



## The apple, the future, and the hug – snapshots of my trip to the USA

By Ines Aubert

First published in the lifespark newsletter, September 2010

Several of my pen pals in Texas had their death sentences overturned and were moved to other prisons spread out over the state.

So, when I planned my last trip in summer, I decided to invest a lot of time and visit them all. For the first time, my husband Kurt joined me and even wanted to visit inmates, too.

**Visiting unknown inmates:** In Polunsky, a regular visit lasts two hours and all the visits are behind glass. So, for a stranger to visit with an inmate is not very private and manageable.

My plan was that I ask our members if they think that their pen pals would appreciate a visit from Kurt.

At the same time, my pen pal at Polunsky was once more put on level 3 and therefore was not eligible to have special visits but instead only one regular visit a month. So, I decided I would additionally visit one or two other inmates at Polunsky, as well.

They were quickly found. In Texas, we can send e-mails to inmates; - so, as soon as members got back to me and told me their pen pal would probably appreciate a visit, I wrote an e-mail to the concerned men. I asked them to put me or Kurt on their visit list in case they wanted us to visit them. In short, we had five inmates on death row who confirmed by letter that they had put us on their lists and that they would love to receive a visit.

Unexpectedly, my pen pal had his case dropped some time later and was put back on level 1. He was now again able to have all the four special visits for July and August, but we, of course, stuck to our promise and in the course of several days, either Kurt or I visited all the five unknown inmates at Polunsky. This was a very good experience for all the concerned parties; for the inmates as well as for my husband and me.

If anybody is interested in doing the same when they visit Polunsky, I'll gladly share more of that experience.

**The apple:** One of these inmates, a 73-year-old pen pal of another member has been on death row for 33 years. He doesn't receive any visits and was not familiar with the visit rules or the content of the vending machines. When I asked him what he wanted to eat, he gave me an answer that touched me. He said that he'd like to have one thing only: an apple to take back to his cell.

**The future – two different prospects:** One of the men who now has a life sentence told me that sometimes he imagined himself some decades later coming to the visiting booth with a walker like other old inmates around us did.

He's 43 and not eligible for parole.

One morning in the waiting line in front of the prison I talked to a woman who told me that her husband was to be released in one month after being in prison for 19 years. I asked her how she was preparing herself for that moment. She looked at me and said: "It is absolutely beyond my imagination and I have no idea of how to prepare."

**The hug:** For the visits with one of my pen pals who could be my son's age and who got his sentence overturned, we were extraordinarily granted contact visits. My 30-year-old friend looked forward to receiving a hug from a human being so much that he was counting down the hours before the first visit. After the visit he wrote me in a letter: "What can I say? I can't tell you how good it felt to hug you! Wow! I had no idea it would be just so wonderful."