

CROSSING OVER

For the fifth consecutive year, on September 10th and 11th, René, my husband, and I, Danièle SIRVEN, went to visit Rickey Lynn LEWIS who has been behind bars in Texas prisons since 1990. Since 1994, Rickey Lynn has been locked up in the section for those condemned to death.

For more detailed information about how we first met Rickey and about his unfair trial, we refer the reader to the book "Texas : death row" with the preface written by Mr. BADINTER. The book, graciously and magnificently translated by Pamela GOODMAN, can be ordered through the association L.P.J. (L.R.), either on its website or by post. Pamela, member of the association Americans for Peace and Justice, now joins us in our actions.

"Special visit" 2007 : a two-day visit consisting one four-hour session per day

DAY 1: 10 SEPTEMBER 2007.

Swampy, damp heat; arrived at the entrance at quarter to eight.

The entry ritual to the prison has become stricter and more thorough since last year: search of the car, including the trunk and the motor.

Even the guard who carries out the protocol sees the funny side of this.

We have the right, as usual, to bring in 20 dollars - per person - in the form of 25 cent coins for the snacks Rickey is allowed to have during a strictly limited period - 4 hours - the time he will be in the "cage". He must not take anything back with him to his cell.

ENCOUNTERS :

As soon as we meet at the entrance, we hug each other.

*Mrs Wilcox, the chaplain's wife, visits Death Row faithfully every day. We won't be seeing her husband any more ; he has been very ill since last year.

*Liliane Toussaint belongs to a Belgian association and visits Joseph LAVE; he is going to be executed next Thursday, September 13th.

She is there to support him and his family during the week before his death.

Conditions for visits : 8 hours a day, separated by a glass partition, of course.

- Joseph Lave was granted a stay of execution just hours before his death -

* A young English girl who writes to her prisoner friend and who has been visiting him since she became of age fourteen years ago!

Having got through the series of locked passage ways and past the entrance to the visiting room where the "cages" are located without any problem, we are greeted by Mrs.W, the female guard with whom we have built a relationship based on genuine affection and mutual respect.

RICKEY LYNN:

We want to let Rickey Lynn speak and to ask him the least possible number of questions, out of caution, I think, because nearly every topic can quickly become painful...

It is freezing cold in the visiting room. Rickey comes into his "cage" at eight thirty. He is wearing short sleeves; he is smiling his lovely big smile. He has lost weight.

We look at each other with deep affection. We “hold” hands through the glass. Pure emotion. That day, Rickey ate nearly nothing, he was happy with just a soda. He shows us his stomach and says that he had eaten too much the night before ...

He speaks about his health :

problems with his sight: getting weaker and weaker

problems with his sinuses: still the same; he gets his treatment regularly now.

Rickey is expecting the results of his X-rays in the new two weeks.

problems with his handcuffs: seems to have been resolved for the moment.

Wearing handcuffs that were too tight hurt his wrist where we can see a small wound running across it and a cyst. Furthermore, double handcuffing dislocated his shoulder and caused him great pain.

problems with cholesterol : Rickey Lynn is happy to have lost the weight he had gained during his stay in the “Watch Cell”, the observation cell where he waited for weeks before his execution which was to take place on August 7, 2003...

We spoke a lot about « family »; our family, our children, our grandchildren whose drawings he has displayed in his cell. Rickey asks about everyone; about the members of the Association.

HE IS PLEASED WITH HIS LAWYERS who have succeeded in obtaining a court decision that the test to measure his mental handicap be redone.

And, when I tell him that we find him less sad than the previous year, he exclaims that of course he is happier because his son, Carvin, imprisoned at Hodge Unit, is doing better.

He then tells us that he has obtained the right to send money to Carvin and will get authorisation to see him... in two or three years.

The morning went by quickly. Three photos were taken by the woman guard: one with Rickey-Lynn waving from behind the glass partition, two others where he has his “parents” either side of him.

Before the guard came to put his handcuffs back on, Rickey says : “Let us Pray”...

At half past twelve, we drive the young English girl back to our hotel as she is staying there also...

This afternoon, we will go visit the small unpretentious town of Huntsville, laughing in its greenery. And more exactly we will go see “The Walls”, the prison where the executions are carried out; more than four hundred since executions were begun again by Texas in 1982...

HUNTSVILLE.

The small town is home to 35,000 inhabitants and more than thirteen thousand prisoners in seven prisons which contain between 1,000 and 3,000 delinquents each.

Seven thousand people are employed directly by the prisons and fifteen thousand indirectly. The town lives on punishment and death.

