

GERNIKA

Luis Iriondo Aurtenetxea
A survivor's diary



Gernika is considered to be the holy town of the Basques. There is a tree, called the holy tree, under which the representatives of various towns met to try to resolve how to govern the area.

At the beginning of the war, in 1936 Gernika was a small town of about 5,000 inhabitants. It was an old town with a church from the XIV century. Narrow streets, houses with joists and brick walls were typical of the town. The local industry was made up of factories making machinery, weapons, especially guns for the army, cutlery etc. There was also smithing, sawyers, and the manufacture of slippers and even sweets and chocolate. Trade was very important

because the town was in the centre of a wide rural zone. On Mondays the inhabitants from around Gernika used to come here to sell their products in the market and to buy anything they needed for the rest of the week.

My name is Luis Iriondo Aurtenetxea and I am Juan Iriondo's and Elvira Aurtenetxea's son and I was born here in Gernika. I had two brothers and one sister: Rafael, the eldest, was 17 and he was studying commerce in Bilbao. Patxi, was 9 years old and my sister Mari Cruz, 5 years old. My parents had a furniture business and a coal yard. My mother took charge of the furniture shop and my father the coal yard. At home another person was living with us. She was called Damasa and came from Bermeo where she was living for more than 20 years. When we were children we were asked who we loved more, our mum or Damasa. This put us in a very difficult situation. Damasa was short and thin, but very strong, and she used to help my father delivering the coal. We also had a little dog called "Perla" and a donkey called "Perico". Perico was small and very nice; he pulled the cart while Perla sat on top of the baskets. Perico was well known among the boys of the town. Near our house there was a grass field, known in the town as "plazatoros" (the bullring) because sometimes, a portable bullring was put there. Perico used to graze at plazatoros after work. The field was also the playground of the nearby secondary school, and when Perico and the students met, they used to "bullfight" Perico, and he chased the students, in a funny and playful way, letting off resounding farts and making them laugh. Whenever he caught up with somebody, he used to push them with his nose, making them fall and then jump over them without touching. During the town fiesta there was always a donkey race. One day, a university student asked my father to let him use the donkey and take part in the competition. On the race day and when all of us were waiting for Perico, we were disappointed because Perico was last on the first lap and the donkey didn't even appear for the second lap. Perico was used to stopping in the doorways of shops, and he stopped in front of all of them, in spite of the efforts of the rider. When he got to his stable he went in and took the rider with him.

The first time I heard about the war I was on the beach. I was sunbathing on the sand next to my father who was talking with a friend, and I listened to their conversation. They were saying that there had been a rebellion of troops in the north of Africa, in

the Spanish protectorate of Morocco. It didn't seem like worrying news because Africa was very far away and it wasn't the first rebellion. In 1932, there had already been another military rebellion in Seville, by General Sanjurjo. That one failed, and in 1935 there was another one, this time it was the miners, in Asturias. Those times were quite unsettled.

Events continued, and increased in pace. Lorries and cars full of armed people started to be seen in the town. One day, two civilian guards riding horses, attracted a crowd by beating drums, they read a communiqué which said there was a state of war. For us, the children, everything was new and seemed like a game. There were no longer classes in school because there were no teachers; most of them were on the rebel side. My only concern was because I used to buy a comic, called "Mickey", which came from Barcelona. Every time I went to the bookshop the shop assistant shook his head and told me "it hasn't arrived yet". Little did I know it would never come and that I would never know whether the pirates' queen would kill the good boy or she would marry him.

The town was changing. Basic need items were becoming unavailable. Barracks were fitted out for the different troops. The front was 30 kms from Gernika, and news about young people from Gernika being killed was heard. The first aeroplanes were seen in the sky, too. Useless sandbag shelters were built, but then we did not know any better because there was no experience of bombing. For us, the teenagers, that situation was fun and we used to help loading the sacks and getting on the lorries that carried them.

At the beginning, when the aeroplanes were seen, the factory sirens were rung, but as the same sirens were used to call the workers, they were changed to bells. A surveillance post was set up on top of mount "Kosnoaga", overlooking Gernika and from there they waved a flag when they saw the planes. At the beginning, we used to run to the shelters when we heard the bells. Later, seeing that nothing ever happened and the alarms were rung nearly every day, and because the front was near, we stopped worrying and paying attention to the bells.

