they succeeded and the despicable prohibition was reversed.

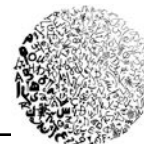
Limiting the amount of books might not seem important, but those who are locked up know well that a book is much more than a way to kill time, and among Basque prisoners, reading is a very common activity.

The book is a window to the world, to other worlds. Putting speeches aside, prisons still have their old punishing function, it is a way to isolate people from society. Prison is a nowhere place. It tries to reach the world with the tip of its nails and let them know about that “place that is not”: it wants to be. Let's imagine how would it be to remove that window and only see concrete.

In fact, it is very significant that books are banned in prisons, as it tells us about the nature of the those who ban them. It is significant to present the book as a privilege to prisoners.



Based on the texts of the journalists
Iñaki Soto and Xabier Izaga



Writing in prison: testimony of a former prisoner

"When our body cannot take anymore, when it does not work, even then, imagination works and lives; **as our imagination can live and see lands and times that are far away from our life right here**", told me a prisoner once. I do not know if that person had any poetic aspiration when he came up with that reflection, but it is indeed true that for a prisoner their natural environment is far from their reach and everyday life and imagination becomes a multipurpose tool; I mean that those who are imprisoned still have the license to imagine, even when the rest is banned and chained.

I have been asked several times why people write in prison and I think I might have answered something different each time and, still, I have not found the definitive way to explain it. Nonetheless, that does not mean I have lied, as truths can be many.

Prison is not a natural habitat for a human being, it is a place that is violently imposed; **prison is a place which no human wants to be in**, so, while they are imprisoned, **the prisoner lives imagining the places in which they would like to be**. They want to be in the place that they lost or was taken away from them, and imagination is the first tool for that, no matter if what they are imagining is real or unreal. In the long nights and days in his loneliness, the prisoner uses imagination, or rather fantasy, to communicate with another reality and live in it.

I do not know when, where, how and for what reason was that a human took another human as a prisoner for the first time in human history. But I would like to think that even that first prisoner in history, having lost it all, deprived of everything, on the edge of desperation maybe, dreamt above fears and concerns. And, perhaps, that person kept in their memory all the marvellous escapes and touching (or maybe tragic) love stories imagined during that captivity. How hard it is to think what could have been imagined by that history's first prisoner!

The same way it is hard to think what have been imagined, dreamt, thought... by all those thousands or millions of prisoners that have served merited or unmerited sentences in any place of the world in their aching loneliness. **And if your imagination brings something to you, or you see it in reality, why not tell it?**

Some of those who have been imprisoned have written literature, specifically: poetry, essays, novels... But many others, I would dare to say that everyone that has ever been imprisoned, have written without

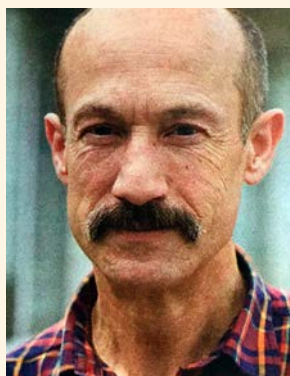
any intention to produce literature, they write mostly letters. Either because they have the necessity to be in contact with their affective environment and they want to keep that contact or to find new affective environments, **the letter has been the most used resource in the history of prisons and prisoners**. Everyone has the license to utilise the epistolary genre, since even those who are not literate can use it through dictating the content to someone who knows how to write... Cannot think of a more beautiful way to complete a story!

A prisoner has received a letter from their wife, in prison, but they do not know how to read, so they ask another prisoner to read it for them. However, the person who has received the letter from their wife will not want that third person to know what their wife want to tell them –they could be romantic things or relationship issues, personal matters...–.

That was just an anecdote, but it was a real one, just like live in prison. The epistolary genre is in anyone's hands, and this genre that is barely used in our current european society, is still common and part of the daily life in prison. Letters are written, and received, everyday in prisons and there are definitely prisoners in prisons everywhere in the world who are waiting for a letter right now, or sat in a corner answering to the last one they received. In my case, it was also the need to communicate with my affective environment through letters what made me start writing and, once that you start doing it, you want your writing to be as elegant as possible: if you are in love, for example, you look for poetic forms; if you are answering to someone who made you angry, you will try to dramatise...

Writing is not only a natural exercise in prison, but also a necessary one: you need it not to lose contact with your family, friends or affective environment, to make requests to the penitentiary administration, to write to the judge, to explain your situation... you do all those things through written communication.

But **it is also a recourse to talk to yourself, to explain the penitentiary nonsense to yourself**, it is a good tool for that and that is mainly what urged me to write in a more literary form.



Jokin Urain writer