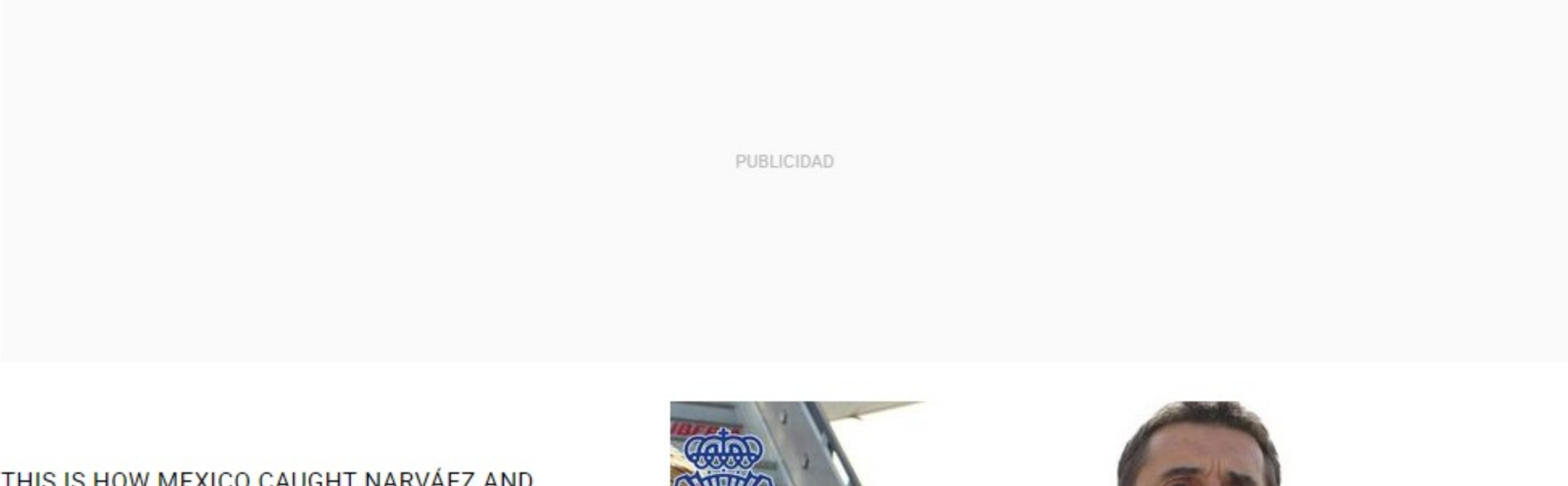


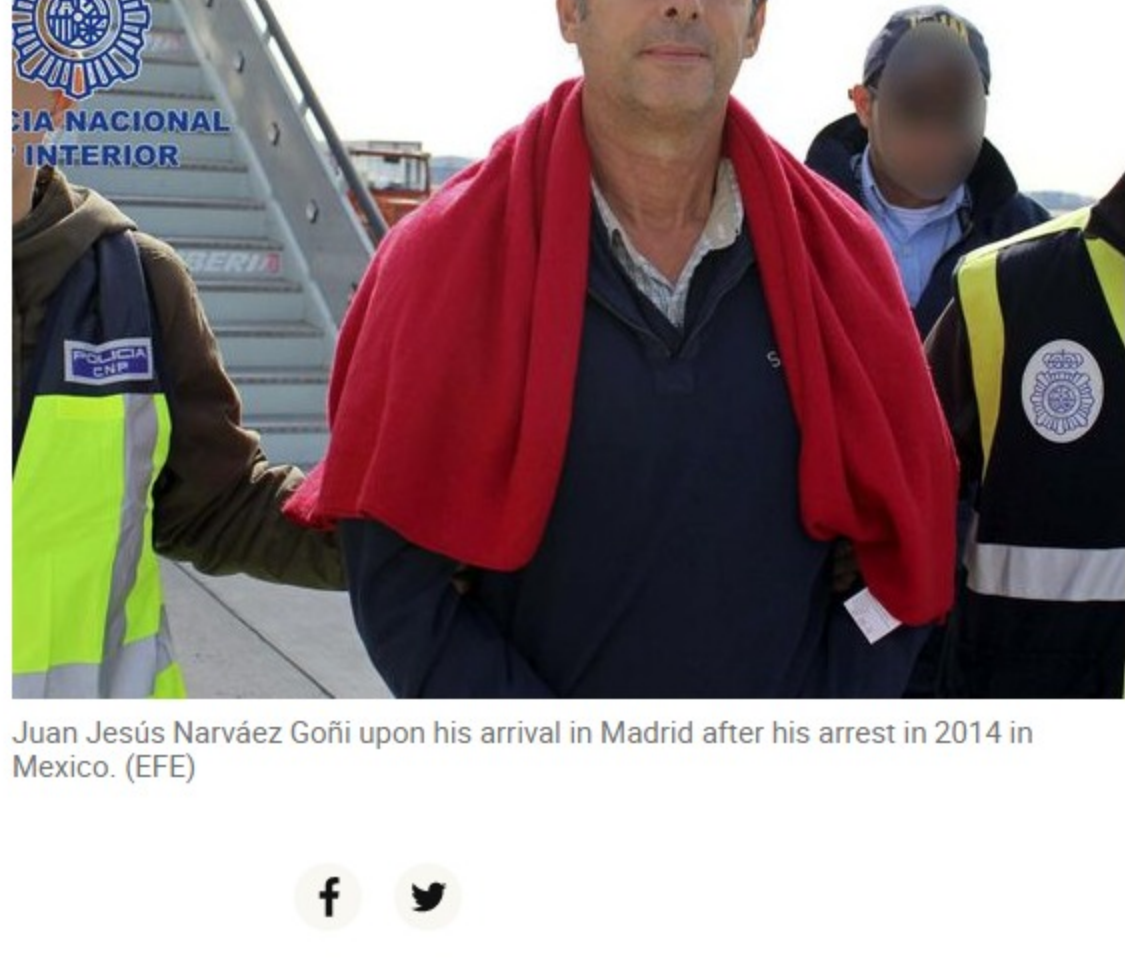
World



THIS IS HOW MEXICO CAUGHT NARVÁEZ AND ALBERDI

This is how the 'Ekaitz' command fell: the Mexican spy who hunted down the deadliest ETA members speaks

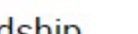
"I know how to locate them, but I cannot participate in the operation." A Mexican agent forged a friendship with two ETA members without really knowing their identity. This is the story of his arrest



Juan Jesús Narváez Gofri upon his arrival in Madrid after his arrest in 2014 in Mexico. (EFE)

For **Aitor Sáez**. **Mexico DF**

10/19/2018 - 05:00 Updated: 10/19/2018 - 23:20



Every Tuesday and Thursday, after picking up their children from school, they would walk several streets until they reached a yoga center. They spent an hour and a half sitting less than two meters away. At the end of class, they chatted for a while about the children and the day. An ever closer friendship.

Neither knew who the other was: an ETA member and a spy.

"I know how to locate them, but I cannot participate in the operation," replied the Mexican agent Mendoza* when his superior arrived with an arrest warrant against the ETA couple **Juan Jesús Narváez Gofri** -sentenced to 60 years for the murder of two policemen in 1991- and **Itziar Alberdi Uranga**. That morning in February 2014, the spy felt mixed emotions when he saw the photo of the two "friends of his": "I remember them as calm, kind people, we had a very good relationship. It hit me very hard."

They spent an hour and a half sitting less than two meters away. An ever closer friendship. Neither knew who the other was