War wasn't going well for the Basques. Franco's troops attacked round Navarra and took San Sebastian. The frontier with France was closed, isolating by land the North of Spain, loyal to the Republican government. This left the sea as the only route to get food and guns. In the sea were the best naval units, loyal to Franco, they patrolled the seaside making provisioning difficult.

As the Francoist advance progressed, the first refugees arrived. More and more people were coming. With the new refugees continuously arriving and the troops in barracks, Gernika seemed to be in a festive season. The streets were full of people going up and down. We were free from our parents' supervision because they had other things on their minds, so we enjoyed life better than ever. We even had cigarettes. When lorries with tobacco for the barracks arrived we volunteered to help them unloading them and some packets always "fell into our pockets".

We heard about the bombing of nearby towns, especially Durango, only 20 km. from Gernika, and the construction of shelters was taken more seriously. In the square that we call "El Paseo" where a market took place on Mondays, four underground tunnels were built. One of them collapsed while it was being built, and the sky could be seen from inside, but it was rebuilt again.

My mother thought I had too much freedom and spoke with the manager of the bank of Bilbao, who needed people because all his young clerks had been mobilized. He hired me as an office boy and I ran errands and did other small jobs.

On the 25th of April 1937 I was near the “Paseo” with my friend Cipri (Cipriano Arrien). We were both very fond of drawing as a hobby. I envied him because he was very good at drawing motorbikes with their engines and I could only draw bicycles. We saw a column of militia retreating from the front and we approached them to see the machine guns and small cannons transported on mules. They were dirty and tired and went past at a weary pace on the road towards Bilbao. The Alarm Bells started ringing and we saw some planes flying overhead. Then Cipri told me he knew a safe place to take shelter if there was a bombing. He took me to the road of Luno and showed me a little hollow that I recognised because it was next to a stream where I had tried to hunt birds with sticks covered with glue. (I never got one!)

On the 26th of April I was going happily to the bank, after having lunch. The day before I had just worn my first long trousers. Wearing long trousers meant that our parents didn’t consider us children any more. One of my friends, who was much taller than me, had been wearing them for ages, and I was nagging my mother to make me some. When I wore them for the first time my mother told me that they were only for Sundays, but on the 26th, Monday and market day my mother let me wear them for work. When I got to the office, there was only one clerk. He was a refugee bank clerk from Lekeitio, a seaside town, and from where he had had to escape because of the advance of the Francoist troops.

A little later, the alarm bells started ringing. The man asked me:

“Why are bells ringing?”

– “Planes” I told him playing down the importance of it. “They are the alarm bells.”

The man was frightened.

– “Where is there a shelter?” He asked.

– “Pass the cattle fairground” I told him “go up some stairs and at the end of the square there are some.”

– “Come with me!” He ordered and I had to follow him very half-heartedly.

The cattle market was further down than “El Paseo” (the market square) in woodland called “El ferial”.

Before getting to the entrance of the first of the shelters, the first bombs exploded. People ran and squeezed together at the entrance, and I was pushed inwards. It was very hot because the ceiling was low, and there wasn’t any ventilation so it was hard to breathe. I thought I would die of suffocation. I also remembered the shelter that had collapsed while it was being built and I was terrified thinking about what could happen if a bomb fell on it. Outside, a bit further away, explosions were heard. But a bit later they stopped and the militia men who were at the door told us we could leave.

I came to life breathing fresh air again. I met a friend.

– “It seems the bombing has been in Renteria” He said. Renteria is a neighbourhood on the other bank across the only bridge that crosses the river in the town.

– “Let’s go and see what has happened” I told him, forgetting the bank and the clerk of Lekeitio.

But before we arrived to the steps, the alarm bells rang again and we ran again towards the shelters. Everybody ran. This time, even though the explosions were closer, I waited until everybody was in and I stayed near the entrance. A wall of earth sacks prevented me seeing what was happening outside. There I could breathe better, but this time the only defence I had against the bombs was those earth sacks.

