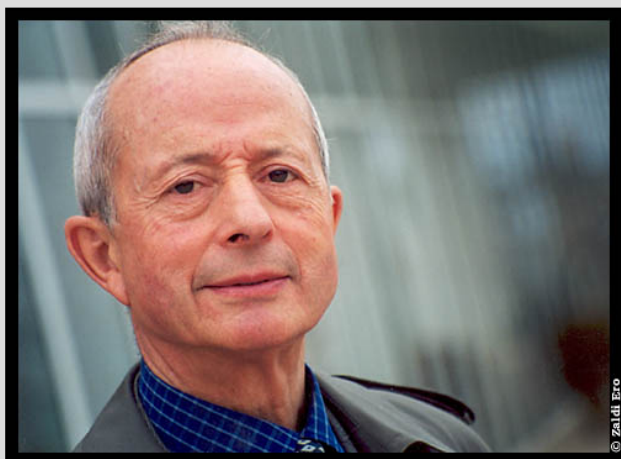




# Basque Writing 23

## TXOMIN PEILLEN

### Witness to the history of Basque PEN



Argazkia: Zaldi Ero

This year is a very special one for the PEN association, as it was 100 years ago that novelist and poet Catharine Amy Dawson planted the seed of the writers' organization in London. The initiative immediately spread to other cities, and the seeds bore fruit all over the world: PEN clubs started to be founded by writers from different cultures and languages in a number of places. Here in the Basque Country, writers began fantasizing about the idea of founding a Basque branch, and, although it took a few years to establish, the club was set in motion 70 years ago. So, in this issue of *Basque Writing* we are celebrating two anniversaries.

Anniversaries always provide a great opportunity to take a look back and reflect on the path taken, which is precisely the aim of this issue: using PEN International's anniversary as our starting point, we will reminisce about the history of the Basque PEN club and its evolution. It has been a rocky road, to be sure, especially in those initial years, and the group's activity has even been inevitably interrupted on occasion. The founders of Basque PEN experienced a rough beginning, since the mere fact of gathering writers from both sides of the border was practically impossible due to the fear that dominated the Southern Basque Country under the Franco regime. Nonetheless, despite all the difficulties,

they finally managed to make Basque language and literature visible within PEN International.

This retrospective would not be complete, however, without mentioning a direct witness to the history of Basque PEN, Txomin Peillen. Part of the association from the very beginning until today, he is the undeniable protagonist of this issue. These pages you hold in your hands will show you the path Peillen and Basque PEN have walked together by recounting some remarkable events in his life and his contributions to the domain, including works on linguistic consciousness, how war impacted his life, his stand for freedom of speech and his humanistic and multilingual education. You will also take a look at his multifaceted writing: apart from writing and collaborating with Basque PEN, he has been a university professor, conducted a multitude of studies and been a member of Euskaltzaindia (The Academy of Basque Language). In their articles, Miel Anjel Elustondo and Aurelia Arkotxa express their unique views of Peillen's work. The former extensively interviewed him this year for the *Solasaldiak* (Talks) supplement of the magazine *Administrazioa Euskaraz* (Administration and Basque), and the latter had the opportunity to work with him during his time at Euskaltzaindia.

The fact that all the elements above perfectly align with the PEN philosophy accounts for Peillen's commitment to Basque PEN on all three occasions when it was established and re-established. To recognize his outsize contribution, we made the author from Zuberoa honorary president of Basque PEN and, some years later, in 2009, he received our honorary PEN Fountain Pen.

Thus, this issue of *Basque Writing* is a tribute to him, our honorary president.



**Maddalen Subijana**  
Euskal PEN



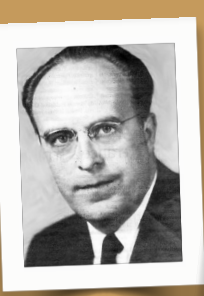
# Creation of Basque PEN



Manu de la Sota



Manuel de Irujo



Jokin Zaitegi



Sebero Altube



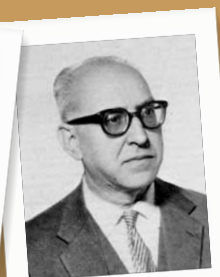
Xabier Landaburu



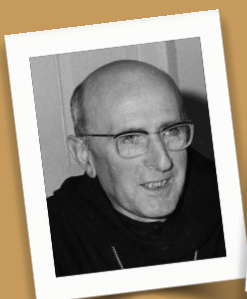
Henri Gavel



Nikolas Ormaetxea 'Orixe'



