



A Great Escape in the Spanish Civil War ***Searching a fourth fugitive in California, 80 years later*** ***A logging truck company***

In 1944, during the course of WWII, two major escapes took place from Nazi concentration camps in Poland. In Sobibor, an extermination camp, around 400-500 Jewish prisoners escaped desperately. Many were killed and others hid in the woods. In another famous getaway, 76 allied aviators fled Stalag Luft III. Fifty got captured and killed by the Gestapo; three managed to get to the UK.

But six years before, on May 1938, in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), 795 prisoners from the San Cristóbal fortress, in mount Ezkaba, next to Pamplona, led a flight towards the nearby French border. The relentless pursuit led to the execution of 206 those escaping, and the remaining ones were captured, with the exception of three escapees who, after an epic flight, achieved their goal.



Together with these three documented fugitives, a fourth fugitive, unidentified, could have reached the border, and from France, through Mexico, could have arrived to California and started a new life.

In March 1997 an elderly stranger arrived to two of the villages situated in the path between the fortress and the French border and also was seen in front of the fort's main gate, asking about the whereabouts of his flight-mates, who were shot. He introduced himself to at least eight villagers as one of those escaped and managed to reach France, and later, California.

Any insights on the whereabouts and identity of this 'fourth fugitive'?

*We are looking for a man **born as an Spaniard around 1920**, who arrived to California in 1939, he enlisted in the US Army during the WWII as a tank driver, he then ran a **logging truck company on the axis between Alturas-Chico** managed by his family when he retired to Chico.*

Any text or reference around wood industry, sawmills or hauling companies in the area ((Shasta, Butte, Lassen...), is welcomed.

If you'd like to share any information, you can send an email to: greatestescape1938@gmail.com

Story of Gaspar Linzoain and his meeting with one of the fugitives from the fort, sixty years after the escape.

Gaspar Linzoain was born in 1932 in the village of Iragi, a small hamlet in the mountains between the fortress and France, 33 miles from the border. In March 1997 he started a conversation with a stranger that had arrived in a big and dark SUV. The stranger introduced himself as a participant in the escape of 1938, and after, resident in the United States, according to his retelling he had returned to recall the places where he had saved his life and remember his fellows from the escape.



The stranger, imprisoned at the fortress while being underage, was involved in the evasion together with a group of another six, - one of them of Azagra. They found a couple of villagers, who gave them food and they oriented towards France, but before arriving to the border the group was intercepted. Given the tumult, they dispersed. A couple of them were captured and then shot dead in Urtasun.

After losing his companions on the road, he managed to elude patrols and to arrive to a farmhouse in Banka (French Basque Country), exhausted and wounded in the arm. The good samaritan shepherd who helped him, Martin Urrels, had two brothers, Michel and John, shepherds in Cedarville, Modoc County, CA.

According to his testimony, he worked on the farmhouse and forest roads to earn some money to get a passage across the Atlantic, after which he arrived to Mexico and then, to California, illegally, in 1939.

He returned to Europe serving as a tanker, suboficial, for the U.S. Army. He was nationalized as a U.S. citizen, and later set a logging truck company, that once retired had been continued by his family. He lived later in Chico.

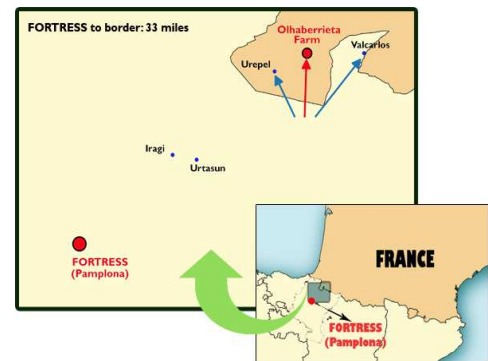
The credibility of his story requires asking how is it possible that his absence was not documented at the fort. Many survivors of that war - of all wars - hid their past to overcome this period of suffering. For instance, another fugitive from the fort, José Marinero, who rebuilt his life in Mexico, never told his family about that past experience.

On the other hand, the prisoner's registry in that prison was very deficient at the time; there were no elements to determine exactly the number of fugitives. This allows us to speculate on the existence of an undocumented fourth fugitive.

This old fugitive that came from California, maintained in March of 1997 other encounters in Iragi, Urtasun and the door of the prison from which he escaped; a total of eight people, narrated a similar story, that has been probed in many aspects:

The getaway route to France

In Iragi, a group of six fugitives was intercepted by a patrol. Three are recorded as shot in Usetxi, two miles away. Two others were captured and shot in Urtasun. One of those was A. Zudaire, a native of Azagra, a village that the foreigner quoted during his visit in 1997. The DNA tests done after the exhumation of the body years later determined his identity.



After crossing to the other side, the stranger arrives to Olhaberrieta, Banka farmhouse, this was the closest to the border. It is located in the mountains, but in 1938 its position was on the road between Roncesvalles and Banka, which disappeared when a new road was made in 1970.



In Olhaberrieta farmhouse lived a 31-year-old pastor, Martin Urrels, who had already welcomed other refugees from the war in Spain. Two of the Urrels brothers were pastors to Cedarville, Modoc County, CA, and were in good touch with their brother. In 1956 Michel, one of them, visited the family farmhouse.

