

## **«We will meet again,» Paul says - then he is executed: A Swiss woman tells of her friendships with death row prisoners in the US**

**Can you like a murderer who has been on death row in the US for decades? A Zurich woman has found out - and explains why she still thinks the Swiss justice system is too lenient.**

Time passes, and when the supervisor declares that they have ten minutes left, Ursula Corbin can no longer hold back the tears. In all the years since she met Paul\*, a deep friendship has developed. She knows that she should be encouraging him at this moment, and yet it is just the opposite. Tears stream down Ursula Corbin's face, while Paul becomes very calm. Soon he will be free, he assures her, "Someday we will meet again." Paul presses his hand to his heart, then to the pane of glass between them.

It is the last picture Ursula Corbin has of him. Six days later, Paul is executed by lethal injection.

This is how Ursula Corbin describes her farewell to Paul Lindsey Miller, who shot a drug dealer during a robbery in 1991 and was sentenced to death for it two years later. For years, Ursula Corbin, who lives in a small single-family home on the outskirts of Zurich, cultivated a friendship with Paul, the murderer on death row in Huntsville, Texas. For 16 years, Paul awaited his execution, locked in a cell of a few square meters. Hundreds of letters cross the Atlantic during this time, as well as several visits. Until September 16, 2009, the day of Paul's execution.

### **In the end, only trash TV helps**

Paul is just one of more than a dozen people awaiting execution in an American prison – many men and hardly any women – who were and are in touch with Ursula Corbin. For 36 years, she has written to them, made phone calls, cared. She travels to American prisons, where she submits to harassing visitor rules, to spend a few hours talking with the prisoners. Some of them have not a single soul in their lives except Ursula Corbin, who shows them that she is not indifferent to them.

Paul was the 1174th murderer executed in the U.S. since the U.S. reinstated the death penalty in 1976. More than 1,500 people have now been executed, more than a third of them in Texas. Most of them wait decades to be executed. More than 2,500 people sentenced to death are currently on U.S. death row, and nearly 200 are in Texas.

Once the sentence has been carried out, the Texas Department of Justice neatly lists the names of those executed on the Internet, their deeds, their stories, their picture, even their last words. They are macabre testimonies to state cruelty. Fear, remorse, longing and the desperate resignation to fate of the doomed speak from their words before dying. Paul, too, surrendered when the hour of death came: "Warden, pull the trigger," he says when there is nothing more to say. And addressing his relatives one last time: "I love you, brother, never forget it. Ronnie, Linda, Amber, Kathy. Chaplain Hart you're the best."

"I know when he's going to die - to the minute."

"Fortunately, I have never had to be present at an execution," says Ursula Corbin. She has not offered this to any of her pen pals, and no one has ever asked her to. She doesn't know if she would be strong enough to watch a familiar person die, tied down on a gurney. It would never, ever be the same as watching a terminally ill person go to their death. She would have to say goodbye to a perfectly healthy man who would otherwise go on living. "Still, he knows he's going to die. He knows it, and I know it. We know how he's going to die, and we know when. We know it to the minute."

Thus, death almost always comes up during Corbin's last visits before an execution. How it feels and whether it hurts. Whether it was revenge for the crime and what would happen after death. Whether God exists - and that he certainly does. Such encounters, which are far too short and yet infinitely long, last several hours. After the end of the encounter before the execution, Corbin leaves the prison cell completely exhausted every time, sad, stunned. She returns to her hotel, weeps silently until there are no more tears. Afterwards, she turns on the television and tries to block out the inevitable with American trash TV.

It was quite by chance that Ursula Corbin became connected with convicted criminals. When she returned to Switzerland from years of living in several countries with systematic human rights abuses, she joined Amnesty International (AI). One day, the organization received a request from Andy from Texas, who - awaiting execution - was seeking interaction with the outside world. Corbin was the only one in her AI section who spoke enough English.

After Andy's execution, Ursula Corbin vowed never to get into such correspondence again. But then a U.S. radio station asked her for an interview. No sooner had the interview aired than dozens of other condemned prisoners from across America asked for penfriendships with the death row murderer's sympathetic acquaintance. "I wasn't looking for this task," Corbin says. She is a fun-loving person, she says, and has a beautiful family and many friends herself. "But connecting with a person in hopeless situations suits me. I was curious at first, and later I didn't want to be a coward."

