

El Secuestro Podcast

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While listening, look for the answers to these questions:

1. [2:04] What did the kidnappers tell Luis's family on that first phone call?
2. [3:39] How did Luis feel about his Tía Marta?
3. [4:56] What did the unknown person on the phone say about Tía Marta's car?
4. [7:05] How did Luis describe "el Capitán"?
5. [8:42] What did Juan have to tell the kidnappers?
6. [9:50] How long did el Capitán say the process would last and what did he explain to the family?
7. [13:11] What proof of life did Juan ask for?
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Transcript

Martina Castro: Welcome to the last episode of our first season of the Duolingo Spanish podcast. Today we bring you a story from someone you might recognize. Here's a hint: A clip from one of his TED talks —

Luis von Ahn: So what we've been working on for the last year and a half is a new website—it's called Duolingo—where the basic idea is people learn a new language for free while simultaneously translating the web. And so basically, they're learning by doing.

Martina Castro: That's Luis von Ahn, co founder and CEO of Duolingo back in 2011. There's a path that led Luis to this stage that starts before he launched Duolingo or became a Computer Science professor at Carnegie Mellon University. It starts back when he was a regular kid growing up in la ciudad de Guatemala. He has fond memories of that time—of visits to his family's candy factory, and of how obsessed he was with math and science. But there's one memory from the year he graduated high school that Luis wishes he could erase—even though it's what eventually led him to leave Guatemala for the United States.

Luis von Ahn: En el año 1996, mi tía fue secuestrada.

Martina Castro: “Secuestrada”... as in, she was kidnapped. It happened often during those final years of the civil war in Guatemala. By the mid-90s, when the war between the country's military and communist guerrilla fighters was over, more than 200,000 indigenous people had been killed. As a child, Luis was mostly unaware of the war because it was fought in the rural areas of the country. Until the day his family got that fateful call –

Luis von Ahn: Solo dijeron que tenían a mi tía, que estaba viva, y que iban a llamar después con más información.

Martina Castro: Again, welcome to the Duolingo Spanish Podcast, where we bring you true bilingual stories of travels with unexpected turns, plans unraveled, and destinations unknown. The Spanish in this story is for intermediate level learners, but if you get lost, don't worry, we'll be chiming in throughout the story.

Martina Castro: Luis' aunt, whom we will call Marta, was the matriarch of the family. She was married to a colonel in the army who retired early, and never got another job.

Luis von Ahn: Después de tener seis hijos juntos, mi tía y el coronel se divorciaron. Después del divorcio, mi tía estaba sola y necesitaba pagar los costos de la comida y educación de sus hijos.

Martina Castro: In order to support her family, Marta started a food business, and she became very successful. By 1996, Luis' aunt had become a wealthy woman with kids and grandkids.

Luis von Ahn: Yo tenía 17 años y vivía con mi mamá a poca distancia de la tía Marta. Yo iba a su casa todos los días, y la tía Marta era como una segunda madre para mí.

Martina Castro: One afternoon, Marta's oldest son, Luis' cousin, called Luis. He said his mother had gone missing. In Guatemala, kidnappings were common, so they feared that this is what had happened to her. His voice trembled; that's how Luis knew this was not a joke.

Luis von Ahn: Corrí a la casa de mi tía. Ahí estaban sus otros hijos y algunos de sus nietos. No teníamos mucha información.

Martina Castro: That day, Marta had gone to pick up her ex-husband.

Luis von Ahn: Mi tía y el coronel estaban divorciados, pero todavía eran amigos.

Martina Castro: She was supposed to bring him over to the house.

Luis von Ahn: Pero nunca regresó.

Martina Castro: But she never came back. Within a few hours, they received two calls.

Luis von Ahn: La primera llamada fue de una persona que no conocíamos. Dijo que el coche de mi tía estaba abandonado, sin nadie adentro.

Martina Castro: The second call was from the kidnappers.

Luis von Ahn: Dijeron que tenían a mi tía Marta, que estaba viva, y que iban a llamar después con más información.

Martina Castro: By that time there must have been 15 people in the house already, and everyone was asking questions over one another... Why was she driving alone? Who had found the car? How much money did they want? Would they have enough to rescue her?

Luis von Ahn: Fueron horas de peleas, gritos, y lágrimas. Después tomamos una decisión: pedirle ayuda a los amigos militares de mi tío, el coronel.

Martina Castro: After making a few calls, Luis' family ended up talking to his uncle's friend—someone at the anti kidnapping unit with the government.

Luis von Ahn: Ellos preferían no hablar por teléfono, así que decidimos encontrarnos en una calle en el centro de la ciudad. Fuimos en uno de los coches de la familia, una minivan con ventanas muy oscuras.

Martina Castro: The men they picked up were dressed in plain clothes and never shared their full names, but Luis remembers his family was instructed to call the boss “El Capitán” or “The Captain”.

