



## Travel update, summer 2016

By Ines Aubert, Switzerland, July and August 2016

**The Travel update was written during the trip to see Robert P. a last time before his scheduled execution on August 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016.**

### **July 27th 2016: Travel update – I'm leaving tomorrow**

I will be leaving for the USA tomorrow and see Robert next week. Until then, I'm visiting other pen pals of mine. If Robert doesn't get a stay I will be in Texas until August 24<sup>th</sup>.

Some people have been asking how Robert is doing. He's at peace and enjoying life. He doesn't want people to be overly sad about his possible execution on August 23<sup>rd</sup>.

In his letter of June 29th 2016 he wrote: *"I don't really see death as sad. Not mine, not anyone's. And if it's a painful experience it just means the attachment was very strong, as well as the love.. In my head, death is somehow an achievement. It's the spirit saying "Ok, you did it! You went there and made it through what your soul needed to experience, and you can now move on and release your Self from the bonds of flesh... if only for a moment."*

Please understand that I cannot forward greetings and messages to Robert. There are many people on this mailing list as Robert has become quite known through the BBC documentary and other films in many parts of the world.

I won't be able to respond to all of your e-mails either. I apologize for that. I will read them though as Robert reads all the letters he receives.

### **August 1st: Travel update – The ambassador**

We just returned from a boat tour on the Wakulla River in Wakulla Springs in Florida. It was an awesome tour, full of sensations. The sun was shining and a soft wind was blowing. There were the countless colors and shapes of the plants and leaves at the bank of the river. Huge bold cypress trees grew in the water and provided shelter for different animals. All the colors around us were mirrored in the water of the river while we slowly passed by. At the banks, inside the water and on trunks and trees we saw a lot of animals of all kinds, including alligators and manatees. There was a constant exotic noise around us and the splashing of the water when a bird flew up next to us. I experienced a great feeling of peace and comfort like there would never be any reason for sorrow. To me it was like a glimpse into paradise.

The past two days I visited my friend Mark who is on death row in Florida. We had two six-hour-long contact visits, which we spent talking, eating lunch and having coffee at a little table. When we had to say the final good bye I knew too well where Mark would be heading to; his tiny cell where he has spent the last 27 years. I know about the living conditions on death row and while the 12 hours we spent together resemble a meeting with any other close friends the semblance of normality abruptly ends when the door of the visit park closes behind the visitors and the inmates are shackled and escorted back to their cells.

The question arises: is it okay to enjoy boat tours when, at the same time, a close friend has to live on death row? Or even faces an execution date in about three weeks? Is it ethically justifiable to be awe-struck with Mother Nature, knowing a dear friend won't be able to see any of it anymore?

My answer is a clear yes. It's not only allowed, I rather feel there is an obligation to enjoy our life and all the beauty of it. To me, it is as if I would charge my batteries so that I can share all the experiences through letters and occasional personal meetings with my pen friends. I am an ambassador from the outside world and I will share it with those who are no longer considered worth being part of it.

In Texas, the visit situation is much worse than in Florida. We communicate through phones as a glass separates visitors and inmates. The visits are wonderful nonetheless and I look forward to seeing Robert in a few days. The next few days we will be heading towards Texas, enjoying beautiful places along the way.

Here you will find a [comic](#) that shows you the life on death row in Texas.

### **August 5th: Travel update – The dilemma**

The past days we've constantly been travelling towards Texas, trying to show every state that we crossed respect and appreciate its beauty and uniqueness. There is a lot of beauty in these states which we tend to forget in our commitment against the death penalty.

In Louisiana we visited the Angola prison museum. It is right next to the entrance of the Angola prison which is still active. The prison started as a plantation with slaves from Angola, so that's what gave it its name. In Louisiana we saw a lot of cotton fields along the roads, the cotton plants are blooming right now. Last year, the former death row wing at the Angola prison became part of the prison museum and can now be visited. The death row cells are open and you can step inside. I can only imagine the suffering and despair of those who were incarcerated in these cells for many years before they were executed... Let's never forget the pain of the victims and their families either.

This morning I saw Robert for the first of several visits. He's at peace and says hello to everybody. Robert is quite optimistic that one of the issues they have pending will lead to another stay. Robert has been trying for years to receive the approval for a visit with his father Sam and also with his brother Steven, who are both in prison with life sentences. The Wardens of both involved prisons would have to approve this visit and so far one of them has always blocked it. All the Wardens have now given their approval for such visits, so that's exciting news for Robert. Robert hasn't seen his father and brother for 20 years! However, as far as I understood, the visits won't take place if Robert receives a stay. There are many dilemmas around Robert's situation such like this: do I wish now that there won't be a stay until the last couple of days so he can see his father and brother? Or do I wish to spare all of us the exhausting days leading up to the execution day and wish for a stay to come as soon as possible? Typically, there is no right or wrong with dilemmas and I haven't made up my mind yet. But as I don't have any say in the matter it is probably not that important.

### **August 9th: Travel update – Let's hope for plan B**

On Saturday I had a contact visit with Seth for the very first time. (You will learn who Seth is [here](#).) He gave me a very shy hug and seemed a little afraid of so much physical closeness. The three years I've been writing to the now 21 years old have sometimes been irritating. On Seth's wrist there is a tattoo saying: "Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer" (one nation, one reich, one Fuehrer). In his letters, Seth sometimes elaborates on his white supremacist ideas. It has been challenging for me to keep writing to him and he in turn didn't really understand where I was coming from when I disagreed with his ideas.

