

The Unabomber's not-so-lonely prison life

Holly Bailey & Ted Kaczynski

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The Cliff Notes

You take your friends where you find them, including the federal ‘super-max’ where Ted Kaczynski enjoyed the company of his fellow mass murderers

From his prison cell, Ted Kaczynski — the “Unabomber,” who terrified the nation in the 1980s and early 1990s — has carried on a remarkable correspondence with thousands of people all over the world. As the 20th anniversary of his arrest approaches, Yahoo News is publishing a series of articles based on his letters and other writings, housed in an archive at the University of Michigan. They shed unprecedented light on the mind of Kaczynski — genius, madman and murderer.

They were workout buddies who had little in common — except for infamous reputations and a skill with explosives.

But housed in neighboring cells on the same secluded wing at the United States Penitentiary Administrative Maximum Facility (ADX) in Florence, Colo., Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, struck up an odd friendship with two other notorious terrorists of the 1990s: Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh and Ramzi Yousef, who planted a bomb in the World Trade Center in 1993 that killed six people, a precursor to the 9/11 attacks.

Locked in their tiny cells 23 hours a day, the three at one point shared the same recreation time. Outdoors, the environment was bleak: an all-concrete yard so deeply recessed that some former prisoners have likened it to standing in an empty swimming pool. But inmates were escorted to individual wire-mesh cages — about 12 by 18 feet, Kaczynski estimated — where they could speak to each other under the watch of guards.

Ramzi Yousef, Ted Kaczynski and Timothy McVeigh. (AP Photo)

In his early months in prison, Kaczynski became close enough to McVeigh and Yousef that they shared books and talked religion and politics. He even came to know their birthdays, according to letters he wrote about them to others.

“You may be interested to know that your birthday, April 27, is the same as that of Ramzi Yousef, the alleged ‘mastermind’ of the World Trade Center bombing,” Kaczynski wrote to a pen pal in 1999, according to a letter on file at his archive of personal papers at the University of Michigan Library. “I mentioned this to Ramzi, and he wants me to tell you that since your birthday is the same as his, you and he must have similar personalities. ... He may have some degree of belief in astrology.”

Known as the “Alcatraz of the Rockies,” ADX is considered to be America’s toughest prison, where the nation’s most dangerous criminals are locked away and meant to be forgotten. But for Kaczynski, who had lived as a hermit for more than 20 years in his remote cabin in the backwoods of Montana, prison was, in many ways, a social awakening. For the first time he had regular, daily contact with other people, even though it was largely with prisoners who had committed equally horrible crimes.

Kaczynski’s letters offer an unprecedented glimpse into what life is like inside ADX, a so-called supermax prison that has been widely criticized for its use of solitary confinement. Kaczynski arrived there in May 1998, shortly after he was given eight life sentences without parole for his 17-year bombing spree, which killed three and left dozens injured. According to his personal papers, Kaczynski so detested the idea of spending the rest of his life in prison that he actually wanted the death penalty.

Though he longed for freedom and mourned the loss of his beloved Montana, Kaczynski admitted to pen pals that ADX wasn’t so terrible as far as prisons went — though he might have been better equipped than most for the lonely existence of a small, enclosed space. (His 12-by-7-foot jail cell is not much smaller than his 12-by-10-foot cabin, which didn’t have running water or electricity.)

“I consider myself to be in a (relatively) fortunate situation here,” Kaczynski wrote in a February 2000 letter. “As correctional institutions go, this place is well-administered. It’s clean, the food is good, and it’s quiet, so that I can sleep, think and write (usually) without being distracted by a lot of banging and shouting.”

The prisoners on his cell block, he added, “are easy to get along with.” He had particular praise for Yousef and McVeigh, whom he described in another letter as “very intelligent ... friendly and considerate of others.” “Actually,” Kaczynski told another pen pal, “the people I am acquainted with in this range of cells ... are nicer than the majority of people I’ve known on the outside.”

In July 1999, McVeigh was moved to federal death row in Terre Haute, Ind., and though prison rules blocked him from exchanging letters with Kaczynski, they kept up their friendship. Through a journalist at the Buffalo News, McVeigh sent Kaczynski a copy of “Into the Wild,” writer Jon Krakauer’s account of a young man’s hike into the Alaskan wilderness. (Kaczynski, who is particular about his books, liked it.) Meanwhile, the Unabomber asked his pen pals to send McVeigh magazines and articles, including a subscription to Green Anarchy magazine.