Luis von Ahn: El Capitán era un hombre alto y musculoso de como 40 años. No dijo mucho en el viaje de regreso a la casa de mi tía, pero nosotros le contamos lo que había pasado. Cuando regresamos a la casa, nos reunimos todos en la sala.

Martina Castro: First, the captain assured them that Luis' aunt would return alive. Kidnapping was a business, he said, and it's bad business to kill your victim.

Luis von Ahn: Dijo que los secuestradores iban a llamar otra vez para pedirnos dinero.

Martina Castro: And he warned them that they would have to go against their instincts. No matter what amount of money the kidnappers demand, he said, you must say it's too much and that you can't pay it.

Luis von Ahn: Nos dijo: "Si dicen que sí, y pagan muy rápido, los secuestradores van a pensar que pueden pagar más. Así, van a pedir más dinero y el proceso va a tardar más tiempo".

Martina Castro: The Captain said the most important thing was to choose one person who could negotiate with the kidnappers on behalf of the family. Ideally it would be someone who wasn't too close to Marta, because the kidnappers would try to manipulate them. So they chose the husband of one of Luis' female cousins, whom we will call Juan.

Luis von Ahn: Juan iba a tener que pedir pruebas de que nuestra tía Marta estaba viva. Tenía que decir que no teníamos suficiente dinero para pagar lo que pedían, pero que estábamos haciendo todo lo posible para obtener el dinero.

Martina Castro: The captain was clear—the kidnappers will say on the call that they will kill Marta if the family doesn't pay the ransom quickly. They will hang up in the middle of the call and then not call back for many days, to make the family believe that Marta was dead.

Luis von Ahn: Pero necesitábamos mantenernos fuertes, nos decía el capitán. Yo no sabía qué pensar. No conocíamos bien a este hombre.

Martina Castro: Not only had they just met this man, but Luis and his cousin picked him up with these other tough looking dudes in the middle of a parking lot and not one of them was in uniform. Luis couldn't help but wonder—could the family really trust them?

Luis von Ahn: El capitán dijo que el proceso iba a tardar entre 7 y 15 días. Si seguíamos sus instrucciones, ella volvería viva. También explicó que no era como en las películas.

Martina Castro: First, the family had to actually pay the ransom. There would be no SWAT team rescue. Second, the captain explained that the exchange wouldn't be in the moment. The kidnappers would say where to leave the money, and then Marta would be returned to the family several hours or perhaps even days later.

Luis von Ahn: Ahora sí teníamos miedo. ¿Íbamos a darle todo el dinero a los secuestradores antes de ver a mi tía? No tenía sentido. Pero no teníamos otra opción. Teníamos que creer en el capitán.

Martina Castro: That same night the kidnappers called back. By then, Juan, the designated negotiator, was anxiously waiting by the phone. The person on the line said he was calling about Marta. Juan said they had been expecting his call and that he would negotiate on behalf of the family.

Luis von Ahn: Juan le preguntó a la persona cómo se llamaba. “Me podés llamar Tío Sam”, dijo él. Después dijo cuánto dinero quería a cambio de mi tía y que si no lo pagábamos, mi tía iba a morir. Como lo habíamos planeado, Juan dijo que eso era demasiado dinero.

Luis von Ahn: El Tío Sam, or Uncle Sam, said the family better find a way to get all of the money...Otherwise, Marta would die.

Martina Castro: Then he hung up.

Luis von Ahn: La cantidad de dinero que querían era alta pero no era imposible de pagar, entonces algunos en la familia insistieron en pagarla toda.

Martina Castro: At that point, many family members had set up camp at Marta's house to keep her family company. So they discussed the best course of action as a group, until they came to a consensus—they would follow the captain's instructions and wait.

Luis von Ahn: Cuando el Tío Sam llamó al día siguiente, preguntó si ya teníamos el dinero. Juan dijo que era demasiado, pero que estaba tratando de conseguir todo lo que podía. También pidió pruebas de vida antes de seguir hablando.

Martina Castro: Prueba de vida, or proof of life, was essential, said the captain. Each time the kidnappers called, Juan needed to ask for evidence that Marta was still alive. El Tío Sam insisted on the original sum of money they had requested, but agreed to give them proof of life.

Luis von Ahn: Juan le dijo al Tío Sam que le preguntara a Marta algo que solo ella podía responder. La pregunta era sobre una conversación entre ella y su hijo que ocurrió un día antes del secuestro.

Martina Castro: At that point, el Tío Sam hung up. The following day, he called back, and gave Juan the correct answer to his question. Marta was still alive.

Luis von Ahn: El Tío Sam preguntó si ya teníamos el dinero. Juan le dijo que solo teníamos US\$10,000. Preguntó si era suficiente.

Martina Castro: Ten thousand dollars was about a tenth of what the kidnappers had originally requested. Luis and various other members of the family thought this was too little, that they should give something closer to the original amount, even if it was high. But after much debate, the family

settled on this figure. They had heard that kidnapping negotiations started very far from the original asking price, similar to haggling in a street market. Tío Sam was not happy to hear this counter offer.

