

Pride and prejudice

To many Spanish, the Basques were just gun-toting ingrates - until the Madrid bombings changed everything. Now, peace is in the air, and a people can dare to be proud again

By Elizabeth Nash

11 May 2004

For centuries, villagers from the mountains and valleys of the Basque country have made the solemn pilgrimage to the town of Gernika, to stand beneath an ancient oak tree and defend their rights and liberties - and demand homage from the kings of Spain. The tree represents their identity, their assertion of nationhood, their refusal to bow to outside domination.

Last month this mighty oak died, killed by fungal infection and a freak summer drought. Now the lifeless trunk sports only spindly twigs and a few dead leaves that flap and spin in the wind. The parched relic sits incongruously in the centre of a rainsodden park that shimmers with blinding iridescence between intermittent cloudbursts.

But a new oak is growing nearby, nurtured from an acorn produced by the 144-year-old tree. That in turn came from a still older husk, protected by the little temple on the springy lawn, dating back more than 300 years. "It's the expression of our spirit," said Pedro Bilbao, the gardener who tends the park. "The tree has died but the new one is born."

Basques mourn the death of their sacred tree, but welcome the green shoots of hope that are sprouting in a region long riven with hatred and violence. The Madrid train bombings in March represented a watershed moment for Spain in many ways and the new optimism of the Basque country owes much to the sense of shock and revulsion at the appalling loss of human life. The Basque journalist Gorka Landaburu, who lost several fingers and his left eye three years ago when Eta separatists sent him a letter bomb, expresses a widely held determination to move on.

"A new life cycle is starting to replace the old. A new tree will grow to coincide with the new political cycle that is beginning. The tree has died, long live the tree," he says. After months of painful surgery, Mr Landaburu has undergone a personal renaissance. Not only has he recovered his writing skills, but six months ago he launched the region's first Basque-language weekly newspaper, Aldaketa, which means "Change".

Basques have long been portrayed in Spain and abroad as sullen pistol-toting whingers who don't appreciate the prosperity and freedom they enjoy. A small number of Eta terrorists have tainted a whole people with the stain of violence. Faced by a barrage of hostility and incomprehension - intensified by hardliners from Madrid - many Basques withdrew into the protective body-armour of grievance and victimism.

No foreign power dared mediate such a perilous and intractable conflict. Bill Clinton helped Northern Ireland on the path to peace, but no one risked burning their fingers for the Basques. But suddenly Basques are breathing more freely and starting to feel good about themselves.

In a sign of the changing mood, Brussels last week gave the go-ahead for Euskera, the ancient language Basques have fiercely defended for centuries, to become an officially recognised European language. Their whirring, clacking tongue will be accepted as a "treaty language". The measure, initiated by the month-old socialist government of Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, meets a long-held Basque demand spurned by the previous ruling conservatives.

EU documents will be translated into Euskera (and Catalan and Gallego - Spain's other minority languages). Correspondence between Brussels and Basque authorities will be conducted in Basque, marking the international acceptance of a language suppressed for decades by Franco's dictatorship.

Relief now gusts through the Basque country with a keenness as penetrating as the recent rainstorms. "A new political phase has opened of respect and institutional participation," said Spain's deputy prime minister, Maria Teresa Fernandez de la Vega, when she confirmed the measure last Friday. As the siege mentality softens, Basques find themselves treated by Spain's new socialist ministers as people who can hold a sensible conversation and whose historic rights deserve respect. This moment, long awaited, marks a climate of dialogue that Basques believe could eventually overcome decades of separatist terror and restore their reputation as a civilised, industrious people.

"Good new winds are blowing from Madrid that could help solve the Basque conflict," the Basque regional prime minister, Juan Jose Ibarretxe, told an international peace conference in San Sebastian last weekend. "We see light at the end of the tunnel, and I'm convinced it's not the train coming the other way." Madrid's new approach, he said, "accepts that you can't fight terrorism with wars, but by examining and resolving the underlying causes."

This new political phase marks a continuity of the spirit of Gernika. Javier Zenikazelaya, a teacher, shepherds a troop of children around the old oak: "We Basques worship our trees, we share with the Celts and Germans the pre-Christian belief that trees are sacred. This tree is the symbol of our liberties that go back nearly a thousand years. The parliament of Gernika is among the oldest in Europe."

Basques boast of their passion to maintain their language and culture, of how they never left their frontiers to conquer others, and resisted outside domination ever since Caesar's legionaries left them alone in exchange for free passage between Gaul and Hispania. "Kings of Spain bent their knee to assemblies of Basque farmworkers at this spot," Mr Zenikazelaya says. "Gernika is the shrine to our freedoms. That's why it was bombarded."