In his archive of personal papers in Ann Arbor, Kaczynski has meticulously documented his time in Colorado. He has filed copies of his annual prisoner evaluations (he’s a model inmate with good behavior); book reports for the rare learning courses he’s taken, including one in psychology; and even prison newsletters, which offer puzzles to help the inmates bide their time.

Though Kaczynski mostly offers praise for ADX, he has filed a few complaints or “cop outs” over the years, mostly about noise and food. The prison, in his view, does not serve enough fresh vegetables. And he’s complained repeatedly about food prep. “Today, again ... I received an undercooked hamburger. Like some other inmates, I

refuse to eat undercooked hamburgers,” he wrote in a complaint to “food services” in February 2002. “Undercooked meat can transmit diseases, for example, salmonella and tapeworm. ... Yet we often get undercooked hamburgers. Would appreciate it if you would make sure the hamburgers are fully cooked.”

According to Kaczynski’s letters, he wakes up before dawn — around 6 a.m., when his breakfast tray is slid through a slot near the door of his cell. An hour later, in the warm months, he’s let outside for roughly an hour of recreation time. “I cover about five miles running back and forth in one of my tiny areas that we’re allowed to exercise in,” he wrote in a February 2000 letter, in which he recounted his daily routine.

Back inside, he reads or writes letters or essays until lunch is served, between 10 and 11 a.m. After lunch, he sometimes exercises in his cell — “push-ups, sit-ups and so forth” — before going back to writing. Sometimes he takes a nap. Dinner is served between 4 and 5 p.m., after which Kaczynski turns back to reading and writing. For a while he was focused on improving his foreign language skills, studying Russian, German and Italian dictionaries at night. He goes to bed around 10 p.m., sometimes listening to a classical music show on a radio station based out of nearby Colorado Springs.

Though he has no access to the Internet, Kaczynski does read the daily newspaper — often the Denver Post, though at one point he had a subscription to the Los Angeles Times, courtesy of his former attorneys Judy Clarke and Quin Denvir. He also subscribes to a variety of magazines, including the New Yorker, Time magazine and the New York Review of Books. Between that and letters from his extensive list of pen pals, who send him articles printed from the Internet, Kaczynski appears to maintain a close eye on politics and current affairs from his prison cell, constantly opining on current events in his letters.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the lead-up to the war in Iraq, Kaczynski wrote several letters somewhat supportive of the American campaign against Saddam Hussein, calling it “warranted.” “I don’t think all these petty little dictators around the world should be allowed to develop nuclear weapons,” he wrote in December 2002.

But in the spring of 2003, after the invasion of Iraq had turned up no evidence of weapons-making, the Unabomber changed his tune. Though he’d thought the intelligence made a good case for disarming Saddam, now he “felt reasonably sure (whatever they may tell themselves or the public) the politicians’ motives for invading Iraq had more to do with their own egos and their own drive for power than any unselfish desire to prevent the harm that Saddam might do with his weapons programs.”

But he pushed back on a correspondent’s suggestion that the United States was worse than any other superpower in this department. “If Russia or China or some other country were top dog, would they behave any better than the U.S.?” he said. Besides, he added, everyone was ignoring the real root of the problem: the technology society, his lifelong nemesis.

Still, Kaczynski offered some qualified support for President George W. Bush the following year as he ran for reelection. Though Bush was “incompetent,” “the one

good thing is that he is opposed to stem-cell research,” Kaczynski wrote. And if the Unabomber could vote, “I would seriously consider voting for Bush and his quasi-criminal group.”

Why? “Well, apart from the stem-cell issue, I figure the re-election of an incompetent president and his irresponsible gang will help weaken the system.”

In July 2009, Kaczynski responded to a letter asking him about prison life. “I’m an atypical prisoner in an atypical prison,” he wrote. “Prison life is probably boring and monotonous for most prisoners in a maximum-security prison like this one, but it is not so far for me because I have too much, rather than too little to keep me occupied.”

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The Letters

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The Ted K Archive

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The Cliff Notes & Letters

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