



## Hermanos in Life and Death

By Andreas Hausammann, Switzerland, August 2017

Rolando Ruiz - through the services of the Swiss human-rights organisation Lifespark - became my pen-pal in the summer of 2000. By the time he was executed in Huntsville TX in March 2017, he had long become more than a friend: we had grown to be each other's "hermanos", brothers. Rolando did not use this term lightly. I was deeply moved when he first called me his brother through the impenetrable armoured glass that separated us in the visiting area of the Polunsky Unit in Livingston TX. Yet, it fit instantly as it reflected the bond between the two of us that we both cherished and relied on. What connected us was way more than a private little charity project of a well-nourished, content Swiss musician mercifully supporting a hopeless death row inmate overseas might have done.

From the moment Rolando's first letter arrived in my mailbox, I realised God had decided to give me a wonderful gift: someone with lots of love and a most giving heart, someone from a wildly different background who was keenly interested in me and my every-day life, someone who was in the process of becoming a wonderful Christian companion, someone who could use my help and encouragement, yes, but who helped and encouraged me in equal measure through his unconditional love and faithfulness. Whenever I ran into problems in my private or professional life, I knew I could tell mi hermano all that was on my heart, and I could count on him finding words that put everything in a healthy perspective. Through the years, this perspective became more and more profoundly Christian as Rolando grew in his faith and his trust in the God of the Bible. As I am a Christian, too, this development deepened our bond even more. At one point, we decided to read through the entire book during the course of one year, using the same Bible-reading calendar. Even though sometimes, weeks and months elapsed between our letters (to travel to Texas to see Rolando was a time-and money-consuming undertaking that I only managed about every two years), we knew we prayed for each other on a daily basis. We asked God for strength and endurance, for his blessing on our families, for wisdom and humility in our daily choices. Rolando's beloved mum, Maria, and her poor health often weighed heaviest on his heart, so I was delighted to get to know her - alongside Rolando's extended family - personally in 2007, albeit on the tragic occasion of Rolando's first execution date.

Through the hard and clever work of the legal team with the Texas Defender Service who took care of his case, and through God's grace, Rolando's execution was postponed literally at the last possible moment. We were in shock when the news came through to the witness waiting area at Huntsville where we had been waiting to be escorted to the execution, but that shock quickly gave way to an enormous sense of relief and gratitude. We were so glad that Rolando's life had been spared, and the following years only deepened that sentiment as we watched Rolando grow even more in wisdom, strength and love. He found the courage to reach out to his biological father, Rolando Sr., after years of silence and was overjoyed to be able to establish a wholly new kind of relationship with his dad. He found words of encouragement and forgiveness for his mum that truly reached her aching heart. He found the strength and dignity to stand through the ordeal of another hearing on his case before the court in San Antonio that had sent him to death row all those years ago and that mercilessly confronted him with the darkest moments of his difficult childhood and youth once again. He found so much wisdom through his continued

study of the Bible and through prayer that he gradually grew into a spiritual advisor not only for his fellow inmates, but for some of his guards, too. He even fell in love and was about to get married against all odds, had it not been for some prison regulation that was changed by the State of Texas just before the wedding. When this dream was shattered so brutally, Rolando somehow managed to accept the situation, forbidding it to corrupt the thankfulness in his heart for every day he was allowed to live.

Needless to say, Rolando had long become a huge inspiration for my own life. By the time his second date came around and in the summer of 2016, and was called off about a week in advance, he had become so stable in his personality, so grounded in his faith, when I saw him two days afterwards, I met the happiest, most balanced, future-oriented Rolando I had ever seen. What a wonderful day that was. It elevated our sense of brotherhood to another level yet again.

On the day Rolando had been scheduled to die, instead of being a witness to his execution at Huntsville, I met the whole of his San Antonio family in their hometown for a wonderful barbeque party in his mum's and step-father's garden. Tragically, though, the State of Texas hurried on to turn down Rolando's lawyers' latest appeals and set another date a lot sooner than we had hoped.

On 7th March 2017, I spoke to mi hermano for the last time as we said our goodbyes in the long-familiar visiting area at Livingston. We thanked each other from the bottom of our hearts for the wonderful story in our lives that we had been privileged to be part of. We asked God Almighty to have mercy on Rolando and his executioners, on his poor mum, step-dad, and his biological father, his half-siblings, his uncles, aunts, and cousins, his friends as we all gathered all of our energy to somehow be able to stand as the State of Texas set about yet again to avenge a horrible tragedy by purposely inflicting another horrible tragedy.

Late that night, after an endless delay due to legal complications, Rolando's half-brother Omar and I were lead to the tiny witness room next to the Huntsville death chamber. For years, and much more intensely during the weeks leading up to that day, I had prepared for this dreadful moment as best as I could, mustering up as much courage and confidence as possible. Rolando and I had had no difficulties talking about what was going to happen, how totally dependent he was going to be on God's grace to somehow carry him through, how helpless I was going to feel, how desperately (what horrible irony!) we would have to hope that, at least, the drugs would work properly when they were released into his bloodstream to stop his heart.

When we turned the last corner on our way to the witness room, however, I was shocked at how terribly close to my brother I was going to be standing as he drew his last breath. The gurney was right on the other side of a flimsy Plexiglas partition. If the glass hadn't been there, I would have been able to reach out and take Rolando's hand. How I wished I could! Yet all through the years of our brotherhood, we had never been able to touch. That privilege was only granted to us when, after the execution, Rolando's body had been taken to a nearby church, where all of us were finally allowed to embrace him and say our goodbyes. Now, in the death chamber, he looked at us for the last time, told us that he loved us, and asked the victim's family for forgiveness for the pain he brought into their lives. "I am at peace", he said, and then went quickly and quietly. Immediately, I knew mi hermano had gone home now. He had been expected on the other side, just as we had always prayed for. So, right amidst this most cruel pain of watching Rolando's life being taken, there remained a deep sense of gratitude and connectedness that was going to last, no matter what – hermanos in life and death.