Justo Garate



Xabier Diharce 'Iratzeder'



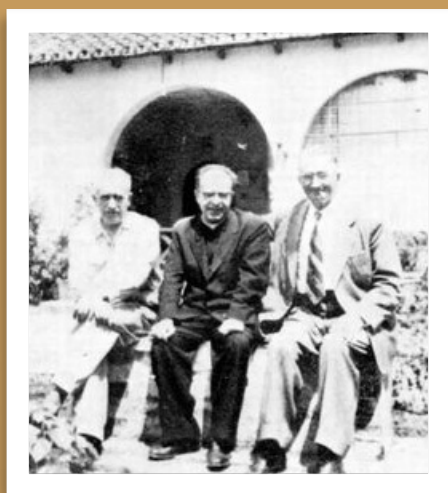
Isidoro Fagoaga



Jean Elizalde



Federico Krutwig



Andima Ibiñagabeitia left, Jokin Zaitegi centre and Nikolas Ormaetxea 'Orixe' right at the association office in Guatemala City in 1954.

(in Velez de Mendizabal, J.M. (1981). *Iokin Zaitelai*. Izarra.

2021 marks the 100th anniversary of **PEN International**. The organisation was **created in London in 1921** and in a very short period of time dozens of centres were founded around the world. On 22-28 August 1950, during the 22<sup>nd</sup> PEN Congress in Edinburgh, the **Basque PEN Association** was approved and Basque writers held their first meeting in Paris on the 24 March 1951.

Many Basque writers supported the **Basque PEN Association**, even though some of them could not be present in Paris due to the difficulties of the time. The writers present at the meeting decided who would form the **Board of Directors**: Sebero Altube, Jean Elizalde, Henri Gavel, Justo Garate, Nikolas Ormaetxea «Orixe», Piarres Lafitte, Ixaka Lopez Mendizabal, Jokin Zaitegi, Michel Etcheverri, Xabier Iratzeder, Isidoro Fagoaga, Manuel Irujo, Xabier Landaburu and Manuel de la Sota. They also appointed **two secretaries**: Andima Ibiñagabeitia and Jon Mirande. When Ibiñagabeitia was exiled to Guatemala, Federico Krutwig took his place, but, even so, the Association quickly dissolved.

That first initiative was launched in Argentina at the hands of the Basque writers moving in the circles of the Argentinian Institute of Basque Studies (*Instituto Argentino de Estudios Vascos*) and the publishing house *Ekin*. Soon many others joined the group: some were from the Northern Basque Country; some studied in Paris and were members of *Euzko Ikasle Alkartasuna* (the Basque Students Association); while others lived in Mexico. **They located their headquarters in Biarritz**. There were no Southern Basque writers in that initial group on account of the reasons clearly explained by Andima in the magazine *Euzko Gogo*:



# Creation of Basque PEN

*We knocked on doors in Zuberoa, Nafarroa Behere, and Lapurdi, and the doors would open with the sweetest smiles and affection. We couldn't, however, knock on the doors of the writers located in Nafarroa, Araba, Gipuzkoa, and Bizkaia. We have so many writers there, and they are the best, no doubt. We were afraid that someone might take our calls for attention as being political. We were scared that our calls would not reach our beloved writers. We also feared that something bad would happen to the writers themselves. We are not fearful, at least not in character, but we didn't want to bring harm to anybody. (Euzko Gogoia, 2<sup>nd</sup> year, issues 7-8).*

Ibiñagabeitia also announced the **aim of Basque PEN Association** at the same magazine:

*Basque writers, as of late, have stayed away from foreign writers' associations. The news of the works created among us have been usually confined within the borders of the Basque Country, much like the soft walnut flesh inside its hard shell. Fortunately, our writers have also produced some noteworthy works, and we have had some intelligent men among us. Unfortunately, however, their acknowledgement has not flown beyond our fields and valleys. It was about time, after all, that we break the shell and display our soft walnut flesh abroad, so they could see that it is as soft and tasty as theirs.*