Now the explosions were heavier. “El Paseo” is a U shaped square where the girls’ and boys’ schools form the side arms and the central part was a terrace under which were our shelters. The entire square was sheltered so the people could shelter

from the rain. Bombs seemed to be dropped in salvos because they caused a long lasting sound. This noise seemed to enter one side of the square and run all over it generating the long sound, we became gloomy, it felt like the sound got into our bodies. The explosions were followed by gusts of hot air. The air was warm, revolting; I thought it was death-flavoured.

I didn't know then, but later, after years I've discovered that the planes had taken off from the airports of Vitoria and Burgos. The first one was, in a straight line, 50 kilometres from Gernika and the other one 140. The planes taking part in the bombing were three squadrons of heavy bombers Junker JU 52, about 27 aircrafts, a squadron (nine aircrafts) of bombers Heinkel HE-111, protected by 18 fighter planes, nine Heinkel HE-51 and nine Messerschmitt ME-109. Altogether about 55 aircrafts.



Gernika didn't have any defence. According to a telegram sent by the Basque president Aguirre to the Airforce Minister on the 15th of April, eleven days before the bombing, there were only 4 aircraft in Biscay ready to fly. In Gernika there was only a machine gun in the militia men barracks to defend the town, and it jammed as soon as it started shooting. So the German planes could bomb at their pleasure, without any obstacles. During the bombing it seemed like there were some short pauses. Bombers took turns. They dropped bombs and may have gone back to Vitoria, to replace the bombs. They could fly there in 15 minutes.

I tried to pray, but I couldn't finish any prayer. I thought I was going to die, and I wanted to get ready for it, but the noise stopped me. I couldn't think because of the bangs and the heat coming from outside. I thought of my friend Cipri and I envied him because I thought he was watching what was happening without any risk. I promised myself that if I could leave I would never come back to a shelter and I would run to the field.

But the bombing went on and seemed never-ending. How long were we under the bombs? I was near a militiaman and in a moment I asked him: "Will it finish soon?" I thought that because of his experience in the war he would be able to answer my question. He looked at me, shrugged his shoulders and didn't answer.

Finally the explosions stopped. The militiaman looked at me and said: "It has already finished."

I went out and stopped, terrified. The whole town was in flames. Smoke covered the sky. I started running past the damaged stalls and ran towards the road of Luno. Other people escaping from Gernika were running in the same direction. Next to the Udetxea's fountain something bright attracted my attention. I approached and saw it was like a metal tube. It was broken and from inside poured a white mass. It was an

incendiary bomb. As I read long after, 3,000 bombs like that were dropped together with other 50,000 kilos of explosive bombs.



When we arrived at the first bend in the road, there was a militiaman standing guard. Behind him and in the place where my friend Cipri had shown me his shelter, I thought I saw some corpses. I approached to see but the militiaman didn't let me. In that moment I didn't relate the corpses to my friend Cipri. I didn't understand that Cipri could have died. Later, when I came back to Gernika, I knew that one of those corpses was his.

A little later a woman told me she had seen my mother with my sister and I realized I had not thought of my family. The survival instinct had blocked any other feeling. I asked her about my other relatives but she knew nothing. At the second bend in the road, known as "Cuatro Bancos" (Four benches), I met my friend Eloy. He had not seen any of my relatives and neither had I his. We went up to a hilltop where we could see Gernika, and there sitting on the grass we watched as our town was burning. Eloy's house, next to mine, was one of the biggest in Gernika. It was known as "The circus" because inside there was an assembly hall but that was closed for years. At that moment its walls collapsed causing a big cloud of smoke. Eloy, without showing any emotion, told me:

"There are my grandmother and my aunt. One deaf and the other one paralysed."

I had a packet of cigarettes in my pocket and I offered him a cigarette. I didn't care if any familiar person could see me smoking. I thought that that day we had turned into men. In fact I didn't like smoking, but I thought that circumstances demanded it. But we couldn't light the cigarettes. In spite of Gernika being consumed by flames, we didn't have any fire to light our cigarettes.

"I've heard" Eloy told me, while we threw away our useless cigarettes, "that they have dropped papers saying that they will come back tomorrow and destroy what remains standing and the farmhouses around."

"We could go to the cavern of Forua", I answered.

This was a cave in a nearby village, two kilometres from Gernika, next to a quarry. But it was getting dark and it wasn't a good idea to go through the mountains but even less attractive was going through the burning town. We decided to go there next day, but we needed to find a safe place to sleep that night. We decided to go up to Luno that night.

