



# Life Journeys Leading to **MAUTHAUSEN**

## .. Franz **Jäger**



Evelyn Steinthaler

Johannes Doppler

## Dear student,

In 1938, in a small town in Upper Austria, one of the many Nazi concentration camps was constructed. It was known as the Mauthausen concentration camp. It existed from 1938 to 1945. The camp was run and guarded by the SS. The people who were imprisoned here came from many countries in Europe: Poland, Russia, France, Italy, Germany, Austria and others. They were political opponents, belonged to marginalised groups (e.g. 'criminals', 'asocials') or were persecuted for anti-Semitic and racist reasons (e.g. Jews). Most of the prisoners were men, but there were also women and children. In the Mauthausen quarry, the prisoners carried out hard forced labour. In the more than 40 subcamps (Gusen, Steyr, Linz, Ebensee, Vienna ...), they were deployed in the arms industry. People lived in overcrowded accommodation. They were not given enough food and clothing, and they starved and died of diseases. SS men beat many prisoners to death, shot them or murdered them in the gas chamber at Mauthausen. In total, almost 200,000 people were imprisoned at Mauthausen and its subcamps. Half of them lost their lives.

The Mauthausen concentration camp was on a hill and could be seen for miles around. Many people were involved with the camp: they worked there, brought deliveries or knew SS men. Almost everyone knew about the death camp. Often, the SS men committed the crimes in full view of the population. On 5 May 1945, the Mauthausen concentration camp was liberated by US troops. In this booklet, you will read the story of a person who was connected with the Mauthausen concentration camp. Where a word is underlined, you can find a short explanation at the end of the booklet. There are also tasks for you to work on in your small group after you've finished reading. Take the booklet with you on your visit to the Mauthausen Memorial! During your visit, you will encounter the places and stories you read about in the booklet.



**I**n September 1944, the 'Volkssturm' (home guard) is formed in Nazi Germany. All able-bodied men between 16 and 60 years of age who have not been drafted into the Wehrmacht must report to the Volkssturm. The Volkssturm is deployed to defend 'home territory' and is intended to serve the 'ultimate victory' of the German Reich. Men in the Volkssturm do not receive military training like the soldiers of the Wehrmacht. They are also not given a uniform. They can only be identified via an armband which reads: 'German Volkssturm – Wehrmacht'. Their tasks include construction work and securing and defending towns and villages.

Franz Jäger from Hagenberg in the Mühlviertel region is a member of the Volkssturm. He lives in Schwertberg and is 44 years old. He makes slippers for a living and has been married since 1940. Early in the morning of 2 February 1945, he is woken up by the head of the fire brigade, Mr Hoffmann: Franz Jäger has to join the local Volkssturm in their search for Soviet prisoners of war. They are to search for Soviet prisoners of war who have escaped from [Block 20](#) of the Mauthausen concentration camp only a few hours earlier. Over 500 were involved in the escape attempt and about 100 were shot during a fight at the



camp wall. But over 400 POWs managed to escape. Jäger was out drinking the night before and didn't get home until four in the morning. He refuses to join. But at six o'clock, the head of the local farmers' association, Karl Glinsner, calls on him to join the search for the escaped concentration camp prisoners. The camp leadership at Mauthausen under [Franz Ziereis](#) has called for a 'hare hunt' for these men, who have been driven by desperation to escape certain death in the concentration camp. In an announcement at the market square, Norbert Niedermayr, the Volkssturm commandant in Schwertberg, describes them as 'dangerous fugitives' who 'must all be shot'.



Almost all the escaped concentration camp prisoners are members of the Red Army. Following escape attempts and acts of resistance, they have been brought to Mauthausen as '**K prisoners**' to be murdered in the camp. They are not ordinary soldiers, but officers and senior non-commissioned officers.

In addition to the Volkssturm, the **SS**, **SA**, **gendarmarie**, Wehrmacht, fire brigade and Hitler Youth are called upon to hunt down and kill the escapees. But civilians also join the 'hare hunt' and shoot at the prisoners who have escaped with their own private weapons without receiving orders.



Early that morning, Franz Jäger is ordered to Theresia Luegmayr's farm as reinforcement. As soon as he arrives, he threatens to shoot escapees. Prisoners are already being shot on the surrounding farms. Jäger searches the hayloft together with Josef Bernhard, who has also been ordered to come.

