

Pen pals on Death Row

Hari Ammeter and Ines Aubert regularly write to their pen pals living on death row in American Prisons. And thus keep them alive – until the death sentence is executed.

Hari Ammeter is sitting at the living-room table of his apartment in Zurich, a stack of letters and postcards in front of him. Carefully drawn flowers deck the stationery, colorful graffiti is sprinkled on envelopes, mouses and snowmen dance across postcards. Hari Ammeter drinks another zip of coffee, lights a candle and starts to read: mail from death row of high security prison Polunsky in Livingston, TX. For 20 years, José Angel Moreno has been waiting for his execution by lethal injection there. The 38-year-old Mexican received his first letter by Hari Ammeter exactly ten years ago. «In the beginning it was mainly curiosity», says Hari Ammeter. What is life like in such a prison? Why does a human being kill somebody? – Those were questions that bothered him.

José Angel Moreno is a convicted murderer. When he was 18, he and two of his friends kidnapped and shot a family man. José may not have pulled the trigger, but he helped plan the crime. «In my letters, I tell José about my everyday life, my job, life in my 2-people flat-community, of visits with my parents and of my travels», says Ammeter.



Thoughts about life behind bars: Hari Ammeter with a stack of letters from his friend José.

Sometimes he has a bad conscience about sending postcards from China, Ireland or the Alps to Texas. But his pen

pal, who would himself like to travel all over the world is glad about the travelogs. «He keeps on making jokes about how I

cannot bear staying at home for too long», says Ammeter. Penpalships with death row inmates are rather common: according to the organization Lifespark, about 300 Swiss citizens write to people on US-death row. In addition to that, there are uncountable organizations all over the world who arrange such penpalships.

Two important organizations who have been arranging penpalships for about 20 years are Livesline and Human writes from Great Britain. The goal, however, is the same in all organizations: to support death row prisoners, who are cut off from the outside world and to let them participate in life outside of the prison walls.

more than men, and they look more into subjects like death», the 38-year old electrical engineer believes.

A deep friendship has developed between Hari Ammeter and José Angel Moreno in the last ten years. «We have a lot of things in common», Ammeter smiles. Both of them are very tidy, almost perfectionists and both prefer writing to speaking. Only their taste in reading material is completely different. «José loves to read fantasy books, whereas I like novels and non-fiction», explains Ammeter.

Starting a penpalship with a death row prisoner must be very well-considered – this is what

«Most executions are carried out without ruthlessly.»

Reason: one should be well-balanced and patient – endurance and sympathy are also desired. It is also important that the penpal is aware of the fact that this is a special friendship: in 99 percent of the cases there is a time-limit to it, as most executions are carried out ruthlessly. In addition, knowledge of Spanish or English is a basic requirement. The list of death row inmates seeking penpals is very long. Many prisoners may wish for more than only a person to write to. They are seeking friends who do not leave their lives after writing just one or two letters, but who remain and, at best, visit them in prison.

José Angel Moreno will presumably be executed this year. Hari Ammeter visited him on death row in September 2006. Foreigners are allowed to visit death row inmates for four hours each on two consecutive days. «Through my visit I wanted to give him confidence and show him, how much he means to me», Ammeter explains his decision. «I was very nervous when I was lead from the boiling heat of the Texas sun into the icy, air-conditioned high-security tract in Livingston.» The light is glaring, the hallways are long and sterile – like in a hospital. And it is deathly quiet.

After Hari Ammeter had been lead deeper and deeper into this concrete bunker, the moment had finally come: Through Perspex windows he could look his penpal in the eye for the first time. «I was surprised by the closeness there was,» tells Hari Ammeter. In their letters, Josés



20 years behind bars: Hari Ammeter's pen pal José is waiting for his execution on death row in Texas.

Mainly Women write to the death row prisoners

Not only in Switzerland, Hari Ammeter is one of only a few men who cultivate such a friendship. The majority of penpals comprises of women. «Women enjoy writing letters

organizations highly recommend to future members. Lifespark even makes telephone interviews with interested people in order to find out whether they are suitable for a penpalship.

crime had never been a topic. Not until this visit Ammeter found out, why his penpal was on death row at all. With José's mother receiving psychological treatment and his father never being home, the neglected teenager became part of a gang.