Luno (Lumo in Basque) is a small village, situated two kilometres above Gernika. A long time ago, Gernika was just a neighbourhood of Luno, but in 1366 the Count Don Tello, Lord of Biscay, gave Gernika some special privileges and declared it independent. Now it was a church with some houses around, forming a square.

When we got there, we saw a house with the door open and light inside. We approached and one of the women at the door recognized me, because she lived near my house.

Elvira's son, the furniture shop assistant - told the other people and invited us to come in. The kitchen was full of people. Most of them had escaped from Gernika, too. We were given a bowl of milk. It was full of cream and I didn't like cream but I plucked up courage and swallowed it. After that, they offered to let us sleep in some camp beds in the stable that had been left by soldiers retreating. They gave us some sacks to cover ourselves.

In the stable, with the heat of the animals, it wasn't cold and as I was tired by the day's emotions I got to sleep quickly. I don't know how long I had been sleeping when suddenly something woke me up. I got up from my camp bed not knowing why, when I heard someone calling my name. I moved the sacks away and without saying anything to Eloy, I went outside. The fire from Gernika illuminated the square and I saw my mother's silhouette shouting my name again. I ran towards her and we embraced each other.

"Let's go to the town" she told me when we moved away a little later. "We are going to be taken to Bilbao."

While we were going down by the road, she told me what had happened to them during the bombing. She had escaped to the country with Mari Cruz, her youngest sister, and they hid in a trench during the bombing. Patxi, my brother who then was ten years old, was the one who had suffered most. He was near the high school building that was then a communist barracks, when the bombing started. The guard who was on sentry duty took him to the nearest field where they lay down. A bomb struck nearby and when Patxi turned over he only saw an arm stuck out of the debris that had fallen on them. Terrified, he started running along the street with the idea of going to a shelter he knew there was in a house called "The count Arana". He ran and ran as fast as he was able to, not listening to the shouts of people asking him to shelter with them. He got to the shelter just as some bombs fell close to it. He fainted on the floor, but fortunately, my father was inside and took him in his arms. Taking advantage of one of the pauses in the bombing, everybody left the building and went to the ground floor of the town hall. This was because a house which also had been fitted out as a shelter 150 metres away, had started burning, and this one may also be attacked and destroyed, but they had time to escape.

When the bombing was completely finished my father looked for my mother and gave her Patxi, then he ran to our house trying to save some things. The house was burning and he headed to the stable where Perico was. He opened the door but a sudden blaze pushed him back. Looking through the flames he could see Perico trying to get loose. He tried getting inside but at that moment the stable collapsed burying Perico inside. After that, my father always complained about having arrived too late, because he had loved the funny animal.

We knew that my brother Rafael had been seen, after the bombing, helping in a burning shop to save pieces of cloth. A friend of ours, who worked in the "Ertzaintza" (Basque police), had managed to get a car in order to give us a lift to Bilbao.

When we arrived in Gernika there were a lot of people moving around. Soldiers and firemen from Bilbao tried pointlessly to put out the fire. They moved the hoses shouting and giving orders, but pipes had burst and there was no water. Next to the Meeting House of Gernika, is the tree that makes our town famous, and there were a lot of people there too. They seemed to be politicians and journalist just arrived from Bil-

bao. The car that would take my mother and us to Bilbao was there, but my father wasn't there. We got in the car and left for the provincial capital.

At the beginning we stayed in the house of a furniture salesman, a very close friend of the family. My father met us there. We were a very heavy burden to our host and we quickly found a flat that belonged to a labour union leader who was fighting at the front and who agreed to us living there while we were homeless. The flat was in a six floored house in a working-class neighbourhood, next to the town hall of Bilbao. It was close to the mountainside of Artxanda, one of the mountains that surround Bilbao. We used to go to eat to the charity dining hall set up by the municipal health service for the many new refugees coming to Bilbao. Nearby there was a railway tunnel and my brother Patxi spent all day long inside it. He was so afraid of the planes that we had to take the food to him because he refused to leave the tunnel during the day. We knew that my other brother, Rafael, who was 18, was drafted in a transmissions battalion.