The detective from the Center for Investigation and National Security (CISEN) – **the Mexican intelligence service** – in Puerto Vallarta (Jalisco) had coincidentally attended Alberdi's yoga classes for months, who **after fleeing to Mexico in 1992 changed his name to Eva Barreña**, like her husband who called himself José Ruiz. Her two children, ages 16 and 20 at the time of the arrest, **studied** at the same school as the agent's children. The young people **were unaware of the true identity and past of their parents**.

In December 2012, several classmates of one of the sons of ETA members interviewed Itziar for a school project about a person they admired. The woman **presented herself as a passionate sculptor** and spoke of her Spanish origin. **The teenagers uploaded the recording to YouTube**. "I think the Spanish Police located them because of that video. The arrest warrant came just over a year later, too much of a coincidence after more than two decades in hiding," Mendoza told El Confidencial.

A few meditation sessions and a video on YouTube were enough to put an end to 22 years of hiding in Mexico for the two most bloodthirsty members of **ETA**, claimed by the Spanish Justice until then as **"the terrorists with the highest number of murders committed"**. After separate journeys in the eighties, in 1990 'Pajas' and María became members of the 'Ekaitz' liberated commando, author of one of the bloodiest campaigns of the terrorist band. In less than two years they have been implicated in **34 attacks that resulted in 22 murders** and dozens of serious injuries, as they are also related to the planning of attacks at the Barcelona 92 Olympic Games.

