

My journey with Robert Pruett on death row in Texas

By Ines Aubert, November 2017

At the end of April 2002, I wrote my first letter to Robert Pruett, who had just arrived on death row in Texas. I had been connected to him through the Swiss organization lifespark, of which I am an active member. In my letter to Robert, I introduced myself and wrote “This morning I got the letter you sent to lifespark. I see you are a very intelligent and interesting person. I'm quite sure we'll have a good time together.” At the end of the letter I asked him: “Tell me: are you a kid or a man?” Robert was twenty-two years old at that time, and that seemed so incredibly young to me. Robert immediately wrote back and expressed his joy over my letter. He outlined his life and wrote: “To sum up my pastimes and hobbies you could say I just have an insatiable desire to learn new things.” That portrayed Robert very well and he had been like that all these years.

In his first letter, Robert also wrote: “I'd like nothing more than to see more of your home, garden and life.” During the following years, Robert got to know all aspects of my life. He learned about the sowing, growing, harvesting and dying in my garden over the seasons of the year, watched my children grow up, and supported me in my own learning and growing. My appearance in Robert's life meant financial, but more importantly, emotional support for him. Robert seemed to love to create a bond, not only with me, but with my whole family. In one letter he wrote “I am not part of anyone's life anymore and I like to think I am part of yours!” At one point he asked: “Will you guys adopt me?” I read the question aloud to my three children, and my oldest son, 14 at that time, replied in all earnest that well, he would agree that we adopt him under the condition that he didn't have to share his room with Robert. Robert laughed when I reminded him of his question and my son's answer.

I'd been on a journey with Robert for fifteen and half years. I watched him grow and become a spiritually oriented person. I like to think that I helped him to become that person through my constant support and love, and by typing and

posting his writings that later captured the world. Sometimes I say that I feel I raised Robert.



At Robert's and my first visit in February 2003

In 2005, Robert sent me a first text which I typed out and posted on a homepage someone had set up for inmates' writings. His very well-written article drew attention to Robert. He went on sending me texts, and soon informed me he was going to write his autobiography, which I thought was a great idea. With this plan of his and with him going on writing shorter texts, later called "journals", it became apparent he was going to need his own homepage. So, I asked my son to create one for him.

Over the following years, Robert continuously worked on his autobiography as well as on the journals. The autobiography ended up being close to three hundred typed pages, and I worked on Robert's originals for numerous hours, typing them out page by page. His biography became a strong bond between Robert and me as we now had a common purpose and a goal greater than our personal connection: to get his story out on the net. I was happy to be able to help him with that, as I thought the heartbreaking story of his childhood deserved to be shared, and that Robert deserved to be heard.

When in April 2014, the episode “Crisis stage“ of the BBC documentary “Life and Death Row” aired for the first time, things exploded. The episode was about Robert Pruet, Robert Garza (who was executed in September 2013 while the documentary was being produced), and about the Texas Innocence Network with David Dow, Jeff Newberry and their team of students who worked for both inmates. I started receiving messages through the e-mail address I had set up on Robert’s behalf. They came in by the hundreds. I forwarded them via the inmate e-mail service jpay and Robert read them all. A little later, I set up a mailing list through which I kept the people who cared about Robert up to date.

Over the past years, because of the BBC documentary and because of his autobiography on the homepage, Robert attained “idol status” to many people. Many who read the autobiography were amazed at Robert’s writing skills as well as his memory, and the fact he recanted so much of his past. The autobiography is a detailed document of a childhood full of neglect that leaves no-one unaffected. Many people, after reading it, felt as if they personally knew Robert. They wrote to me how much they adored and admired him, and sent him more letters he could ever respond to. To me, this was a surprising phenomenon.

His popularity, I believe, impacted Robert a lot. He was overwhelmed while at the same time enjoying it. The letters he received provided him with insight into the lives of people from all walks of life and in entirely different situations. To me it was as if the world passed through his cell in a constant flow of people, each bringing the gift of a shared moment and a story to him.

Over time, I also got to know Robert’s brother Steven and his mother Marcia and became a pen pal with his father, Sam Pruet, about ten years ago. During all the years, new people came in Robert’s life, many becoming close friends he trusted or even girlfriends or fiancées. Robert had been disappointed a few times. Some of the people whom he had considered to be true and honest friends later developed hostile feelings toward him. So, there had been some drama going on in his life. Robert used to comment on it: “I will stay in the present and won’t let negativity

have an impact on me!” A couple of times, I removed the homepage from the net for a while because another woman with whom he was close had set one up for him, too.

