

Anne-Marie SIMONET visiting Raymond MORRISON, Raiford, Florida

May 28-30, 2016

English translation Anne-Lise Wood

Here is a short report of my visit to a death row inmate, Raymond Morrison, incarcerated in the American Union Correctional Institution in Raiford, a town a little more than an hour away from Jacksonville, Florida.

I was lucky to make this trip with Martine and Gisèle who correspond also through Lifespark (a Swiss organization fighting against death penalty, whose main aim is to coordinate mail correspondence with inmates on death row in the United States), although Gisèle's correspondent was in another high security building.

We had chosen to come the weekend of May 28-30, since on May 30 (the Monday) the United States were celebrating Memorial Day, allowing one more visiting day in all the prisons of the country.

After having filled in the « Request for visiting privileges » form Raymond had sent to me a few months before, I have received in return a "Visitor Information Summary" giving all kinds of information regarding the dress code and general behavior. That's how I learned many new words such as "*fish net shirts*" or "*see-through fabric*", which were of course prohibited. I already knew that cameras and cell phones were forbidden; in fact the only thing authorized was a small transparent plastic bag containing my passport and a maximum of 50 \$ in cash in banknotes.

The number of visitors being limited, Raymond advised us to be at the prison gate at least one hour before the opening of the door.

So, we bravely arrive at 7am and see a few women are already waiting. There are four benches available and I am happy to be able to sit while waiting. At 8.15am, the first people are allowed to go inside and a few minutes later Martine and I are standing in front of a thick glass (probably bullet proof), where our picture is taken. Through a slot, they give me a sheet with Raymond's name and picture, as well as personal information on me. These documents allow me to continue my way inside of the prison and I will have to keep them with me during the entire visit.

The first wired fence opens with a squeak and closes behind us with a sinister noise... Here I am, in this heavily protected prison surrounded by impressive walls and watchtowers, as well as many guards!

In a small room, a rather nice guard takes note of all the jewelry I'm wearing and counts the money in my bag. Everything is carefully listed on large sheets and each of us is searched in turn. After I am told to take off my shoes, I am asked to show the sole of my feet. Most probably, this is done because some unwise people must have tried to hide stuff like drugs under their feet. No risk with me!

After having given our passports, we receive a badge holding a number and Martine and I walk through a metal detector security gate, which takes us out of the building. I thought I would be outside again but not at all. We have to walk a narrow concrete path at least 120 meters long, entirely wired and with rolls of barbed wire on top. English and Spanish boards warn us to keep away from the electric gates. Next step: more waiting in a small hallway until the last door opens and that's it, we are in the visiting room where Martine and I are directed to sit at an iron table with four little iron stools around it. I don't need to tell you how uncomfortable it is to be seated for six hours on these small and rather hard iron stools... In fact, the second day I took a thick jacket as a made-up cushion: you learn to be practical with experience!

We still had to wait for « the object » of our visit who, on his part, had also been rather busy. As soon as my coming had been announced to the prison staff, three guards got him out of his cell, put manacles around his wrists linked by a chain to his feet. In a room next to the visitors' room all this "hardware" is taken off and Raymond, wearing white trousers and an orange T-shirts appears. After he announces himself to the guard who keeps the register, he is allowed to come to my table and I can at last take him in my arms... a moment charged with an intense emotion for both of us, after 15 years of correspondence.

Fortunately, I understand what he says in his American-English accent perfectly and, contrary to what I feared, time goes by relatively quickly, both of us having so much to tell each other. Surprisingly, the atmosphere of the visiting room is very cheerful and joyful: people look almost like a bunch of buddies. Most of the visitors, almost all of them women, know each other well and talk freely. There are also several families with children and various games, books, color pencils, cards, etc. are provided for them. I can also see some bibles and have the feeling that some of the visitors are chaplains.

One particular thing strikes me: because the food is so bad in the prison, all the inmates run at once to the refectory where tables are covered with provisions. Raymond has told me that he usually has two rolls with peanut butter for breakfast at

5am, then lunch at 11am (never any meat, fish or fresh vegetables or fruits) and again bread with peanut butter at 4pm. The daily costs for food per prisoner amount to 1.87 \$! I prudently select a Twix that must date back to the 80s'. In fact, I suspect the refectory managers (a private firm) to buy out-of-date food in order to sell it to the prisoners who don't have any other choice but to buy it.