Meanwhile, the Francoist troops had got into Gernika and were approaching the defences surrounding Bilbao called "El cinturón de hierro" (the iron belt). The engineer who had built it, Luis Goikoetxea, later inventor of the train "Talgo", had left some weak areas and he changed allegiances, taking the maps with him. So it was not difficult to break the "belt" and continue advancing to Bilbao. Basque troops put up a lot of resistance, but with very few means and without air cover, they were being thrashed by the enemy planes during the day. They had to counterattack at night to try to recover the lost positions. In Bilbao we could hear the sounds of battle taking place close to mount Artxanda, almost over our heads.

One day, I came down to Bilbao and saw some militiamen recruiting anybody they thought could bear a rifle, and sending them to the front. One of them grabbed me by the arm and tried to take me.

"I'm only fourteen" I told him, but he didn't take any notice. I managed to release his hand and started to run. He didn't attempt to follow me.

I went back home. The fight was taking place in Artxanda, less than one kilometre from my house, and I was alone at home. My mother, together with my sister, had gone to the tunnel to keep Patxi company. Among the syndicalist's books I had found a novel and I was reading it when I heard a noise like a car starting, but it was somehow different. Suddenly, I realized what it was. An artillery shell! I threw the book away and started running downstairs. We lived on the fifth floor and there was no lift. Before getting to the doorway I heard the explosion. It sounded a bit far away. It must have been a shell launched against the front line that was aimed incorrectly, and passed over our heads.

When my father got home that night, he said:

We are not safe here. You have to get out, but I'm not allowed to go. I've found out about a train leaving to Santander tonight and you have to take it.

We gathered the few things we had and went to the railway station. To go via the streets was dangerous. The battle was not far away in Artxanda and bullets fell down over Bilbao, making a strange metal noise when they hit the tram cables. We had to avoid the streets that faced the mountain at Artxanda, or to run close to walls when we had no alternative. When we arrived, the platforms were crammed with people with suitcases, blankets, mattresses, bags etc. My father went to enquire, and a little later he came back.

He said "Nobody knows anything. They don't even know if the train is leaving. I've heard that in the port, in front of the University of Deusto, a ship is leaving to Santander."

Again we had to run through the streets of Bilbao accompanied by the sound of bullets. As we were crossing a square I seemed to hear the noise of artillery fire and lay down on the floor. Every body did it, but nothing happened. It must have been a car this time.

“I thought it was a shell” I told my father to apologize.

When we got to the port, the last people were embarking. We said goodbye to my father, giving him a strong hug and got on the ship. We were sent to the bow. A tug towed the ship with the lights off. Arriving at the mouth of the river, the tug left us and the ship. We followed the coastline, in order to avoid the enemy ships, and headed for Santander.

Dawn was breaking when we arrived. We disembarked and were sent to a cinema where we were given bread and cheese. My mother left us, asking me to look after my brother and sister. In the middle of the morning she came back to tell us that we had a place to sleep that night. She had been to look for a furniture builder who she had bought from and had invited us to spend the night. He gave us Spanish omelette for dinner and as I was very hungry, it tasted like the world’s most delicious omelette.

In the distribution of refugees, we had to go to Torrelavega, a town located 20 kilometres from Santander. There we were booked in a house in the middle of the town, where we had a big room for the four of us. We used to go to the municipal health service to eat. The food supply problems were evident. There were more and more refugees and less and less food. In the middle of the afternoon we were not even strong enough to go up to the second floor where we lived and we had to hold on the handrail because we were so weak. My mother was afraid for our health and one day, leaving us, went back to Santander to look for a solution to our situation. She came back in the afternoon and told us:

– “Be ready. Tomorrow we’ll leave”.

– “Where are we going to go?” I asked her.

– “I don’t know, I think to France. A ship is leaving tonight from Santander and we have to get on it. We can’t stand this any more”.

That night we embarked on an English coal ship. Its name was “Kenwick Pool”. We were told to go to the hold of the ship. Here there were sacks of wheat that we used as a bed. Possibly the ship had arrived with that cargo and now they used it to give us shelter. It smelled of people, and crowds. With the movement of the ship at night, I started feeling sick. When dawn started to break, I put a handful of wheat in my pocket and went up on deck. The wheat was to try to take the edge off my hunger. It was cold out, there was heavy sea and the ship was moving quite a lot. At the sides of the ship, overhanging the sea there were a kind of wooden huts. They were the toilets for the huge number of refugees on the ship. I pretended to chew the wheat but it was too dry and hard and it didn’t stop my hunger.