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ETA member Juan Jesús Narváez Gofri during his trial at the National Court for the shooting murder of two policemen in Barcelona in 1991. (EFE)

An express operation in the middle of meditation

The operation for his arrest was organized in barely a week. "Once they were located as we had them, it was very easy. You think it's like in the movies, but in reality it's calmer," says Mendoza, who during those days was "incredulous" and ambivalent: "I know they committed crimes, murders, but **anyone has the right to rebuild their life** as they had done. **I would have preferred never to meet them so as not to carry that weight**". Even so, he put his professionalism before his feelings.

From eight in the afternoon on Saturday, February 15, 2014, six patrols were located on the roads surrounding Las Juntas and Los Veranos, **an idyllic country area where ETA members had organized a spiritual retreat with their students**, about 25km from Puerto Vallarta, where they resided. "It is a wooded area, sometimes used as **a drug route**, so we had to wait to clear the area," Mendoza says. I was at the barracks because they already knew me and couldn't identify me."

At eleven o'clock at night, **Mendoza himself gave the order to carry out the arrest by telephone**. Some twenty members of the Mexican intelligence agency, the Army, the Prosecutor's Office and the Spanish National Police burst into the group meditation session that the Basque couple was leading. "It is a spectacular operation because there are political issues at stake, but nothing complicated. They **never carried weapons**", says the agent.

The two ETA members resisted during the arrest until one of the Mexican agents told them: "They are going to be calm from now on and until they get to Spain. **I have here the telephone numbers of your children** –indicating his mobile–. If they don't behave, a button will suffice for them to have information right now about the lie they have grown up with throughout their lives. **About who their parents are and the crimes they committed**. The change in attitude was immediate.



Seven causes for the end of ETA that Basque schoolchildren will study (including police effectiveness)
Jose Maria Alonso. Saint Sebastian

While his classmates congratulated him, Mendoza could only think: "What will I tell my children?" That is the greatest memory of him about moments in which he felt dejected. **They were all friends from school**. The children of Alberdi and Narváez did not understand the arrest of their parents from the outset.

Two days later the family was transferred to Madrid at dawn on a regular flight from Mexico City. The couple was accused of carrying "false identification" and of "illegal" stay in the country, a type of repatriation through administrative means that avoids lengthy extradition processes. **"Only when they got on the plane were we able to break the news**, as the protocol indicates," Mendoza explains.

Puerto Vallarta, den for fugitives

The arrest shocked the peaceful Mexican Pacific town. Its inhabitants remembered them as two cordial people, no one could imagine that an international arrest warrant fell on them. They had settled in the late 1990s in the El Pitillal neighborhood, near the Puerto Vallarta hotel zone. **None of her friends knew where her house was located**, which according to her neighbors they built themselves. At first they led a reserved life, but over time they became recognized subjects of the community.

Alberdi taught spirituality classes and in her spare time she was a sculptor, an artistic vocation that led her to organize several exhibitions. Her husband, known as "Don Pepe", was a fumigator, but her main occupation was as a chiropractor (despite not having a license to practice). She had recently opened a medical office on a central street. Shortly before her arrest, both had attended a local radio station to present their magazine **'The path of the golden eagle', where they described her philosophy of life**.

The colorful seaside city welcomes hundreds of tourists and bohemian foreigners: **an environment conducive to hiding**. This is stated by Mendoza, who in four years carried out 30 operations in the area together with Interpol, the FBI and secret services from various countries. "There are many people on the run, especially from the **United States** and Canada. We have arrested murderers, escapees from prison, multi-millionaire con artists and pedophiles," he says.



Aerial view of Puerto Vallarta on the Pacific coast of Mexico. (Reuters)

Mexico, den of ETA members

Mexico has historically been a den of ETA members. Its authorities have returned 40 members of the gang to Spain, although **"between 200 and 300 ETA members may have passed through its territory at some point"**, as political scientist Saranda Frommold pointed out to this newspaper. "Mexico was an ideal place of refuge because it had a lot of Basque migration, especially exiles from the Civil War. **You could easily go unnoticed**," she adds.