**On death row for 36 years**

So Ursula Corbin kept writing and writing. Take Jerry, for example, who has been sitting in San Quentin, California, for over 36 years, hoping that the tide would finally turn for the better. Jerry was sentenced to death solely on vague circumstantial evidence, for a murder that occurred in San Francisco in 1986: based on less than accurate witness testimony and a simple blood type comparison. From the beginning, Jerry denied the crime, without ever

having a chance. Since his first day in the cell, Jerry has known only one thing: the fight for his life and for his freedom.

His page-long letters to Ursula Corbin reflect an utterly inhumane justice system for which an inmate's life seems to have no value. Although doubts about Jerry's guilt quickly prove to be well-founded, court dates are postponed over and over again. Deadlines are ordered and new dates are set to deal with additional evidence or trivial procedural matters. Witnesses are often untraceable or deceased decades later. Public defenders change and have to familiarize themselves anew with the case.

Jerry precisely reports the endless back and forth to Ursula Corbin, which, of course, does not change his fate in the slightest: His case always remains a so-called "death penalty case". "Well, enough about me!", Jerry continues after the update on his case and asks Ursula Corbin: "What's going on with you?"

This is how Jerry passes his time. Until one day he tells Ursula Corbin about an almost unbelievable event.

### **A surprising turn**

The pandemic is in full swing when Corbin hears from Jerry again after a long time. He himself had fallen seriously ill with Corona, he writes. He had been on a ventilator and almost died. And yet, he says, there is hopeful news.

Just as Jerry is fighting the virus, a murder occurs in a neighboring state. Shortly afterwards, the perpetrator is caught. During hours of interrogation, the man confesses to further murders - including the one in San Francisco from the last century, for which Jerry was supposed to take the rap. He describes the events of that time so precisely that there is hardly any doubt about Jerry's innocence.

Today Jerry knows that he will not die by lethal injection. And yet this story doesn't have a real happy ending either. Two years after the surprising turn of events, Jerry is still sitting in a California prison, waiting. When a new trial will take place, in which the confession of the real culprit will be acknowledged and Jerry's innocence will be established, is still unknown. Meanwhile, Jerry knows only one thing: It could take years.

Months have passed since Ursula Corbin last heard from Jerry. She keeps asking herself what Jerry will do when he is released. After all, he has no family, no earnings, no apartment: "If he is released one day, he will be a man in his late sixties who has spent more than half his life innocent in prison and will hardly be able to find his way around in this world."

### **"They deserve punishment"**

Thousands of letters are now stored in cardboard boxes in Corbin's basement, as she writes in her recently published book. For days and nights she corresponded, often as if driven. "It makes me feel needed and that I can bring some humanity to an inhumane system." On some weekends in the early years, she sat at her desk so often that her family rebelled. Back then, it was sometimes too much, Corbin admits in retrospect.

And yet she deliberately describes some of her contacts as friendships. She has invested a lot, but also received a lot in return, she says: "I write to people who have time in abundance and a great interest in communicating with someone in the free world. From that often comes a profound and trusting exchange." Just as she cared, many convicts also took an interest in Ursula Corbin's life.

Perhaps this is also due to the fact that Corbin seeks interaction on equal terms. She does not suffer from helper syndrome, she emphasizes. Nor is she concerned with pity, but rather with compassion for people in a brutal and merciless system. Despite her abhorrence of the death penalty, she does not make light of the crimes of those who are guilty.

"Whoever kills a person does something that cannot be justified. Most of my pen pals deserve punishment." And it's not uncommon for Corbin to think harsher sentences are appropriate, for example when she hears that a violent criminal in Switzerland has once again gotten away with a few years in prison.

But if there are cases that particularly starkly illustrate the absurd justice system in the U.S., Corbin clearly counts Jerry's story among them.

Ursula Corbin: "Thou Shalt Not Kill". Published by Ruffer and Rub.

\* The names of the prisoners have been changed.

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