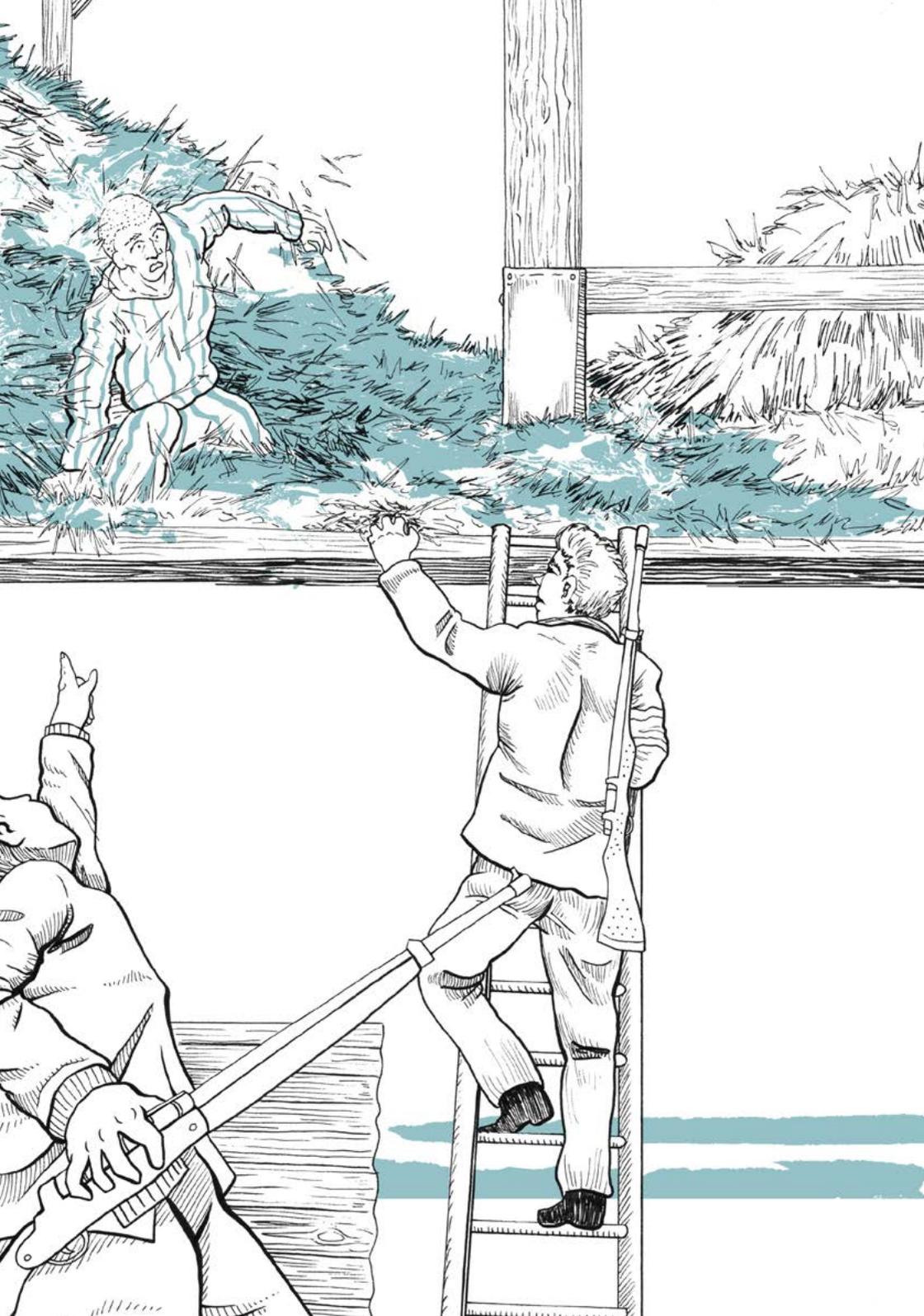
They find an escaped prisoner hidden in the hay. Jäger first tries to get Bernhard to shoot the man in the hay, but Bernhard refuses. As Bernhard turns away, Franz Jäger shoots the man lying on the ground in the forehead. The prisoner of war shot by Jäger is one of more than 400 who are murdered in the 'Mühlviertel Hare Hunt'. Only eight escapees are known to have survived – for example, because they were hidden by families on farms in the surrounding area.