Luis von Ahn: El Tío Sam empezó a gritar, diciendo que sabía que podíamos pagar más.

Martina Castro: And he hung up. They didn't hear back from Tio Sam until the next evening. He was agitated and said his bosses were losing their patience with them.

Luis von Ahn: Dijo que entendía que la cantidad original era muy alta, pero quizás podíamos pagar \$80,000.

Martina Castro: And just like that, they were back to the bargaining table. Following the Captain's advice, Juan went up from the original amount, but still offered less than what Tío Sam requested.

Luis von Ahn: Juan le dijo que tenía buenas noticias: que habíamos encontrado más dinero y podíamos pagar US\$30,000.

Martina Castro: Tío Sam said no, that they needed to come up with more money immediately.

Luis von Ahn: Juan fue firme y dijo que eso iba a ser imposible. El Tío Sam dijo "lo siento mucho" y terminó la llamada.

Martina Castro: The following day, Tío Sam didn't call back. Nor the next. Even though the captain had said this would happen, everyone started to worry they had made a mistake. What if they had pushed too hard? Or offered too little? What if they didn't get another chance to negotiate for Marta's release? What if she had already been killed?

Luis von Ahn: Vi que Juan estaba muy nervioso. Era probable que iba a sentirse responsable por la muerte de Marta. Nadie pudo dormir esa noche. En la mañana, todos saltamos cuando sonó el teléfono.

Martina Castro: Juan had been waiting near the phone and picked up quickly. But it was just a distant cousin asking if there was any news about Marta.

Luis von Ahn: Al día siguiente, el Tío Sam no llamó. Muchos familiares se fueron de la casa.

Martina Castro: After the third day without word from the kidnappers, members of the family who had been camped out at Marta's house started to pack up their things and head home. Luis took this as a sign that they had lost hope of Marta returning alive.

Luis von Ahn: Yo empecé a sentir pánico. ¿Y si mi tía nunca regresa? Pero unas horas más tarde, el Tío Sam llamó.

Martina Castro: El Tío Sam sounded even more agitated and angry than the last time he called.

Luis von Ahn: Juan le preguntó si mi tía estaba viva, y el Tío Sam dijo que sí. Juan le dijo que solo teníamos 50,000 dólares.

Martina Castro: Surprisingly, Tio Sam said that was fine. He asked them to put the money in a suitcase and to leave it in a trashcan in a mall a few kilometers from the house. But first...

Luis von Ahn: Juan le dijo que antes de pagar, necesitábamos otra prueba de vida. Una hora después, el Tío Sam llamó con la respuesta correcta a otra pregunta para mi tía.

Martina Castro: Tio Sam then asked that the ransom money be taken to the mall immediately. He warned that he would be watching the area, so they

better leave it there within the hour. Marta's family put the cash in a small suitcase and handed it to Juan to make the drop.

Luis von Ahn: Cuando Juan regresó a la casa, dijo que no vio nada raro en el centro comercial, y que había dejado el dinero donde pidieron. Las próximas horas fueron muy largas. Pasamos otra noche casi sin dormir.

Martina Castro: Hours passed, but they received no news from Marta, nor calls from the kidnappers confirming the receipt of the money.

Luis von Ahn: Pensaba en mi tía, quien era como una segunda madre para mí. Me preguntaba si la volvería a ver.

Martina Castro: Then early the next morning... The doorbell rang...

Luis von Ahn: Era mi tía. Estaba viva y bien, pero muy nerviosa.

Martina Castro: Marta stood in the living room, while everyone sat around, eyes fixed on Marta. The 65-year-old woman trembled as she told them what happened the days she was kept captive.

Luis von Ahn: Nos dijo que estuvo en una habitación pequeña y oscura, y que no podía ver porque sus ojos estaban cubiertos. Dijo que los secuestradores le habían dado de comer, pero que tuvo mucho miedo.

Martina Castro: Days after being placed in that room, she was able to make out the face of someone familiar through her blindfold. She recognized one of the army generals who had worked with her ex-husband. For fear of retribution, she never denounced him for his crime.

Luis von Ahn: Después del secuestro, mi vida cambió. Cada día me preguntaba si alguien más iba a ser secuestrado. ¿Sería yo, mi mamá, uno de mis amigos? Meses después, me fui a Estados Unidos a estudiar en la universidad, en parte por la inseguridad de Guatemala.

Martina Castro: And he never moved back. Just months later, in December of 1996, the decades-long war in Guatemala officially ended. Luis says, today, the country is much safer. But people walk around with ghosts from that time—loved ones they lost, regrets and fears that they were never able to shake. For Luis, his ghost is Marta’s kidnapping...

Luis von Ahn: Todavía puedo sentir la ansiedad de esos días del secuestro de mi tía.

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