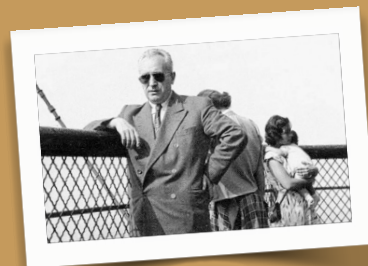
By the time Basque PEN Association was founded (1949), Txomin Peillen, – then 17 – was already acquainted with Andima Ibiñagabeitia and Jon Mirande. One day, before the founding of Basque PEN, with a view to learn Breton, he went to an office that turned out to be the Basque Government headquarters in Paris and was offered the opportunity to teach Basque. In that same spot, he met Jon Mirande, who was seven years older than him and had an extremely similar background: they were both born in Paris to Zuberoan parents, and even though their parents spoke to each other in Zuberoan Basque, they had raised their children exclusively in French.

Basque language and literature bound them together, and it was then, urged by Ibiñagabeitia, that Peillen started to write his first compositions in Basque. In 1962 they founded the magazine **Igela**.

## **Unorthodox people's peculiar goals and plans**

*This world of ours is full of wicked preachers. Some push their neighbour to practise terrorism while they stand idle; others call for virtue, but don't practice what they preach. IGELA does not urge anyone to do anything, except to think that those who exhort us do not in any way contribute as much as we do to advancement on the path of goodness.*

*Many people promise heaven; on the contrary, we offer a hell in which we can burn in joy and happiness: What would be the meaning of life with pleasure and enjoyment removed? Would it be worthy of being called life? Oh, dear friends, you clap enthusiastically for me! Oh, I knew you were all too insane – and therefore too clever – not to get my message. (Igela, no. 4, Oct. 1962)*



Andima Ibiñagabeitia



Jon Mirande



Txomin Peillen



**Igela** magazine





# Paris, Zuberoa and Algeria



Robert standing (10 years old), Txomin sitting (9 years old). At school in Paris in 1941.



Chatting at the table with his parents in Dordorrage, his father's birthplace. Ligin, 1961.

He was a Basque Parisian. His parents did not teach him any Basque, even though they spoke Zuberoan Basque to each other. While he could understand it, he was not able to speak it, so he decided to start taking lessons in his teens. Back then, Basque language lacked prestige: it was generally believed that there was no use in learning Basque, that it was a complete waste of time. Nonetheless, Peillen strongly believed that it was Basque people's duty to use their language in order to keep it alive. Ever since he started learning it, not only has he stuck to his decision to speak Basque, but has also made great contributions to our language and culture.



In Algeria, together with the nursing team, 1960.

War had a huge impact on his life. His first notion of war arrived through his father, who spoke of what he went through during his military service in Turkey, where he witnessed the Armenian genocide first-hand. In 1939, at the age of seven, Txomin moved from Paris to Zuberoa with his brother and mother and spent two and a half years there, fleeing World War II. He served in Algeria in 1954. While he did not have to shoot anyone as an army nurse, he did witness carnage and devastation, leading him to take an interest in Gandhism.

When PEN was founded in 1921, the echoes of the World War I were still readily audible. Peillen had not yet been born, but he did experience war first-hand a few years later. Here is what **the PEN Charter states in that regard**: *"In all circumstances, and particularly in times of war, works of art, the patrimony of humanity at large, should be left untouched by national or political passion" and "Members of PEN should at all times use what influence they have in favour of good understanding and mutual respect between nations and people; they pledge themselves to do their utmost to dispel all hatreds and to champion the ideal of one humanity living in peace and equality in one world".*





# Basque language writer and activist



Jon Mirande (1925-1972)



Andima Ibiñagabeitia (1906-1967)

*"Andima Ibiñagabeitia taught me that Basque should not be like Latin to us, not even like a second language, but the language of our thoughts, the tongue of our books of wisdom".*