The first meeting will also be the last

At first, there were only minor thefts, then they wanted big money. José was the only one who got caught. Yet, he never revealed his gang friends. «Maybe the verdict would have been less harsh if he had done so», thinks Hari Ammeter, «but José had an agreement with his friends that they would not snitch on one another.» Today, José regrets what he did.

«If José wants me to attend his execution», says Hari Ammeter, «I will think about it again.» Right now, however, he would decide against it. Ammeter does not want to see how a human being is being executed, just as little, as he watches brutality on TV «At that point, I do not think that I can help him anymore», he is convinced. He does not know, whether or not he will build up a new penpalship after José's death: «It will be difficult to replace José.» Despite the fact that their first meeting is most likely also their last, there were no tears upon their parting. «We are both not that emotional, more head-guided.» As a farewell, they pressed their palms against the glass window, said «See you later» and parted.

Letters as a purpose in life

Approximately 3500 people are currently waiting to be executed in the USA. Among them, Mariano Rosales, 67 years old. His cell with bed, toilet and a small box filled with his

belongings measures 6.6 sqf. His only connection to the outside world is a small window-slit in the wall – and Ines Aubert, his Swiss penpal.

letter to Mariano about once a week. Mariano was her first penpal on death row. She knew nothing about the crime he had



Touching letters: Ines Aubert at the kitchen table in her house in Wermatswil, where she writes letters every day

«For death row inmates, these letters are their purpose in life», says the 45-year-old mother of three children living in Wermatswil ZH. For the last five years she has been writing a

committed: «For me it did not really matter», she says. Interest in the person and the inhuman circumstances on death row in connection with her passion for writing were enough to motivate her.



Touching impossible: Ines Aubert with her penpals Mariano (left) and Kenny in Texas.

Mariano Rosales, as well, has been sentenced to die by lethal injection and has been sitting on death row in Texas for 20 years. When 45 years old, he shot several people – out of jealousy, after having caught his wife with her lover. Wife and lover survived, three other people who had the misfortune to be in the wrong place at the wrong time died. Mariano deeply regrets his crime, he has become strongly devout in prison. He calls his penpal «my salving angel».

Children participate

Before Ines Aubert decided to write to a death row inmate five years ago, she consulted with her family. «Neither they, nor my friends reacted negatively», says Aubert. Today, her children even actively participate in her penpalship. Her 13-year-old son plays chess with Mariano. The mother keeps drawing the chessboard onto a paper; like this they have been playing the same game for almost one year. Her older daughter takes Spanish classes at school and writes Spanish letters to the prisoner with Mexican roots.

A penpal cannot replace human warmth



letter excerpt: Mariano wrote to his penpal about a fly visiting his cell.

Ines Aubert tells Mariano about her daily life, about excursions and experiences with her family, her husband and her children and

sometimes, she tells him about the things that trouble her. Usually she includes something in the letter, a postcard, a collage showing her and Mariano in the Swiss mountains or cartoons.

Even a fly can rock the boat

«The prisoners are grateful for everything and thankful when being included», says Ines Aubert. Death row inmates spent 23 hours a day in their cells. In many cases they stay there for ten, some even 20 years. There are almost no possibilities for activities. «For Mariano even the visit of a fly is a special occasion», explains Ines Aubert. And of course, this occasion wants to be shared with someone. Besides his daily routine in prison, Mariano also

talks about his family – he is a proud great-grandfather –, about God and about death. «Death row inmates want to spread their soul and be recognized as human beings – often, this is the only

thing they have left», says Aubert. In such a profound friendship, it is possible that the penpals feel more for each other and fall in love. Weddings in prison are not uncommon. Like the case of Gary Wayne Etheridges. He spent twelve years of his life on death row. He met his German wife through a letter correspondence and fell in love. They had only seen each other through a Perspex window and still, the relationship went well up until his execution. «Even though I can understand that very deep feelings may grow, I do not support such relationships», says Ines Aubert. Of course it is possible to become very close in these friendships. There are even women who take up penpalships to death row prisoners in order to experience a romantic or erotic adventure. However, this is the wrong motivation and negatively influences the work of those who write to prisoners out of unselfish reasons.