On 26 April 1937, Hitler's Condor legion of Junkers and Heinkels flew over Gernika for three hours, dropping bombs on the market square and machine-gunning terrified

townsfolk from the air. It was a sunny market day, and the town was packed with people from outlying villages.

Luis Iriondo, 78, was 11 when the waves of planes flew in. "I felt the hot air from the bombs and heard the deafening roar of the planes. Those three long hours seemed like eternity. When it was over the whole town was in flames, the sky covered with smoke. There were bodies everywhere."

Thousands died in the first civilian bombardment in European warfare, and the devastation inspired Picasso's *Guernica*, one of the 20th century's finest paintings. The Spanish spelling of the town's name is now used only for the painting.

Young Luis, his mother and two small sisters fled to Bilbao, then to Santander, and were taken aboard an English cargo ship, the *Kenwick Pool*, one of many British vessels that rescued dispossessed Basques from Franco's advancing troops. Thousands of refugees spent the civil war in Britain, but the *Kenwick Pool* docked at Bordeaux. Months later Luis and his family rejoined his father and elder brother in Bilbao, and eventually they returned to Gernika.

But the tree was unharmed. "Yes, the tree is a survivor too," he chuckles. "It may die but the symbol doesn't die. They plant another tree and it continues. We strike our deals under a tree. That's what 'Basque honour' means: shaking hands under the tree."

Mr Iriondo attended the commemoration in Dresden last year of the Allied bombardment of the German city during the Second World War. The gesture of reconciliation included opposition to the war in Iraq. "I am convinced all wars could be solved, even our conflict with Eta, if we sat down and talked," he says.

An hour's drive from Gernika is the elegant resort of San Sebastian, a different world. Lounging along one of the finest beaches in Spain, this city is so chic that the French come here to eat. Its restaurants account for 10 Michelin stars, its newspapers devote sections to gastronomia.

San Sebastian has been a byword for style since moneyed Basques made it a summer pleasure-ground for royalty in the 19th century. Belle époque villas still line the seafront of some of the most sought-after real estate in Spain. But the old portside with its grid of narrow lanes used to be the heartland of separatist militancy. Taverns draped in the *ikurriña* flag had photos of imprisoned Eta gunmen on the walls, and collection jars on the bars to support their families. All that is gone. The pro-Eta *Batasuna* party was banned last year, and the taverns shut. Walls are free of threatening slogans, and of the sinister symbol of the cross-hatched bullseye. In *La Cepa* bar, where the regional conservative leader Gregorio Ordóñez was gunned down 10 years ago, drinkers concentrate on having a good time.

Even San Sebastian's film festival, whose organisers unveiled this September's programme last Friday, reflects the freer mood. It will celebrate anti-establishment filmmakers from the Marx brothers and Luis Buñuel to Michael Moore. The poster shows a naked man with his fist clenched, a scandalised bishop in the background. Such provocation was unthinkable a year ago, when conservative politicians tried to ban Julio

Medem's film, *The Basque Ball*, from the festival. In Medem's documentary, Basques of different opinions talk about the conflict and how it might be solved. The film caused a furore and prompted the former culture minister, Pilar de Castillo, to accuse the director of helping the terrorist cause.

Then came the Madrid train bombings, initially blamed on Eta, that killed 192 on 11 March. "I woke that morning with a sense of despair, I was ready to leave the country," Julio Medem said. "Fury gushed from two groups: old Francoists and victims of Eta, and I was a liability."

Medem's film shows all angles of Basque opinion from armed separatists to conservative hardliners, from Eta supporters to victims of attacks. "I tried to respect the opinions of all I spoke to. The government must open the doors to dialogue," he said.

What happened on 11 March changed everything. The Islamist attacks made every Spaniard revolt against terrorism, and pushed Eta deeper into isolation, says Gorka Landaburu. "Even Eta sympathisers now urge the organisation to abandon arms," he says. "They just need some face-saving formula." Eta is reckoned to be at its weakest, crushed by a security clampdown, shunned by a nation traumatised by the slaughter of 11 March.

"Eta has not killed anyone for a year. So we have a sort of undeclared truce," Mr Landaburu says. "But that's not enough. I still have bodyguards, and so do thousands who have received Eta death threats. Eta has done terrible damage to the Basques. We're news only when they commit some outrage. But when they disappear, we'll recover our good name and our sense of self-worth. We must talk together. This is our great opportunity." He holds out the stumps of his truncated fingers, fixes me with his good eye. "If we have to help Eta find a way out of the cold, I'll be the first to lend a hand."

In the park of Gernika the gardener, Pedro Bilbao, trims the lawn. Sunshine bursts from behind the clouds and blazes on the leaves of the young tree, near the skeleton of the old. "Outsiders think we walk around with pistols at the ready, but the truth is completely the opposite. I hope we can show that we are a peaceful people."