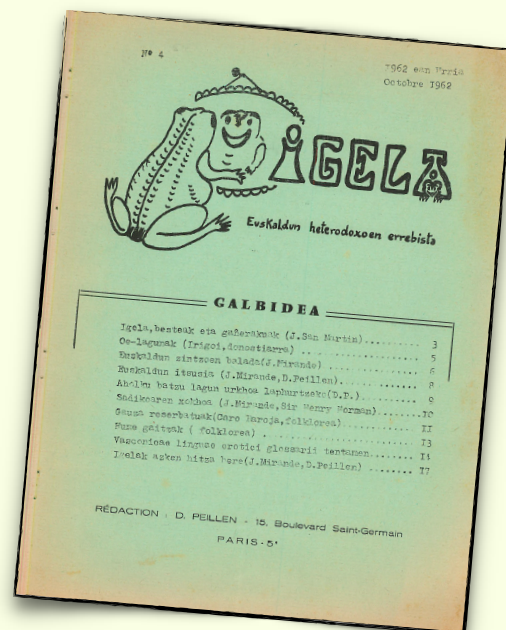
*"As for Jon Mirande, he taught me that in order to write in Basque, one needs to study and practise the language thoroughly, and that, since we are a European culture, we need to learn about European literatures so as to enrich our knowledge of nearby foreign cultures".*

*"If I had not met Andima Ibiñagabeitia and Jon Mirande I would never have been part of Euskaltzaindia"*

From Miel A. Elustondo's personal interview (2021).  
Solalsaldiak 18, **Administrazioa Euskaraz**, IVAP, 3-28.

Txomin's brother Robert Peillen was also part of the circle, the friendly environment that conceived of and launched the magazine *Igela: The Magazine of Unorthodox Basques*. Along the same lines as the Spanish magazine *La Codorniz* and the Russian *Krokodil*, they decided to produce humour and satire in Basque, which would be used as a weapon to evade the Basque orthodoxy of the time and publish all the content they pleased without censorship. **«IGELA does not urge anyone to do anything, except to think that those who exhort us do not contribute as much as we do to advancement on the path of goodness».**

That is what they declared on the first issue, and that was precisely the aim of the magazine. Over the course of the two years the magazine was active, they published six issues; however, by the time they had published the last one, Peillen and Mirande's friendship had already started to break down due to the fact that Peillen disapproved of the dangerous direction that Mirande's ideology was taking towards fascism. As a matter of fact, that circumstance separated the two Zuberoar friends for a number of years. Their quarrels aside, it is undeniable that *Igela* made a huge contribution to Basque language and was held up as an example by the various writers' circles that would appear later on.





## Euskaltzaindia member and researcher



In Lodosa (Nafarroa) with Euskaltzaindia, 2001.

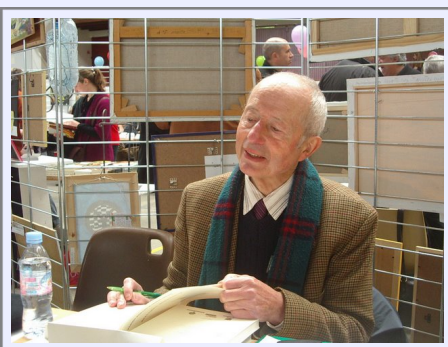
In 1961, he was designated a member of **Euskaltzaindia** in the “**Urgazle**” (assistant) category. In 1988, he became **full member** of the institution’s department of Onomatology and Literature, and, today, he is an **emeritus member** of the Basque academy.

Although he graduated with a degree in Biology, he showed great interest in linguistics and Basque language from a very young age. Following this passion, he completed a degree in Iberian and Ibero-American Spanish studies in Paris and also holds a degree in education. He has also been trained in the field of ethnology. Almost all his publications are written in Basque.

He taught Basque Language and Literature at the **Faculty of Arts and Languages at the University of Pau**. In 1981, he received a PhD from the University of Bordeaux with a doctoral thesis entitled *Lexique Basque de l'anatomie, morphologie et sémantique*. He has developed doctoral courses on Basque Studies and Pyrenean Mythology and has been a Basque language professor at the Bayonne campus of the University of Pau.



The team of Centre d'Etudes Basques surrounding their director Maité Lafourcade. Bayonne. 1997.



Although his first short texts were published in the magazines **Gernika**, **Egan** and **Euzko Gogoa**, he soon took the leap into novels. He has published ten fiction books to date, two of which (*Itzal gorria* and *Gauaz ibiltzen dana*) have received awards. His last novel, *Minotauro*, was released in 2020.

He has also written poetry and prose, and produced translations and essays, in which he almost exclusively explores the field of ethnology: traditional medicine, hunting, trapping, food, etc. He has also studied Zuberoan traditions, sociology and society.