Seth has not experienced any care and guidance in his upbringing and like Robert he landed in prison before he was 16. His father is in prison as well and his mother has visited him once since he was locked up. I have always been wondering whether Seth would change his beliefs once he feels loved and whether he would one day see equal human beings in his neighbors of all ethnics. During the visit, Seth revealed to me that he was starting to grasp the concept of trust which he had never understood before. He also said he was now trying to show more of his personality instead of referring to ideologies and theories because he understood that this would generate more closeness.

I will try to respect my young friend the way he is, but I admit I would prefer him to leave behind such white supremacist thinking. I'm aware that I'm not supposed to hope for people to change so they match my view of life because that means I don't respect who they are. Still, I can't help looking for signs that Seth will change his beliefs sometime in the future.

I had two special visits with Robert and it was good to see him and to talk to him again. I watched him trying to organize his last two weeks before the execution. He had to fill in a lot of paperwork for the prison administration and also schedule the last visits. Inmates on death row in Texas can have ten people on their visit list and they can change the list only every six months. So, Robert had to decide who would be on his visit list so they would be able to see him before the execution. That alone was a difficult task for him as inevitably some of his friends won't be put on that list. But then besides the visit schedule in case they follow through with the execution, there needs to be a plan B in case Robert gets a stay. The visit schedule needs to be set up in a way that those who come from far would still be able to see him after he got a stay and there won't be any all-day-visits. The plan B actually consists of several sub plans depending on when the stay is given and whether or not people can still cancel their flights or change their plans. Those who can't change their flights and come here anyway should be able to see Robert, also in case of a stay, so they don't have to go home without even seeing him.

We tried to figure out how to organize everything during our visits. But as we don't have any paper and pens in the visit room we had to work it all out in our heads. Each time I left the prison I had a memorized list of messages or questions to forward to other people in order to collect or give all the necessary information. The same when I entered the prison. Robert seemed a little exhausted by all of this and at one point he said, laughing: "The execution is actually the easiest part of it all!"

Otherwise, Robert was in good shape. He ate a lot, spoke and laughed a lot. If you have an imagination of how a death row prisoner should be two weeks before his scheduled execution:

Robert is not like that. He's not miserable or scared but instead enjoying life and able to joke and laugh.

### **August 11th: Travel update – We'll go for plan B! Robert got a STAY!!!!**

Robert got a stay again!

I learned about the news after I left the Polunsky Unit where I visited with a friend of Robert. We are all very happy!

I will continue with the Travel update and write more later. Time to celebrate right now!

### **August 15th: Travel update – The point of contact**

It is a great relief to know that Robert is safe for the near future!

I learned about it after I had left the Polunsky Unit on Thursday and Robert will be granted only one regular visit of two hours next week. According to plan B another friend of his will be seeing him but I will visit a friend of his at the same time and can at least wave hello through the glass. Visitors are not allowed to talk through the phone to other inmates besides the one they are visiting. I don't know when Robert learned about his stay and there was no way of getting word back into the prison to inform him. It is always sad to be separated when there would be reason to celebrate.

When I go to see my friends in prison there is not only a point of contact between the free world and the prison world: it can also mean that two different ways of life in the free world meet. It has been for the third time now that I met some visitors in the visit room of the prison in Navasota that caught my attention. When I saw a small group of these similarly looking and equally dressed women for the first time I was irritated by their appearance. They seemed to originate from another century. All the women had their hair done in the same way and they could be told apart mainly by the color of their robes. These women were members of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints. The members of this church, or rather sect, live a very restricted life with little individual choices. Polygamy is practiced and girls as young as 14 years old are married with much older men. The "prophet" Warren Jeffs makes all the decisions and rules and although he sits in a Texan prison cell with a life sentence for the sexual assault of underage girls, he still governs his community and provides "messages from God".

When I sat next to these women and exchanged a few words with them I wondered how different our worlds and prospects are and what they might think about me. You will find an article and short videos about the church [here](#). The movie [Outlaw Prophet](#) shows the life of this sect.

In case you still question the value of visiting with prisoners you might want to read the text "[What visits mean to me](#)" by Daniel McDonald.

### **August 20<sup>th</sup>: Travel update – Happy endings**

The whole trip to the USA was a very rich and full journey and now with Robert having a stay it even has a happy ending. Robert is doing fine and he's happy about the stay. He was moved off death watch and is in another cell now. Unfortunately, the meeting with his father and brother was not approved and won't happen.

I had a very interesting talk with a man who wrote me an e-mail telling me I was just another of these naïve European women who believed everybody on death row was innocent while in fact they are all guilty. He ended his e-mail with "And another Euro woman will have been duped". I wrote him back and we started writing back and forth. This man is a good representative of someone who is strongly pro-death penalty. Still, I appreciate the talks we had because we both listened to one another. It was an interesting challenge to find the arguments and words to answer his accusations. I had always wanted to talk to someone who works for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and this man had been employed at the TDCJ for a couple of years. So, my wish was fulfilled...

I'm thinking of delving deeper into the topic "naïve European women" and "death row groupies" as European women who write to death row inmates are often labelled like that by people who favor capital punishment.

Last but not least I'm very happy that some people on Robert's list became interested in learning more about pen pal-ships with death row inmates. I know that some have already turned to other pen pal organizations which is okay as well.

I'm back home now and this is the last travel update. I will continue with regular updates on Robert's situation as they come in.