

'Mendiak 1976': a story of mountains, friendship and loss



Nestled in the heart of the Hindu Kush mountains in inaccessible Afghanistan, Shakhaur Peak says nothing to almost any mountaineer. However, one of the most luminous mountain stories that can be remembered took place on its slopes in 1976, forever uniting two expeditions, one Basque-Navarrese; Polish the other. That year, 11 young mountaineers traveled by 4×4 from Pamplona to Kabul, loaded with 900 kilos of food and 400 of material to quench their thirst for adventure, their concerns, their desire to open up to the world. The excuse was to climb a mountain.

Even under Soviet influence, obtaining the ascent permits was a feat in itself, and that of the 10 men and one woman who made up the team, this and eight others reached the 7,116-meter peak resulted in what seemed to be a dream epilogue. . Hours after leaving the summit behind, their lives were shaken up forever. Somewhat less tired than the rest of their teammates, Leandro Arbeloa and Gerardo Plaza decided to skip one high field, sleep in the next to dismount it and continue to base camp. They did not arrive.

At a point close to 6,000 meters, the rope fell: Leandro Arbeloa died on the spot; Gerardo Plaza broke arm and fibula. Unable to walk, he spent the night in the open, watching for the sunrise and the descent of his companions. It was a devastating night. Fortunately, their screams were heard. They buried Leandro right there and immediately understood that to rescue Gerardo they would need help: they all descended weak, fatigued and the spur along which the route ran was not easy.

Not far away, a Polish team, trapped on another mountain, volunteered to collaborate. It was the same team that a year ago had opened the route by which the Navarrese had reached the top, so the team leader sent four mountaineers to the rescue, two of them perfect connoisseurs of the itinerary. They hardly understood each other: a word rescued from English, many gestures, and the anguish reflected on the faces of the Navarrese were enough to forge a friendship that would stretch for decades.

“Our mountain can wait, your friend cannot,” the Poles concluded. Gerardo Plaza did not lose his leg thanks to the care of the expedition’s mountaineers and doctors, Javier Garaioa and Trinidad Cornellana, as well as an orthopedic surgeon enrolled among the Poles.



The members of the expedition, before leaving from Pamplona. All these memories, the basic facts, constitute the core of the documentary [*Mountains 1976 \(Mountains, in Basque\)*](#), directed by Luis Arrieta,

with a script by Daniel Burgui and photography by Jesús Iriarte. A story of friendship, of loss of innocence, of pain, illusion and memory. There are no action images that take your breath away, but there are the serene reflection of a group of people already retired or well established in their old age who portray the mark that mountaineering has left on their lives. His testimony has the value of the eyes of the pioneers, a learning that the generations of Himalayers who have come to his wheel will appreciate.

Arrieta, an agronomist by profession and self-taught in audiovisual techniques, climbs with the children of Javier Garreta, head of the expedition to Shakhaur, or with the nephew of Gregorio Ariz, or that of Javi Pastor, two members of the same: "I have always been a romantic of mountain literature and I knew the adventures of Garaioa on Everest in 1980, Garreta on Dhaulagiri in 79 and Gregorio Ariz on K2, in 83, but the Shakhaur expedition, in which the three they participated, it was unknown to me ", he introduces.

"Preparing a trip to the Alps with Koldo Pastor, I asked him for a VHS videotape with the inscription Shakhaur 76. I had a hard time finding a player, but when I saw the images in super 8 I was fascinated. The expedition was unknown, it had been buried and it seemed to me that the story deserved to be told because it had passed into oblivion in the shadow of the following expeditions to 8,000 meter mountains that the nucleus of that group later undertook. The original idea was totally different: I wanted to talk about the first 7,000 Basque, focused on Javi Pastor ", he continues.



“The idea was to go to Nepal with Koldo, and compare what it was like to do a 7,000 then and now. But the pandemic prevented it and gave us time to investigate and know that the young Polish climbers seen in the documentary were not dead as Garreta and Ariz believed. Iwona Zielinska, project coordinator at the Polish Institute of Culture (Madrid) acted as a bridge to find them: the legendary Himalayan Wojciech Kurtyka recognized one of them and pulling the thread we learned that of that Polish group from Shakhaur, four lost their lives, later, in the mountains and many of them were part of some of the great Polish expeditions to *eight thousand* en las que participaron Jerzy Kukuczka o Krzysztof Wielicki ”. Until 1981, Javier Garreta and Bogdan Strzelski, the only Pole who spoke English, wrote letters on a regular basis, strengthening their friendship, telling each other the details of their lives: maintaining these ties was already a “world championship”, Strzelski acknowledges in the film. . Thus, Garreta was able to announce the death of Javier Pastor and Julián Lasterra, in 1978, climbing on Mont Blanc de Tacul: both were part of the Shakhaur 76 team. But after the decree of martial law in Poland in 1981, the correspondence that remained ruined: Polish citizens who did not hold a government post could not receive or send letters abroad. And the Navarrese believed that their friends in Poland had passed away.

The documentary delicately deals with the future of Gerardo Plaza, the mountaineer rescued by the Poles. As soon as he recovered from his fractures, Gerardo returned to the mountains of Afghanistan, then to the Peruvian Andes and finally to Dhaulagiri, his debut in 8,000 meter mountains. Introverted, his passion on the other hand seemed insatiable, despite the fact that by now he had already lost three of his best friends in the mountains. However, in the Dhaulagiri his companions noticed a certain detachment in his way of behaving.



“No one will ever know what was going through his head to kill himself at the age of 27, and it may not be related to the mountain. The viewer will interpret it however they want”, reflects Luis Arrieta, who was always clear about how he wanted his work to end:“ with a still from the reunion between Poles and Navarrese ”.

The long-awaited reunion, extremely emotional, took place last week next to the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, where the documentary was going to be screened within the framework of the [BBK Mendifilm](#). There were hardly any words because only one of the Polish team speaks English, “but there was great emotion in the atmosphere,” says Arrieta. The audience of the Euskalduna Palace stood up, giving an endless applause and put music to the act. The documentary won the Best Mountaineering Film Award as well as the Audience Award.

The passage of time has mitigated and eroded the unfathomable pain that the families of Leandro Arbeloa or Gerardo Plaza endured in their day, the unease of the members of the expedition to Shakhaur. Now his memory, on the other hand, is comforting, bathed in affection and looking at his old photographs is like approaching the fire in winter. His speech in the documentary leaves a trace of a certain peace. Almost all the survivors of the Shakhaur, Basque-Navarrese and Polish, agree with Gregorio Ariz: finally, the mountains, where they lost so much, endowed their existence with meaning.