In the years following the Second World War, 'hare hunt' perpetrators are tried before Soviet military courts and Austrian people's courts for war crimes. In June 1946, charges are also filed against Franz Jäger at the gendarmerie in Schwertberg. The trial takes place at the Vienna People's Court. 'The defendant admits to firing the shot but pleads self-defence,' the court transcript reads. Jäger's claim that the escaped concentration camp inmate threatened him with an iron rod is not deemed credible by the court. Nor does the court see the fact that he was still intoxicated from drinking the previous night as a mitigating circumstance. In 1948, the People's Court sentences Franz Jäger to twelve years of imprisonment with hard labour. He initially serves his sentence in the Stein an der Donau prison.

Seven other perpetrators receive long prison sentences from the People's Courts, while Schwertberg Volkssturm commandant Niedermayr, who is charged with 'issuing criminal orders,' is acquitted after contradictory witness statements. At the beginning of the 1950s, the convicted perpetrators of the 'Mühlviertel Hare Hunt' are released early.





In 1953, the Austrian Minister of the Interior, [Oskar Helmer](#), sends a letter to the Minister of Justice, Josef Gerö. Attached to the letter is a list of twenty people recommended for pardon during the Christmas period. Franz Jäger is on this list. 'His offence is purely a military order offence, which he was guilty of as a member of the Volkssturm,' Helmer says. Franz Jäger is pardoned and released from prison on 18 December 1953.

He returns to Schwertberg, where he lives until 1957. Franz Jäger then moves to Steyr and lives there until his death in 1972.



## Some words explained ...

**Block 20** – Prisoners' accommodation in the concentration camp. The barracks in the camp were called blocks and they were numbered. From May 1944 to February 1945, Block 20 was known as the 'death block'. It was used for K prisoners – mainly Soviet officers – who were sent to the Mauthausen concentration camp to be murdered. Block 20 was surrounded by walls to completely isolate the K prisoners.

**Ziereis, Franz** – Camp commandant of the Mauthausen concentration camp from February 1939 to May 1945. As commandant, he was in charge of the entire camp.

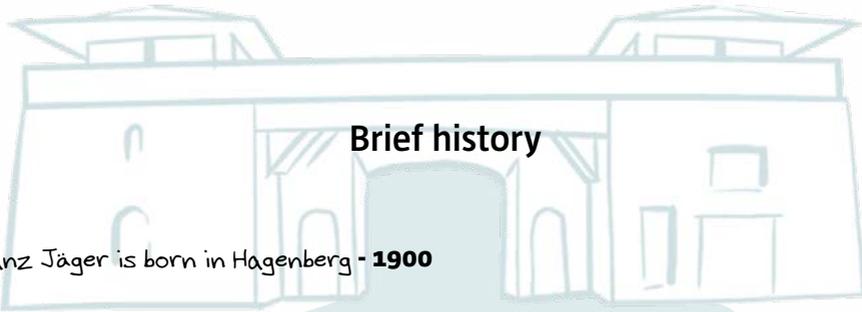
**K prisoners** – 'K' stands for 'Kugel' (German for 'bullet'). Following the secret 'Kugel-Erlass' (bullet decree) of March 1944, K prisoners were mainly Soviet officers who were sent to the Mauthausen concentration camp to be murdered after attempting to escape from a prisoner of war camp or carrying out sabotage during forced labour. They were either shot or left to starve in Block 20.

**SS** – Stands for 'Schutzstaffel' or 'protection squad'. The SS was one of the most powerful organisations in the Nazi regime: it reported to the police, had business operations and had armed troops (the 'Waffen-SS'). The SS guarded the concentration camps and was mainly responsible for the persecution and mass murder under Nazism.

**SA** – Stands for 'Sturmabteilung' or 'storm division'. The SA was the armed organisation of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP). It played an important role in the rise of the NSDAP in the 1920s when it was involved in street fights against political opponents. After the Nazis came to power, the SA became less important than the SS.

**Gendarmerie** – Rural police. In Austria, the gendarmerie existed until 2005.

**Helmer, Oskar** – Austrian Social Democrat politician. Austrian Minister of the Interior from 1945 to 1959. Helmer lobbied for pardons for convicted Nazis, held anti-Semitic views, and delayed compensation payments for victims of Nazism.



