

Grossman executed for killing wildlife officer 25 years ago

Religious leaders asked for a 60-day stay of execution, but were unsuccessful.



Aaron E. Daye/Staff photographer

Peggy Park, left, and Betsy Park, right, the mother and sister of Margaret “Peggy” Park, speak following the execution of Martin Grossman who was put to Tuesday death for the murder of the younger Peggy 25 years ago, across from the Florida State Prison in Raiford.

By [Nathan Crabbe](#)

Staff writer

Published: Wednesday, February 17, 2010 at 6:01 a.m.

Last Modified: Tuesday, February 16, 2010 at 11:26 p.m.

RAIFORD - Despite the pleas of religious leaders from Florida rabbis to the pope, Martin Grossman was executed Tuesday for murdering a wildlife officer more than 25 years ago.

Grossman, 45, was executed by lethal injection at Florida State Prison near Starke.

As his last words, he expressed remorse for the killing before saying a Jewish prayer.

"I would like to extend my heartfelt remorse to the victim's family," he said. "I fully regret everything that occurred that night, for everything that was done, whether I remember it or not."

He was sentenced to death for shooting wildlife officer Margaret "Peggy" Park, 26, in December 1985 after she found him with a stolen gun in a wooded area of Pinellas County. Park's sister Betsy, who witnessed the execution with her mother and brother, said Grossman's apology was "long overdue" and she was glad to hear it.

"We came here today hoping for closure and an end to the years of reminders of how Peggy died overshadowing the memories of how she lived," she said. "I believe we realized that hope today."

Betsy Park said it was unfortunate that the execution took so long to happen that her father, who died in 2000, wasn't around to witness it. She said a campaign to stop the execution had led to harassing phone calls to the family over the past week, which she called reproachable.

An Internet petition drive to save Grossman netted more than 33,000 signatures and Gov. Charlie Crist received thousands of phone calls and e-mail messages about the case. More than 110 rabbis wrote Crist to urge a 60-day stay of execution for a clemency hearing, arguing that Grossman did not premeditate the crime, was high on drugs at the time and had been a model prisoner who deserved life in prison.

Rabbi Nochum Kurinsky of Chabad at the Beaches in Ponte Vedra, who witnessed the execution, said Grossman should have been given another chance to plead his case.

"It's just yet another tragedy, another loss," he said of the execution.

The Vatican had asked for Grossman's life to be spared in a letter written by Archbishop Fernando Filoni on behalf of Pope Benedict XVI. The letter said Grossman had "repented and is now a changed person, having become a man of faith."

Grossman didn't request a last meal before the execution. Instead, he had a chicken sandwich, can of fruit punch and banana cream and peanut butter cookies that he bought from the prison canteen, according to Department of Corrections spokeswoman Gretl Plessinger.

After making his statement, he recited the Shema, a central prayer in the Jewish Scripture. It is traditional for Jews to say the prayer as their last words.

The execution appeared to be carried out without problems. Grossman was declared dead at 6:17 p.m., about 15 minutes after the lethal-injection process started.

Park's mother, who shares the same name as Peggy, sat in the front row of the witness room staring directly at Grossman during the execution.

She said she was thinking of how his death differed from the children killed in last month's earthquake in [Haiti](#).

"They had hard deaths," she said. "I think he had an easy one."

Her daughter was 26, just three years out of college, when she found Grossman and a companion with a stolen handgun in the woods. Grossman, who was on probation, pleaded with her to let him go because he would be returned to prison.

After she refused, Grossman - who was 100 pounds heavier and a foot taller - took her flashlight and beat her with it. She managed to draw her handgun and fire a wild shot before he wrestled away the gun and shot her to death.

Grossman was the 69th prisoner executed since the state reinstated the death penalty in 1976. He was one of 21 Jewish prisoners out of 395 death row inmates, according to the Department of Corrections.

The execution brought about 30 protesters to a field across from the prison. While the protesters typically include members of Catholic churches, they were joined Tuesday by Jewish participants including Rabbi Stanley Howard Schwartz of Daytona Beach.

He said protests should not be about Grossman's faith, but rather about the Biblical prohibition against killing.

"The state of Florida should not commit murder," he said.