Returning some humanity

In spite of all the closeness, Ines Aubert never forgets why her penpals are behind bars: «It makes me very sad, when a human being loads himself with so much guilt.» But it is not the penpals task to judge the crime, it is much more about returning a bit of humanity to the prisoner.

«Violence is the order of the day, gangs dictate life.»

«One must not forget the great responsibility one has», says Ines Aubert. For most prisoners, it is the first time in their life that someone is there for them and, most of all, stays. This fact is confirmed by psychologists like Dieter Bongers, working at the

Swiss Federal Office for Justice. He is responsible for the assessment of pilot schemes in the section 'Execution of sentences and measures'. «Convicts need a person who remains in contact, despite of all the anger, dismay and compassion: a counterpart who is not appalled and runs off.» This is especially true for young men.

Ines Aubert's youngest penpal is a mere 26 years old. Texan Kenny Vodochodsky was put on death row when he was only 19 – innocent, he says himself. His flatmate back then went haywire and shot three police officers and himself. Kenny was convicted for Capital Murder under the 'Law of Parties'. Several years later he accepted a deal with the state: he admitted guilt and got 30 years in prison – instead of a death sentence.

sitting in prison», says Ines Aubert, who is convinced of Kenny's innocence.

Even though the young Texan is no longer on death row, conditions in prison are tough for him. Violence is the order of the day, gangs dictate the life behind bars. Payment of protection money, rape is no wild rumor, but brutal reality. «I often fear for him – he is still so young», says Ines Aubert. She has devoted her life to writing to prisoners and her commitment against the death penalty. The 45-year-old mother regularly participates at events or organizes them at schools. She flies to the USA twice a year to visit her penpals in the prisons of Texas and Florida. «The meetings are very touching and sometimes even tearful», she explains with obvious emotion.



Emotional meetings: Twice a year, Ines Aubert visits her friends on death row in Texas and Florida.

Contact to families

«In the USA, many things go by deals – as long as nobody finds out that an innocent person is

Her first meeting with Mariano, who is a rather awkward correspondent, was overpowering: «This man has an

unbelievably warm charisma.»
By now, the Swiss lady has become part of Mariano's family – she even lived at the Rosales' during her last visit. She is in regular e-mail contact with Mariano's daughter. «She keeps on thanking me for the all strength I give to her father.», says Aubert.

When Ines Aubert and Hari Ammeter decided to start a penpalship with prisoners, their main target – besides a healthy portion of curiosity – was to return some happiness to these human beings. Today they both agree: «These friendships enhance our lives as well.» While both are talking about their penpals, Mariano and José sit in their cells alone. Mariano is drawing a small, yellow bird onto an envelope. José puts a stamp on his and writes down the address. Both letters go to Switzerland.

Lifespark – Writing against death

Lifespark is a Swiss organisation with headquarters located in Basel. It was founded in 1993, and is an independent association with no religious or political affiliation. The main focus is to arrange penpalships with prisoners sentenced to death in the USA. The organization has about 280 members and has established more than 800 penpalships over the last 13 years.

Prisoners usually find out about Lifespark through other prisoners. They then send a letter to the organization in which they introduce themselves. They have to wait several months until a penpal is found. Lifespark does not ask about the type of felony that was committed, about race or religion. Under normal circumstances, only one penpalship is established per prisoner.

In addition, Lifespark co-operates with the official human-rights-organizations, in order to arrange activities against the death penalty in Switzerland, the USA and other countries. Moreover, it grants financial support to local anti-death-penalty-movements in the USA. The goal of these initiatives is to inform members of the parliament, press and the general public and to improve the standards of living in prisons and on death row.

www.lifespark.org

Post Office Box, 4002 Basel, Switzerland