**Peillen is the honorary president of Basque PEN**. He has been a PEN member on all three occasions when Basque PEN was founded or re-founded (1951, 1987, and **from 2004 until today**), and in 2009 he received a **PEN Fountain Pen** for his strong stance in favour of freedom of speech. In this picture he can be seen with the writer Lutxo Egia.





# Peillen, *rara avis* in literature

## Miel A. Elustondo

Txomin Peillen is a *rara avis* in our literature. Born in exile – and what's more, in Paris – he has never been in line with the Basque writers of his time.

In the capital of France, he survived the German occupation first, soothed by children's games, and the Liberation later, more consciously, certainly. Later on, he was called to join the army and served as a military nurse during the Algerian War. By the time he returned home, he had witnessed all kinds of atrocities, some of which he had been able to write down.

In Paris, he became close friends with Jon Mirande, a writer who cleared a new path in Basque literature after the Spanish Civil War. Both Zuberoan-Parisian non-Christian heritage Basque speakers, Mirande and Peillen stuck to unorthodoxy at a time when the Holy Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church and the fanatical priests that served it were lords and masters of the Basque Country; but despite carrying that weighty stigma, they blazed the finest trails at the forefront of Basque literature, where things are always more beautiful. And while Mirande's path was

cut short much earlier than should have been the case – he died prematurely at the age of 47 – Peillen has extended his own work to 90 years of merit and reward, and, along that prolific road, he brought Mirande with him into the present.

As a young writer, Peillen started writing poems in which he flew as far as to China, for he has never been a frontier bird, but bird above all frontiers. In his prolific career, he has produced gems worthy of induction in the golden library: unparalleled, striking testimonies of a past world. If I had to choose a favourite work, it would be the extraordinary anthology called *Animism in Zuberoa* (Animismua Zuberoan), a truly wonderful experience through the old beliefs of the past.

He is a *rara avis* on our scene, in both our academic world and the world of academies.

"I will be mentioned for another 80 years", sang a bertsolari, which fits Txomin Peillen like a glove, or as the Basque proverb goes, like the south wind suits a chestnut.



**Txomin Peillen in 2021**  
Photo: Zaldi Ero



**Miel A. Elustondo, journalist and writer**  
Photo: Zaldi Ero





# The spirit of 'Igela'

## Aurelia Arkotxa

Txomin Peillen could most certainly be considered a committed (engagé) writer, as he perfectly encompasses the Sartrean meaning of the adjective: «The committed writer knows that words are action» (Sartre, *What is literature?*, 1948). By the time World War II and the Algerian War ceased to shake France, Sartre had established firm unifying threads between thought and action. The Algerian war «is our shame» he cried, «it infects us with its racism (...) it obliges our young men to fight despite themselves and die for Nazi principles that we fought against ten years ago» (*Situations V*).

Txomin Peillen was conscripted into the Algerian War as part of the nursing service. There, he witnessed the «atrocities of war» (think of the sketches and engravings made by Goya at the time to illustrate the brutality of war). «I saw the cruelty of that war (...) I walked around with a Red Cross Card that said I was a head nurse.» (Velez de Mendizabal, 2010).

It was in Algeria that he encountered the reality of torture: «The prisoners were treated like dogs. We were not allowed to medically treat them. That is why I became a pacifist.» (Velez de Mendizabal 2010).

Peillen is the only one of Mirande's close friends who is still alive. They had an extremely painful friendship, as an unsolvable ideological conflict lingered at its core: Mirande was a (neo)-Nazi and Peillen an anti-fascist. The topic was so sensitive that they were able to spend several years comfortably apart.

But there was something else that made their friendship dolorous; the fact that Peillen, Ibiñagabeitia, Etxaide were never able to «free Mirande of his demons, (...) illness, and Nazi comrades were always stronger than us» (to myself in 2017). Nonetheless, Peillen profoundly admires Mirande's writing – just as Aresti did – the poetic power of his voice.

In any event, let us go back to the starting point of this text and keep in mind that Txomin Peillen's main inner commitment has always been to «Basqueness», «For me Basqueness has been a decision», he states, «it was never a fantasy, neither a possible career back in that time» (to myself in 2018).

In these times when the desire to control minds is on the rise, Txomin Peillen preserves that playful free spirit that characterized the magazine *Igela*. Mercifully.



Aurelia Arkotxa, euskaltzain osoa