## Brief history

Franz Jäger is born in Hagenberg - **1900**

**1914** - 28 July – Start of the First World War

**1918** - 11 November – End of the First World War

**1933** - 30 January – Adolf Hitler becomes Reich Chancellor in Germany

**1938** - 12 March – ‘Anschluss’ (‘Annexation’) of Austria to Nazi Germany

**1938** - 8 August – Construction begins on the Mauthausen concentration camp

**1939** - 1 September – Start of the Second World War

Conscription to the \_\_\_\_\_ - **1944**

**1945** - 2 February – Soviet K prisoners escape from Block 20 of the Mauthausen concentration camp; the ‘Mühlviertel Hare Hunt’ begins

2 February – Franz Jäger shoots an escaped K prisoner during the ‘\_\_\_\_\_’ - **1945**

**1945** - 5 May – The Mauthausen concentration camp is liberated by the US Army  
- 8 May – Nazi Germany surrenders; end of the Second World War in Europe

Charges brought against Franz Jäger - **1946**

The Vienna \_\_\_\_\_ sentences Franz Jäger to twelve years in prison - **1948**

Minister of Interior Oskar Helmer proposes \_\_\_\_\_ several convicted felons, including Franz Jäger - **1953**

He is released from prison - **1953**

Franz Jäger dies in Steyr - **1972**

## Further reflection in groups ...

-  What do you learn in the account of the 'Mühlviertel Hare Hunt' about how people behave towards escaped prisoners?
-  Franz Jäger is pardoned in 1953 because he 'only' acted on orders. Who do you think is responsible for a criminal act: The person who gives the order? The person who carries out the order? Or both?
-  At the time, many people saw the escaped K prisoners as enemies. What is your impression of how people who have escaped are reported and talked about today?
-  Ask your guide at the beginning of the tour at the Mauthausen Memorial if you can visit the area around what used to be Block 20.





## Publication Details

Biography (research and text): Evelyn Steinthaler

Illustrations: Johannes Doppler

Edited by: Christian Angerer

Proofreading: Teres Stockinger

Design: Walter Fröhlich

References for the biographies available at: [www.lebenswege-nach-mauthausen.org](http://www.lebenswege-nach-mauthausen.org)

Educational manager and project manager: Gudrun Blohberger, with support from Christian Angerer

Team coordinators: Walter Fröhlich, Evelyn Steinthaler

Academic and expert advice: Christian Dürr

Accompanying texts: Christian Angerer, Gudrun Blohberger, Evelyn Steinthaler

Project management and administration: Aleksandra Božic, Angelika Heumader-Rainer

Technical advice: Aleksandra Božic, Wilhelm Stadler, Thomas Zaglmaier

Technical development of the website [www.lebenswege-nach-mauthausen.org](http://www.lebenswege-nach-mauthausen.org): INFOUND

Translation: Alexander Bradbury, Paul Richards

Published by:

Mauthausen Memorial

Director: Barbara Glück

[www.mauthausen-memorial.org](http://www.mauthausen-memorial.org)



In cooperating with:

With funding kindly provided by:

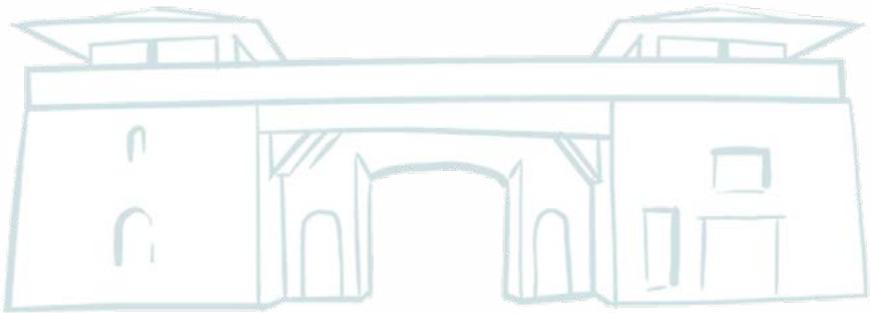
 oead [erinnern.at](http://erinnern.at)



**NATIONALFONDS**  
DER REPUBLIK ÖSTERREICH FÜR OPFER DES NATIONALSOZIALISMUS

**ZukunftsFonds**  
der Republik Österreich

Mauthausen, 2023



**MAUTHAUSEN**

MEMORIAL | KZ-GEDENKSTÄTTE