At the tourist office, we find a charming blue and white brochure that makes you think of the Virgin Mary, proudly positioned between an invitation to go cat fishing and another to take a boat ride on the Lake, entitled “Prison Driving Tour”.

Unreal and unthinkable.

You are encouraged to take a delightful tour including the town’s seven prisons, the cemetery where there are seven thousand anonymous tombs, the prison museum and especially “The Walls” where the executions are carried out.

Located in the heart of the town, this prison boasts surprising exploits : in 2000, legal assassinations numbered in the forties.

Texas is the state that carries out the greatest number of executions in the USA.

7% of the American population eliminates forty percent of the total number of prisoners sentenced to death.

After a stomach-turning car ride we parked our vehicle in front of the entrance to a modest chapel called "Christian Church". Dozens of "churches" of different sizes dot the flat landscape.

I ask the pastor to help us "return to reason" and to find a bit of inner calm before we leave Huntsville.

-"How is it that we only meet welcoming Texas, like you, that we find ourselves in a state which calls itself "Christian" and yet which "kills its fellowman" at a rate of twenty to twenty-six executions a year over the past decade ... "

A courteous and pleasant exchange follows with this calm man in his fifties who refers to the call for vengeance in the Bible, citing verses from the Old Testament as proof.

We give irrefutable arguments pointing out the percentages of Blacks and Hispanics who fill Death Row, their poverty, the bad trials they had, those who were innocent and who were extracted from those places of death, and especially about how Rickey had been saved for thirty thousand dollars in 2003. All this left the holy man with nothing further to say.

We parted, happy to have met one another.

Perhaps we will meet up again next year?

DAY 2 : 11 SEPTEMBRE 2007

The visit with Rickey-Lynn began at eight thirty.

The visiting room was packed.

RICKEY LYNN

Rickey is smiling. He is hungry and he makes us take a memory test. Can we remember since last year what his favorite drinks and snacks are?

His order is impressive. In four hours he is going to swallow different flavoured potato chips, a cheese and roast beef sandwich and chocolate bars. He has a feast!

He announces that at the end of the visit, the woman guard will be giving us a big parcel containing drawings that he did during the year and that we are to take back and give out once we return to Montpellier.

During the month of May, I had written to Rickey saying that my two female cousins and my sister were staying at the house and so René was being waited on like a king. But René had added his own message saying "Don't believe her Rickey. I am a slave to these women". So, here, in this place where Rickey suffers so much, we throw ourselves into a hilarious debate about the roles played by men and women. We let out bursts of laughter, so odd in these surroundings.

Rickey gives us a specific set of instructions to carry out upon our return: contact several of his pen friends, make copies of his drawings and send them back to him, etc

ENCOUNTERS

* Liliane TOUSSAINT who we met the first day and with whom we have kept in touch

* A French woman who lives in Italy and who worked hard for Kenneth Foster's death sentence to be commuted to life in prison, last August.

* A young Hispanic woman who was my neighbour in the visiting room and who was both overwhelmed and overwhelming when she explained that she had been there to support her

husband up to his execution but that he had received a stay of execution that he no longer welcomed...

* A visiting pastor with whom we chatted outside the prison; he is against the death penalty.

* **A prisoner : Kerry ALLEN n° 999410 – who begged us to find him a « family » especially to correspond with while waiting for his date of execution...**

Before the guard appeared for the handcuffing, Rickey asked us to pray

Finally we reach the exit ... The humid Texan heat awaits us. There is a cyclone forecast for the following day

At the final check point, the guard we had met the same morning is friendly. He asks if we are going to do some sightseeing this week. I tell him quick frankly that we will not and explain that we are leaving for our own country because there it “smells of death”. (I took great care to use neither the words “smell” nor “stink”.)

We add that we keep meeting well-meaning folks which makes the punitive system all the more incomprehensible.. He apologizes and there we were once again in a very sincere discussion and the guard said to us at the end, “I am not for the death penalty”... We parted in that rejoicing emotion which this place of anonymous inhumanity created by the encounter between humans.

For the past five years, we have moved from indignation to compassion.

Texans are only just leaving racism and the spirit of lynching behind them and are living in a state where the absence of social assistance does not eradicate misery but rather those living in misery.

Punishing the most disadvantaged of the poor is more on the agenda than their rehabilitation.

In our lovely country which is France, the country of human rights, there is a punitive wind blowing toward us directly from America.

The havoc is already making itself felt.

We are going to have to choose between education and repression.

Danièle Sirven.