Following the failure of the Algiers talks in 1989, many members of the band abandoned their ranks and, in the early 1990s, the Aztec country received its largest wave of ETA members. "Mexico has always welcomed expatriates from all over the world. The only condition to be received was their political annihilation. In other words, **ETA members who wanted to demobilize**, withdraw from the organization have always arrived in Mexico," Frommold details. This was the case of Alberdi and Narváez, who arrived in Latin America in 1992 after the dismantling of their command at the beginning of that year. **They broke any ties with the terrorist group and even with their family in the Basque Country** so as not to be recognized.

According to the Spanish Police, an appointment weeks before with a person linked to ETA led the agents to his whereabouts. According to the Mexican forces, they identified the two Spanish citizens "when carrying out an immigration verification procedure" and perceived irregularities. Both versions divergent and difficult to believe after 22 years in strict confidence, as the Mexican spy who recognized them considers: "It was **the video on YouTube** that put them in the spotlight. Perhaps later the Spanish police began a follow-up, but **that was the initial clue**.

Discovered by social networks

Until 2011, **at least four members of ETA** -some of the leadership- were **discovered through social networks**. The last arrest in Mexican territory, on February 22, 2017, was also prompted by a signal on the Internet. Spanish intelligence located ETA member Ángel María Tellería, alias Antxoka, in Guanajuato through his false profiles on Facebook, just one month after prescribing his crimes.

"I understand that they have to pay for their crimes, that's why I became a police officer. But it worries me to think that I broke up a family."

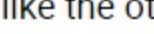
Last week the Police detained ETA member **Luis Miguel Ipiña Doña**, known as 'Tontxu', who has been on the run in Mexico since 1980, at the Barajas airport. The arrest, while trying to enter Spain with a Mexican passport, lasted a few hours. He was released since **his crimes – a dozen attacks are attributed to him – have prescribed**, except for a claim for glorifying terrorism for some tweets written a few years ago. Mendoza was precisely surprised not to find a trace on the Internet of his new pair of Spanish colleagues.

"At that moment it seemed strange to me, I searched the Migration database for their (false) names and they appeared, so I did not give it more importance," he says. For the spy, accustomed to carrying out covert missions, **that location was fortuitous and one of the simplest captures**. "But for me the operation was not like the others. There was an emotional component - he relates -. Every day I asked my children how they were after the arrest. They told me that they were depressed. That hurt me, I felt guilty."

Only the closest relatives of the agent knew his trade. He then told his children that the operation was carried out from Mexico City. They did not ask again and **to this day nothing has been explained to them**. A few months ago they told him that **the young people lived with their grandmother in the Basque Country**. The parents are still incarcerated.

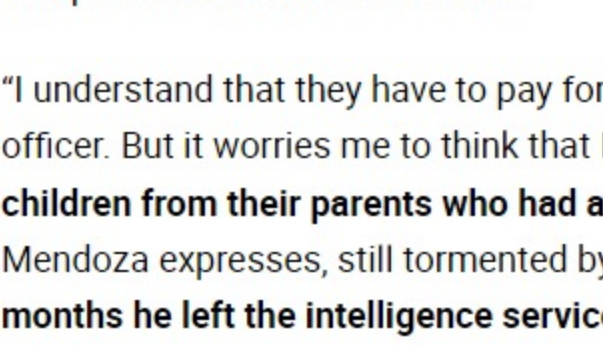
"I understand that they have to pay for their crimes, that's why I became a police officer. But it worries me to think that I broke up a family, that **I separated some children from their parents who had already reintegrated into society**". Mendoza expresses, still tormented by his past as a secret agent. **After a few months he left the intelligence service** and tried to erase those memories of him. The tranquility that he was looking for in the yoga classes ended up in a trap for two ETA members on the run.

**Fictitious last name to protect your identity.*



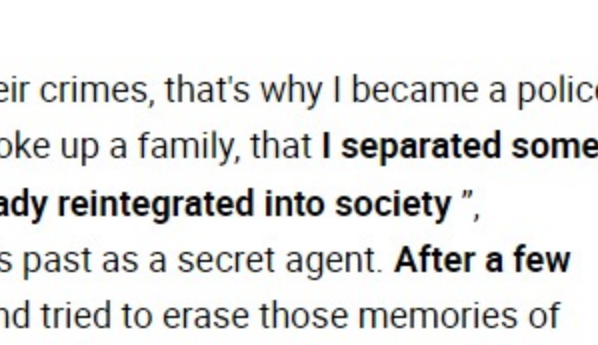
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