The sea calmed down and we sailed to the north of France safely. The ship anchored outside a port, where we spent nearly all day, waiting for them to let us to disembark. Instead of that, the ship weighed anchor and sailed south again. After another night in the ship we arrived at Bordeaux. Next to the dock where the ship had berthed was a railway station. In a wooden building we were vaccinated and boarded a train. While we were waiting for the train to leave a group of young ladies approached the train sharing out chocolate bars. I doubted whether my French, learnt at school, was good enough to get some chocolate. That’s the reason I told my little sister:

Tell the first girl passing “donnez moi de chocolate”.

So she did and spite of her pronunciation, or perhaps because she held out her hand, she was given a bar. That encouraged me to use the French I had learnt at school from now on.

The train departed north and the trip was like a triumphal parade. It stopped at a lot of big railway stations where there were authorities and a lot of people waiting, even in some places with a band, not only did they welcome us, but had abundant food, too. We were welcomed with banners and garlands, as if we came victorious from battle, yet we came broken and defeated.

One group of people got off the train at each station. As we went further North, less and less people remained in the train. Once an old man burst in our coach, armed with a knife, and was shouting for the train to stop. He said he wanted to go back home. Apparently, he had suffered so many radical changes that it had disturbed his mental state, and he yearned for his home. Somebody must have pulled the alarm chain because the train stopped. The man jumped out, but some railway employees followed him and brought him back to the train. We knew nothing more about him.

Finally, we arrived to our destination. We were in Vernon-Eure, department of Normandy, a town situated 60 kilometres west from Paris. We were taken to an old building that in another time must have been a fire-station, but now a trade union took up one side of the building, and we occupied the rest. The kitchen and the dining room were on the first floor, and in the attic, under the roof, there were two rooms used as dormitories. There was a small room between them, and one boy from Bilbao and me were settled there because we were the eldest among the children. The beds must have been brought from the barracks in front of our house. They consisted of some planks leaned on iron supports and mattresses made of straw. After the three nights spent in the ship and the train, they seemed to be made of feathers.

As I was the only one with some knowledge of French, I became the colony interpreter. I used to go shopping with my mother, and she was appointed as administrator for the group, perhaps because she was the interpreter's mother. We were a group of about thirty people and the women took turns in the kitchen. Every week the town council's representative came to take the register and give us an allowance, although I didn't know where it came from. Possibly it was from the Spanish or the Basque government.

It was a nice town, situated on the bank of the river Seine where there was a big beach. On the beach was a lifeguard, an ex-champion swimmer, who helped me to improve my swimming. But in spite of being far from the war and being safe, we all missed our country.

The first time we went out, to get to know the town, Patxi suddenly curled up against a wall and started to shout, "a plane, a plane!" It was a plane, a commercial plane flying over us at that moment. It took a lot of hard work to make him understand that we were not in a war zone and that he didn't have to be afraid of planes, but he was still terrified after the bombing. That terror would never leave him. When he was older, tall and strong, he played centre forward in the Gernika soccer team, where he was known for his courage against the opposition players. On stormy days he became nervous and quick-tempered. It was in vain that we told him not to be afraid. Unconsciously, the thunderclaps reminded him of the sound of the bombs, and although he tried, he never succeeded to overcome this obsession.

In Vernon, not long after that, Patxi fell ill. He had appendicitis. He was sent to hospital where he had his appendix taken out. He didn't enjoy it, and whenever we visited him, he asked us to get him out. He couldn't understand the French speaking people at the hospital and he felt very lonely, with nobody to talk to.

At the end of July we had news of my father. He was still in Bilbao, in the same flat where we left him. Rafael was taken prisoner. He asked us to come back and my mother didn't hesitate to do it. She was a very determined person. She left me looking after my brother and sister and, without knowing a word of French, she went to Paris, to the Basque Government offices, and sorted out the papers to go back.

We had to go through Paris when the International Fair was taking place and where, in the Spanish Pavilion, Picasso's painting with the name of my town was being exhibited for the first time. Unfortunately, we didn't know about it, and it would have been impossible for us to visit it anyway. We departed at night and next morning we were at the Spanish border.