In the middle of the morning, we hear the sound of an electric bell: is it announcing one of the numerous daily "count downs". All the prisoners have to line up against the wall to be counted. I am told that the entire prison population is counted three to four times a day. When you consider all the electric fences, high walls, numerous security gates, I really wonder how anyone could escape from this place.

On the second day, I already know the song by heart: "Four rings, no bracelet, a watch, one necklace, one charm, no earrings, glasses, a jacket, no belt". As soon as the refectory is open, I ask the permission to have a picture taken together with Raymond but for this as well, nothing is simple: as I was going to put my arm around Raymond's shoulder, no... forbidden. No display of tenderness! In this regard, here is what is stipulated in the regulations: "Inmates/visitors are allowed one embrace and one kiss at the beginning and end of a visit. Such activity is not permitted during the visit. Lap sitting is not allowed, and any open or gross lewdness as defined by Chapter 800, Florida Statutes, is prohibited."

To be honest, I have to admit that the wardens, especially at the end of the third day, were not too strict and were often looking the other way. Goodbyes are heart breaking for many couples and tears are spilled on the way out. The youngest of the inmates is only 23 years old, he's got a teenager face, and his girlfriend is a beautiful young girl. Yet, in spite of the regulations, they were kissing endlessly, but what future do they have?

The third day starts badly for Martine: the woman guarding the entrance, harsh and bitter, says her neckline is too low, indecent, and refuses to let her pass. Fortunately (there is always someone ready to help), another visitor gives Martine a pin so she is able to button up her neckline. After the checking of the passports and as I was going to continue my way to the next building, a guard says something that I don't understand. He raises his voice and I stand frozen on the spot. It seems that this day we are not allowed to take the wired lane unescorted – the rule has been changed. The Lord works in mysterious ways. The American wardens' reasoning as well...

To go to the restroom I have to ask permission to the warden: "Please, can I go to the restroom?" So he walks me to the door, unlocks it, lets me inside, waits outside (thank goodness for that!) and locks the door behind me. The third day, there are so many visitors that the warden gets tired and we are free to go and come back on our own.

Raymond's father comes early on Monday at 7am to be certain that he will be let in; so when I enter the visiting room, he is already there, talking with his son. I am so grateful that he has been willing to meet me but unable to understand most of what he is telling me, except that there is a lot about God. In fact, Raymond has told me that the first and last thing of the day is devoted to reading his bible.

As we are waiting for our hamburgers to be heated in the microwave, I start to read a notice (always in English and Spanish since there are many Cuban refugees) entitled "Prison Rape Elimination Area", inviting the inmates to report all inappropriate behaviour on the grounds of "Zero Tolerance".

At the end of three days of conversations, each one lasting six hours, I got rather tired and was feeling exhausted as I was leaving. With compassion, Raymond said he was also tired but promised to write and send a letter the next day so it would be waiting for me on my return. He thanked me one more time warmly to be such a faithful friend during all these years and in doing so, to have helped him not to become crazy.

Out of the 350 inmates incarcerated in this prison, only two (among whom Raymond) have a chance to be released one day. His case being taken care of *pro bono* by Reprieve in London and Innocence Project Florida, his lawyer has been granted the right to file an appeal. Unfortunately, the new trial will take place next year only, at the earliest. In the meantime, Raymond will remain locked up in his small 9 square meters cell in "solitary confinement"...

I am infinitely grateful to Martine and Gisèle who have taken me under their wings so I had the opportunity to make this trip. Tiredness is gone but the memory of this experience will remain forever.

Here is an excerpt of the letter Raymond wrote and which I found back home:

« For many years I knew that I had to be real strong to make it out of this place because living in this place for almost 19 years can play a lot of tricks on your mind.

I've seen a lot of inmates go crazy from being in these cells for too long and I didn't want to go through that so I made myself have a good outlook on life and I study law so I can understand what's going on in my case and I try to stay busy doing something and over the years your letters and friendship has really helped me out. You have become a very special person in my life and I will always cherish our friendship and the bond that we have. I want you to understand that you mean a lot to me. I will always remember the kindness you showed me over the years. You never judged me or talked down to me. You always treated me as a friend and that means a lot to me and I'm truly glad to be able to call you my friend."