California

According to the story the stranger told Gaspar in Iragi, he entered California through Mexico, thanks to his contact with the Urrels brothers. Later, he enlisted into the US Army, and after the war he worked in the wood transportation industry.

Via Mexico

The path to California through Mexico obeys the historical moment. The entrance through New York was forbidden for the undocumented fugitives, and therefore Mexico became a more attractive option, this also coincided with the receptive policies set by President Cárdenas for Spanish refugees. As Joxe Mallea points out: *"The usual trip of the Basque shepherds that arrived to the United States was carried out by boat to New York, and from there by rail to their destination. However, there was another, less traditional, path via Mexico"*. According to the research, the trip had to be done around 1939.

Modoc County

The fugitive arrives in Mexico, but his goal, as we know through his story, is California. Basque emigration to U.S. was mainly constituted of northern Californian pastors, mostly around cities such as Alturas, Redding, Red Bluff or Chico, and extensive protected forests, such as Modoc or Lassen National Forest.

Modoc County in the border strip with Nevada and Oregon is a mountainous area, it had 7900 inhabitants in 1940. Its main activity was ranching, and later logging. In towns like Alturas, and in Surprise Valley: Cedarville, Fort Bidwell ... an immigrant community settled, some of those families were the Urrels, Laxague, Itçaina, Erramuzpe, Carrica... from Banka.

The brothers John and Michel Urrels emigrated as shepherds to Modoc, to work as transhumant shepherds, in charge of large flocks of sheep. The progressive settlement of ranchers came into conflict with this model of free itinerant grazing; mass unemployment in the years of the Great Depression intensified the tensions between these Basque shepherds and the local community.

Between 1924-1940 these shepherds faced many challenges: The creation of national forests closed large tracts of land previously used for grazing. The National Origins Act restricted entry visas: *"After 1924 it was virtually impossible for them to legally enter the United States for almost all those Spanish Basques who had no close relatives inside the USA. Many entered illegally, were taken and deported"*, (W. Douglass, *Amerikanuak*, 1975); The Taylor Grazing Act in 1934 favoured the rental of public land to US citizens who owned a ranch.

The Urrels tried to adapt to the changes. Michel managed to get the American citizenship in 1935, and becomes the owner of a ranch in Fort Bidwell; they moved to Cedarville in 1941, although in the fifties they continued their nomadic work in Nevada. Another brother Urrels suffered the visa restrictions we mentioned: he arrived to California in 1937, but he was forced to return.

In parallel, the sheep industry went into decline in California. The number of sheep on the public lands of Modoc Forest fell to one third between 1922 and 1940 (W.S. Brown, 1945). The model that had attracted Basque shepherds for decades closed a cycle. These emigrants needed to look for other activities.

The enlistment in the US Army

The fugitive might have arrived to the promised land in a precarious condition: illegal emigrant, without a stable residence; and with the herding industry on decay. His clandestine entry does not remain registered. *"If this fugitive came to California illegally, across the Mexican border, I suspect he was not picked up in the 1940 Census. As today's illegals still, you try not to contact government agencies or their officials"* W. Douglass points out.

The former fugitive told in Iragi that he went back to Europe as a tanker driver for the USA army during the WWII. Enlistment was the access route to legality for those non-regularized residents also known as "no yet citizen" who after enlisting in the USA army acquired the USA nationality, and changed their previous name.

A wood transport company between Alturas and Chico.

The decline in the herding industry was compensated with the boom in logging in Modoc. The number of people employed in the lumber industry went from 250 in 1933 to 900 in 1939, and the acres of cut wood, from 52,250 in 1934 to 259,750 in 1943. The county had about seventy sawmills or logging points during those years.

The change in employment of these Basque emigrants is reflected in the Basque boarding houses. Usually they were shepherds, but in Alturas, Cedarville and Susanville, *lumber towns*, they started working in the wood industry. In Alturas, *The Pyrenees*; in Cedarville, the *French hotel*, run by Marie Carrica, lumberjacks or workers in the local lumber mills, such as the Laxague Lumber Mill used to gather. In 1950, Leon Gus Itçaina, a resident of Alturas, died in an accident as a timber transporter. All of them, came from families from Banka (where the 4th fugitive first arrived after crossing the border).

Public highway construction programs in the 1930s were decisive for the expansion of that logging industry. In the 1950s the Modoc logging industry was already integrated into northern California: from small farms that aimed at local consumption to larger ones, along with Anderson, Red Bluff, Cottonwood, on the road to markets such as Sacramento or San Francisco, logging wood farms started spreading. And for this, transport companies were needed.



After WWII, the fugitive had to find a job. The forestry boom, his knowledge of armoured mechanics, directed him towards the thriving wood industry, undertaking a transportation company, which he led until his retirement in Chico.

Courtesy Modoc Historical Society.

Therefore the story told by the stranger that arrived to Iragi flows in a natural way and makes complete sense while contrasting it with its historical context. No one, except someone that has lived through all those chapters, could have narrated in 1997 such a complete timeline. His account of the facts has been proven at several points, but is not enough to find his identity.

This text seeks to obtain further information on the subject in order to unravel the identity of the fourth escaped, who until today, remains just a shadow.