What we found in Spain was very different from what we had left there. We had to sort out our papers in the town council of Irun and when we went to a bar to have breakfast, a notice on the wall attracted my attention. It said: "If you are Spanish, speak Spanish". I thought it was addressed to people coming from France, but it referred to our language, Basque.

On the train, from San Sebastian to Bilbao, a man started talking to us. We told him we were from Gernika and started telling him about the bombing and destruction of our town when he put a finger on his lips and looking around he told us:

- "Don't say that Gernika was bombed."
 - "Why ?" We asked him.
 - "Because it must be said that it was burnt by the reds."
- That was the last time we spoke about the matter.



The victims' number is still unknown



1937-Luis Iriondo was 14

The bombing of Gernika, when it appeared in the press all over the world, caused a great impact and surprise to the Francoists because it discredited their cause. So, to counteract the effect, they issued propaganda that the separatist reds, while retreating, had destroyed the town by burning it. What they didn't explain was who had killed all the dead people. Without coming to Gernika to speak with the survivors, the press looked for proof of what they said. That's the reason they published a photograph of Saint John's church, burnt and with some petrol barrels beside it. We, the inhabitants of Gernika, knew that those barrels belonged to the petrol station next to the church. That was because at that time, as there were no tankers, petrol was transported in barrels. There is another picture, earlier than the one published, possibly taken the day after

the bombing, in which the barrels don't appear. On another occasion, I saw in a newspaper from Madrid, a photograph of Santa Maria's church with this footnote: "Church of Santa Maria, destroyed by separatists retreating and rebuilt by Franco's Spain". The church in the picture was six centuries old.

When we arrived in Bilbao, my parents went through the procedure for releasing my brother Rafael, who was a prisoner, but the same day he was released, they drafted him into their army. We went to the railway station to welcome him coming from prison and at the same time to say goodbye to him on the train that took him to his new assignment as a soldier of Franco and to the front.

My father had to work in a factory in Bilbao and my mother went to Gernika in order to start the furniture business again. The town was in ruins and in the basement of some buildings, not completely destroyed, some shops had started up. The town council fitted out the ground floor of the schools, next to the shelters, and even these were used as shops. In one of those places my mother, thanks to the credit of the manufacturers who knew her, could resume her business. I couldn't go on studying because of the unstable financial situation we were living in and started looking for a job, getting ready to work in an office.

When I visited Gernika, prisoners of war were employed in debris removal works. The streets were clear and it was possible to walk through them. Then I found out about Capri's death.

When the war finished, in 1939, we were still living in Bilbao because only part of Gernika had been reconstructed and in 1942, a month before starting military service, my father died suddenly of pneumonia. While I was a soldier, my family moved to Gernika, to a house in the same street where we had lived before the war, next to "plazatoros", the open space where Perico used to chase the secondary school students.



Though it was officially forbidden to speak about the destruction of Gernika as result of bombing, in conversations and among friends and relatives in the town, it was usual to speak about it freely. In the parish church the young used to publish a sort of newspaper addressed to the missing people from Gernika. We had to make a play on words alluding to the burning and destruction, of Gernika, but without writing the word "bombing", though everybody knew what the words we wrote meant. In 1953, when I was in Bilbao, I was introduced to two French journalists to whom I talked candidly.

They even took me to Gernika in their car and photographed me in the town. I don't know what they wrote, but I told them everything. Little by little the censorship relaxed and almost reluctantly information started to be written about it. At first questioning the responsibility for its destruction, until in 1970, Vicente Talon, a journalist from Bilbao, published the book "Arde Gernika", a collection of survivors' testimonies. Thirty-three years after the bombing, the Regime seemed it didn't care to maintain the lie any more. The world had forgotten the tragedy and the spreading of the truth couldn't damage it anymore.

With the arrival of democracy, books relating to the topic proliferated, but they were not news any more. In 1987 we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the bombing as though it was a great party. There was music everywhere, dances, rock concerts etc. Young people of all types and from everywhere arrived in the town and it seemed like they took possession of the town, and paraded as though they conquered it, committing all kinds of outrages. It was a gloomy day for all of us who had lived through the bombing. It was being celebrated with a party of fun and merrymaking to commemorate our town's destruction and the death of lots of loved ones. Somebody said: "God willing there won't be another bombing. We hope not to be able to celebrate another anniversary like this!"