On Tuesday, October 10, 2017, I saw Robert for the first of the three visits, and afterwards I knew I had to decide whether to be completely open and outspoken to him, or pretend everything was alright. I knew the first would probably lead to a disagreement, which seemed quite insensitive in this situation, and the latter would be dishonest. It was easy to decide for the first; I would have felt bad for the rest of my life if I hadn't. Robert and I, from the start, had challenged each other in many ways. Beyond my personal friendship with him, I saw a mountain of questions about the purpose of life, punishment, reconciliation, trust, love, and much more. In our letters and during our many visits, Robert and I had often discussed these topics.

And just on those days, more than anything, I also thought of the murder victims. There were the families of two victims linked to Robert's life: the Yarborough and Nagle families. I wondered how they were feeling. Who would not feel empathy with the loved ones of men, women or children who were killed? And who would not have nightmares thinking of that happening to themselves: losing a parent, partner or a child? A couple of years ago, I had the opportunity to talk to family members of Ray Yarborough – the victim in Robert's first case. I met Ray's father and son, and saw firsthand what the loss had done to them. Robert and I had talked about the responsibility towards the victims' families in both cases, but we didn't come to an agreement. What I'd wished him to do was to acknowledge their pain. I wished he would have said “I'm sorry for your loss.” Having to accept that Robert and I didn't see eye to eye on this saddened me.

When I saw Robert on the second of the three visits, I asked him to please listen to what was weighing heavily on my heart. Of course, he wanted to know what it was about. I explained to him that I felt he was avoiding the real questions and tasks at hand. For example, facing the possible outcome of the

execution taking place and organizing everything concerning his remains. I felt that by withdrawing and taking it easy, he was ignoring the reality of the situation. Robert, after listening carefully, leaned back and said that well, I was probably right. During that second visit, he said “I want to believe I get a stay” several times, which made me think that deep down inside he didn’t really believe he would get one.

Early in the morning of October 12, I awoke after only a couple hours of sleep. Thoughts were constantly running through my mind: would this day define the relationship I had had with my friend Robert Pruett? Was there anything we needed to accomplish on what was probably the last moment that remained to talk face to face? What if we failed? What would a failure be after so many years of friendship? I wondered also: how would I handle witnessing the execution of someone whom I loved? In what ways would it change me? Would I find hope or lose hope? I also thought about a possible stay. Yet, something deep inside of me told me he wouldn’t get one, and I believed that Robert sensed it, too.

The evening before, the five women who were in the Livingston area to see Robert for the last visits went out for dinner together at a beautiful place where we could look over Lake Livingston from the terrace. There were S. and T., two friends of Robert who had known him one or two years, T. being his fiancée, N. and A., two women who had been friends with Robert for seven years, and myself. Most of us had not met before: it was Robert’s execution date that brought us together. We all felt close to Robert, but not necessarily to his other friends. A woman who was appointed to be Robert’s spiritual advisor, a friend of hers, and my husband Kurt were having dinner with us, too. At 6:20pm, around the time when the inmates who are to be executed are usually injected with a lethal cocktail, I looked at the sunset over the lake and thought of Robert. He loved sunsets and had often written about them. I wondered what would happen in one day’s time at 6:20pm and how we all would feel then.

When Robert was escorted to the visiting booth on the day of the scheduled execution, he had a smile on his face. A lot had fallen into place; Robert

had finally been able to meet with his father after having not seen each other for more than twenty years. The day before, he was allowed to talk to his brother Steven on the phone, and they had an emotional conversation. His sister Tammy wrote Robert a letter a couple of weeks ago. And he would be seeing his mother the same morning. So, Robert had had or would have contact with all his family members, as if there were a force at work getting everything accomplished before it was too late.

During his last days or even weeks, Robert seemed to me to be tired. Tired of the responsibilities he had to take, and tired of considering all the effects and results his actions had had and would have in the future. His extraordinary life of becoming an idol who was admired and looked up to after having grown up in a highly dysfunctional family, and after having spent more than half of his life in prison, at one point the impact of it probably took its toll.



