



**Life Journeys Leading to
MAUTHAUSEN**

**Johann
Kraft**



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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.



Johann Kraft is born in 1894. He comes from a working-class family in Haid near Mauthausen. Johann Kraft works at a number of different companies until he is forty years old.

After the First World War, he starts a family with his wife Anna. They have three children. Kraft advocates for workers' rights as a member of the Social Democratic Workers' Party. In the 1920s, he is deputy mayor of Haid near Mauthausen.

In 1933, the Christian Social government led by [Engelbert Dollfuß](#) abolishes democracy and introduces the authoritarian 'Ständestaat' ('corporate state'). Socialist workers rise up against this dictatorship in February 1934. After they are defeated, the Social Democratic Party is banned.

During this time of political oppression and unemployment, Johann Kraft uses an inheritance to buy a farm in the Ufer district of Mauthausen. He and his wife, Anna, cultivate crops and rear cows, pigs and horses.



After the 'Anschluss' of Austria to Nazi Germany in March 1938, the Kraft family gets a new 'neighbour': in the summer, the Mauthausen concentration camp is built on neighbouring land. Several farmers including Kraft have to sell land to the SS so that they can use it for the concentration camp. Like many people from the surrounding area, Johann Kraft witnesses the crimes at the camp. In 1965, he says in an interview: 'I saw prisoners being mistreated on many occasions. I also saw prisoners being shot.'

When an SS settlement is planned, Kraft again has to make available large plots of land. The SS offers him a farm in Slovenia or in the East in return for the land, but he does not want to move away with his family. He therefore keeps possession of the land and receives compensation because he is no longer able to use the fields for crops.



From 1941 onwards, concentration camp prisoners in a labour detachment have to build the SS settlement very close to the farm. Sometimes the SS makes concentration camp prisoners available to the farmers in the area. On one occasion, two prisoners – overseen by SS guards – repaint Kraft's farm. The SS people allow the Kraft family to give food to the prisoners. They even barter with some of the SS and the prisoners: in exchange for food, the Kraft family receives small pictures and figurines made by prisoners in the concentration camp.

A neighbourly relationship develops between the Kraft family and the SS settlement. The wives of the SS men get milk and potatoes from the farm. Berta Strauß, the wife of the [head of administration](#) at the Mauthausen concentration camp, enjoys helping with the hay harvest. SS man Karl Baumgart sometimes helps with ploughing. The children of the SS are often on the farm.

Johann Kraft also gets along well with [camp commandant Franz Ziereis](#), whose villa is also located near Kraft's farm. On one occasion, Kraft shouts to an SS guard who is beating prisoners: 'You don't have to beat people like that!' The SS man threatens to shoot Kraft. After this incident, Ziereis advises Kraft not to say anything when prisoners are driven past.



At the beginning of May 1945, before the US troops arrive, the SS people go into hiding. The Baumgart family leaves a large basket of clothes on the farm. The wives of escaped SS men hide for a time on the upper floor of the farmhouse. Liberated concentration camp prisoners want to take revenge on the women, but Johann Kraft protects them.



After the Mauthausen concentration camp is liberated, first US soldiers and then Soviet soldiers move into the SS accommodation. Because housing is scarce in the post-war period, people looking for accommodation are housed in the SS settlement. From 1946, the settlement is called the 'Bernaschek-Siedlung' after Social Democrat [Richard Bernaschek](#), who was murdered in the Mauthausen concentration camp in 1945.

The Kraft family stays in contact with some former SS men after 1945. In 1948, Johann Kraft writes a letter to Berta Strauß, whose husband has been sentenced to a long prison term. Kraft says: 'The settlement isn't how it used to be; we often think of times gone by. Hopefully Mr Strauss will come home soon. It is sad for you because you have lost everything. [...] Hopefully we will be able to meet again soon and talk.' Former SS man Karl Baumgart, who was never convicted, comes to the farm to pick up the basket of clothes.

Johann Kraft tries unsuccessfully to get his land back. The housing settlement is eventually given to the municipality of Mauthausen. Johann Kraft becomes politically active again in 1945 as a member of the Austrian Socialist Party (SPÖ). For many years he is deputy mayor of Mauthausen.