Ten years later, in 1997 everything was different. A mass was performed in the graveyard, in the mausoleum devoted to the people who died that day, and the bell from the destroyed church of Saint John rang during the ceremony. It rang slowly, as a death march from other times. There was also a meeting between the German authorities and the survivors, where the German ambassador, read for the first time, a paper written by the German president, recognizing that it had been their air force who had dropped the bombs on Gernika. On behalf of the survivors, I answered the ambassador saying that "then, when 'other German people' came to Gernika, we couldn't be understood because they were up there and we down here and they saw us as ants desperate to escape and ants and men can't communicate. But now yes, everybody is the same height and we can be understood and walk together and be in peace."

To finish, I have to add some notes. My brother Patxi died quite young, he was 28 when he died of a strange cancer-like illness. Possibly his illness is not related to the bombing, but I have always thought that that fateful day, something broke inside my brother because of the horror he suffered and that showed up years later as that illness. We didn't know anything more about our dog "Perla" and I have always trusted she would save herself and find a new owner. When we came back from France we were given a granddaughter of her. She was the same colour and when she grew up was the spitting image of her grandmother. We called her "Perla" too and always thought of her as if she were the one we had lost.

Sometimes I speak about militiamen and about "gudaris" (soldiers). The latter were the Basque parties' soldiers. The militiamen belonged to the various national parties: socialists, communists, anarchists etc, and they wore for a uniform a dungaree, like those the factory workers wear.

Something that has been spoken about a lot is the matter of the number of dead people. When we got to France, I read in a newspaper that there had been about three thousand, and although it seemed to be a lot, after having seen what happened I thought it could be about right. Not long ago, a Bilbao newspaper published a photograph of a Gernika street before the war, and it gave the same figure for the number of victims. At the time of the bombing, the population of Gernika would be about seven or nine thousand inhabitants. Taking into account the number of refugees, the accommodated soldiers etc and supposing that the figure was right, one in every three persons in Gernika

had died. In my home there were 12 of us, including our family, plus uncles and cousins who had arrived as refugees, and nobody died. Looking at my friends and other known families, doesn't give that percentage either. I think there has been a desire to increase the catastrophe, and exaggerate the quantity of dead people, as if that measured the disaster. The town's magazine "Aldaba" has done research into it, and recently published that the quantity of dead people was about 120. Another later piece of research, extended to the farmhouses and villages around, from where people could have moved to Gernika that day, increased the figure to about 220 dead. It's possible that the number was bigger if the number of people who died from their injuries in hospital or other places is included.

There is a one thing that saved a lot of lives. The first aeroplanes tried to destroy the bridge over the river and that would have made the retreating difficult. The objective was not achieved but the bombs did cause a victim, in a person who had taken refuge under the bridge. As the bridge was quite far from the centre of the town, and especially from the market, there was time enough for the people to run to the shelters or to escape to the countryside, although this last option didn't save everybody, because a lot of them died when machine-gunned by the fighters.

Another aspect that could seem strange, is the fact that none of the possible military objectives in Gernika were bombed. There was a firearms factory that made pistols and tactical machine pistols. The machinery factory had become a bomb factory, and the rest of the industry also cooperated in the armaments manufacture that was the priority at the time. All of them were on the outskirts of the town, and none of them was touched. The reason was that they expected to take Gernika very soon and make the most of its industry. In fact, it was only three days later when they got into the town.

Nowadays Gernika is a nice and modern town, with a population of about fifteen thousand inhabitants and where there are no reminders of its destruction. Where once the "plazatoros" was, there is a new building for the market, and where it still takes place every Monday during the year. The young people have heard about the bombing, and it's something completely alien to them, for them it's only a historical event.

The town council, forgetting past events, has twinned itself with a German town, called Pforzheim, which was also destroyed, this time by the British air force during World War II. The German Government had promised, as an act of atonement, to build in Gernika a technical studies high school, but finally it limited its donation to three million marks, to help in the building of a sports centre.

Nowadays Gernika is called "the Peace Town" and there is a permanent office devoted to the spread of reconciliation techniques, called "Gernika Gogoratuz" (Remembering Gernika).