At our last visit on October 12, 2017

A few minutes into our conversation, Robert and I both apologized for having been a headache for the other at times. We both felt that there wasn't anything we needed to bring up or repeat at that moment. The one thing we didn't agree upon, I didn't want to mention again as I understood it was about letting go. So, what

was left was to express the love we felt for one another and the gratitude about meeting in the first place. We agreed that it had been a long journey, longer and more adventurous than we had ever imagined.

The visit with Robert went by quickly, and soon I found myself walking out of the Polunsky Unit for the last time. I knew that at noon, after the last of his visitors had left, Robert would be driven to Huntsville directly in a white van. In the Walls Unit he would be put into a holding cell a few steps away from the death chamber.

I had the longing to drive to Huntsville next to the van although they would take away Robert's glasses and he wouldn't recognize anything on the outside. Kurt and I waited at two different crossings near the prison to see whether the prison convoy would drive by our car, though our waiting was in vain and we gave up at around 12.40pm. We decided to head towards Huntsville where Robert's friends and his mother would gather at the Hospitality House.



12.45pm on the road to Huntsville

A short while later, a white prison car passed us, followed by a prison van and another white prison car. It came as a shock to me that the convoy with Robert had actually passed us. It hit me hard to realize that in that van Robert was sitting, heavily chained, not even able to see anything outside the window.

After Robert's friends and his mother arrived at the Hospitality House in Huntsville, we were left waiting for the final decision as to whether Robert

would be executed. Robert called several times and talked to all of us on the phone. He mostly spoke about his love for us. His whole life seemed to have come down to that one feeling he had missed so badly in his childhood. Love. Love could have saved him.

I will never forget the moment when we were informed that Robert would in fact be executed. Hearing it left me speechless and, for a moment, unable to comprehend it. The whole situation seemed surreal to me - like a moment beyond time and space. Then, it sank in.

Around 5pm, those who were witnessing the execution were escorted to the administration building across the Walls Unit, separated by a small street between the two buildings. As we were instructed earlier in the afternoon, we had to wait in a waiting room, supervised by several officers. Sometime after 6pm, we were escorted over the street to the Walls Unit. I felt at peace and didn't have any other feeling than love in me when we crossed the street. There was no thought in my mind about the cruelty of what was going to happen, but only the focus on the task that lied ahead of me. When I turned my head to the left, I saw the Wall of Grey standing there. There were dozens of officers in grey uniforms, standing in line in honor of Daniel Nagle. I knew that this was considered by some to be an affront, but what I sensed coming from them was dignity. Many of the officers turned their heads towards us and looked at us. The Wall of Grey, besides the victims' family members, had been in my thoughts often. I understood that they wanted to honor their colleague's life by being present. They must all be affected deeply if one of them is murdered on duty.

Inside the Walls Unit, we were again made to wait in an office. After a while, we were escorted through a hallway and a court to an open door through which we entered the small witness room. Robert did not ask his friends to be witnesses, but left it open to us. I believe Robert appreciated having us on the other side of the glass, near him. For the last time, we were able to communicate by way of looks

and gestures. I felt it was one of the most important things I had ever done in my life: sending love to Robert.

Witnessing an execution does not have to be a traumatizing event. It wasn't to me. Most amazingly, it was all about love in an unbelievably unloving surrounding. Robert, in his last moments, talked about love. He did not acknowledge the victims' family members and their loss. I had let go of my hope for that to happen. This was Robert's journey; our paths had just crossed for a little moment in time and we had walked a few steps together. When, after his last statement, the lethal cocktail started to flow, I knew that Robert's life would slowly vanish. It took a long time until the physician entered the chamber and confirmed Robert's death. When I later sent a short message through Robert's mailing list, I wrote "Robert is at peace and has wings now. We all love him very much."

After we left the Walls Unit and stepped out of the administration building, we were driven back to the Hospitality House, and a little later from there to the chapel where Robert's body was laid out. For the first time, we were able to touch him and see him without a glass boundary between us. To me, it was a blessing to tell him goodbye this way.

Did we have "a good time together" as I predicted in my first letter to Robert? It was much more: a journey that made us both grow and learn, and I'm grateful for all the wonderful and challenging times we had, and for everything I came to understand along the way.