Johann and Anna Kraft sell their farm in 1958 and move with their children and grandchildren to the centre of Mauthausen. Kraft is able to talk to anyone, including political opponents, which makes him very popular in the town. One of his many friends is a former Spanish concentration camp inmate who now lives in the town of Mauthausen.

Johann Kraft dies in Mauthausen in 1967.

Some words explained ...

Dollfuß, Engelbert – Was a politician from the Christian Social Party and Austrian Chancellor from 1932. Under his leadership, democracy was abolished in Austria and the one-party 'Christian Ständestaat' dictatorship was established with the support of the Catholic Church. Dollfuß was assassinated by Austrian Nazis in 1934.

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.

Labour detachment – The term for a group of prisoners who had to carry out a specific form of forced labour in the concentration camp.

Head of administration – The SS head of administration was responsible for logistical matters in the concentration camp, e.g. food, housing, and clothing for SS personnel and prisoners.

Camp commandant – The commander of the camp. In the Mauthausen concentration camp, Franz Ziereis was commandant from 1939 to 1945.

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.

Bernaschek, Richard – Commandant of the Republican Protection League in Upper Austria, the armed organisation of the Social Democratic Workers' Party. In February 1934, Bernaschek played an important role in the workers' uprising against the Christian Social dictatorship under Dollfuß. Bernaschek was arrested by the Gestapo in 1944 and shot dead in the Mauthausen concentration camp in April 1945.



Brief history

Johann Kraft is born in Mauthausen - **1894**

1914 - 28 July – Start of the First World War

1918 - 11 November – End of the First World War

Social Democrat deputy mayor of
Haid near Mauthausen - **1920er**

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

The Krafts purchase a _____ in Mauthausen - **1933**

1934 - February – Civil War in Austria

1938 - 12 March - 'Anschluss' ('Annexation') of Austria to Nazi Germany

- 8 August - Construction begins on the Mauthausen concentration camp

Johann Kraft witnesses the mistreatment
and murder of concentration camp prisoners - **1938 bis 1945**

1939 - 1 September – Start of the Second World War

Johann Kraft has to provide _____
for an SS settlement - **1940**

ab 1941 - Concentration camp prisoners have to build the SS settlement

The Krafts are friendly with _____
and their families - **ab 1941**

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

Johann Kraft's stays in contact with
former SS people and former _____ - **ab 1945**

Social Democrat deputy mayor of Mauthausen - **nach 1945**

1946 - The settlement is renamed the 'Bernaschek-Siedlung'

Johann Kraft dies in Mauthausen - **1967**

Further reflection in groups ...

? Johann Kraft lives very close to the Mauthausen concentration camp. What negative experiences does he have as a neighbour of the camp? What positive experiences does he have?

? Which of these statements about Johann Kraft do you completely agree with, partially agree with, or disagree with? What do you learn about the statement in the text and in the pictures? Give reasons for your answer.

- He has nothing to do with the concentration camp.
- He resists.
- He is forced by the SS to take part.
- He is complicit.
- He tries to make the best of the difficult situation.
- He could also make other decisions.

? What do you think about the letter Johann Kraft writes to Mrs Strauss in 1948?

? During your tour of the Mauthausen Memorial, find out where the SS settlement now known as the 'Bernaschek-Siedlung' was located.



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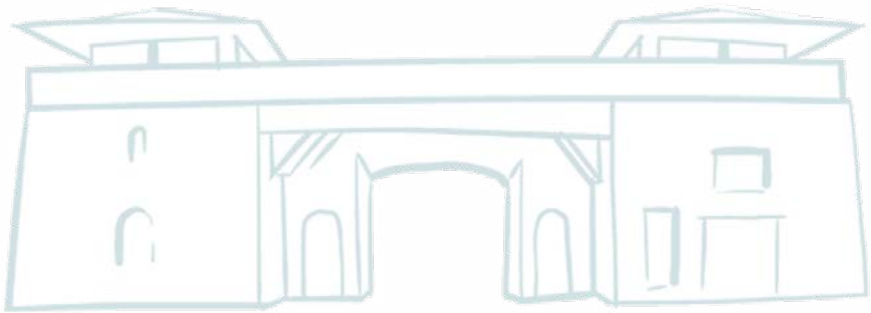
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