



Life Journeys Leading to **MAUTHAUSEN**

Richard Dietl



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Dear student,

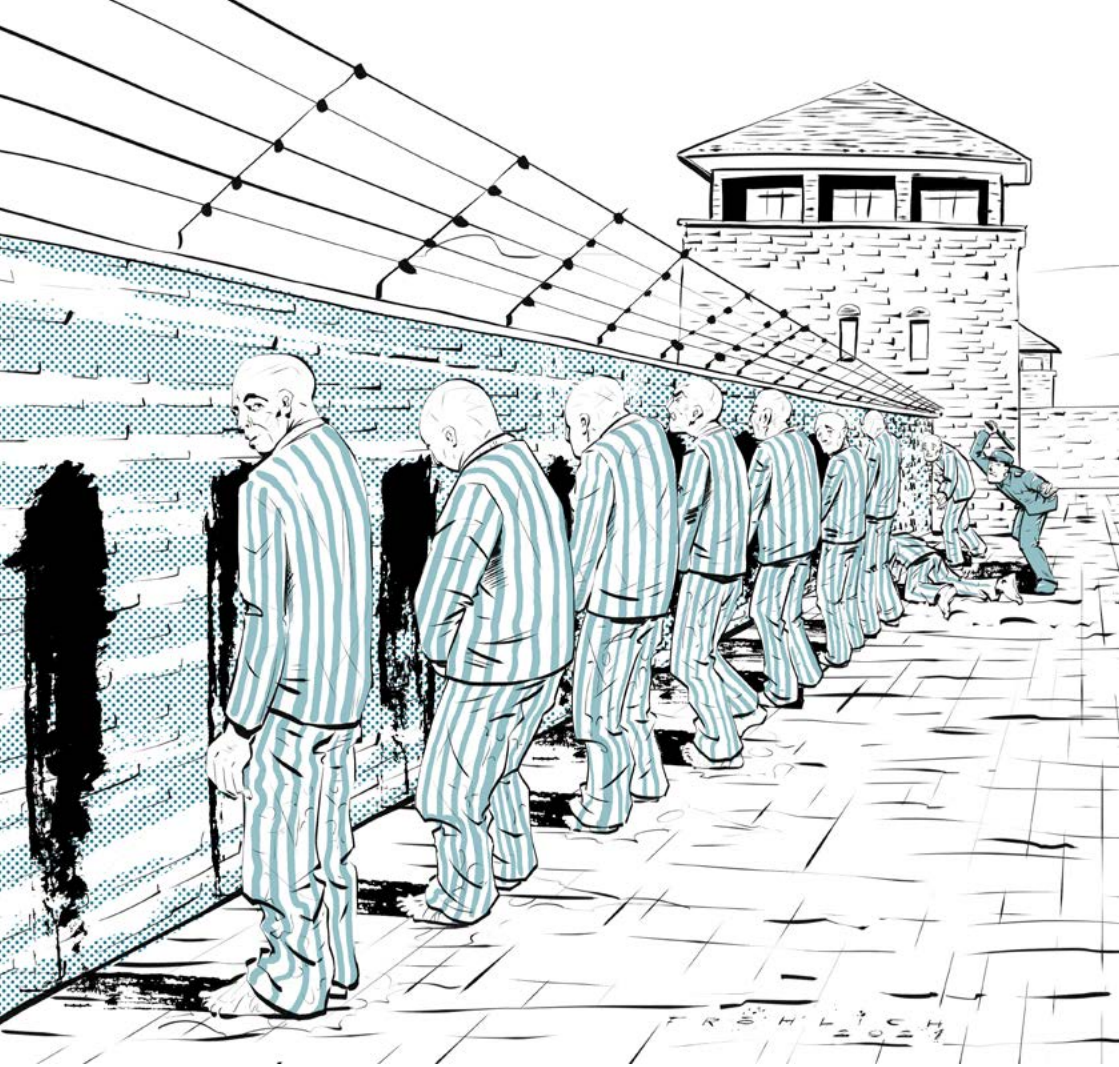
In 1938, in a small town in Upper Austria, one of the many Nazi concentration camps was constructed. It was known as the Mauthausen concentration camp. It existed from 1938 to 1945. The camp was run and guarded by the SS. The people who were imprisoned here came from many countries in Europe: Poland, 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.



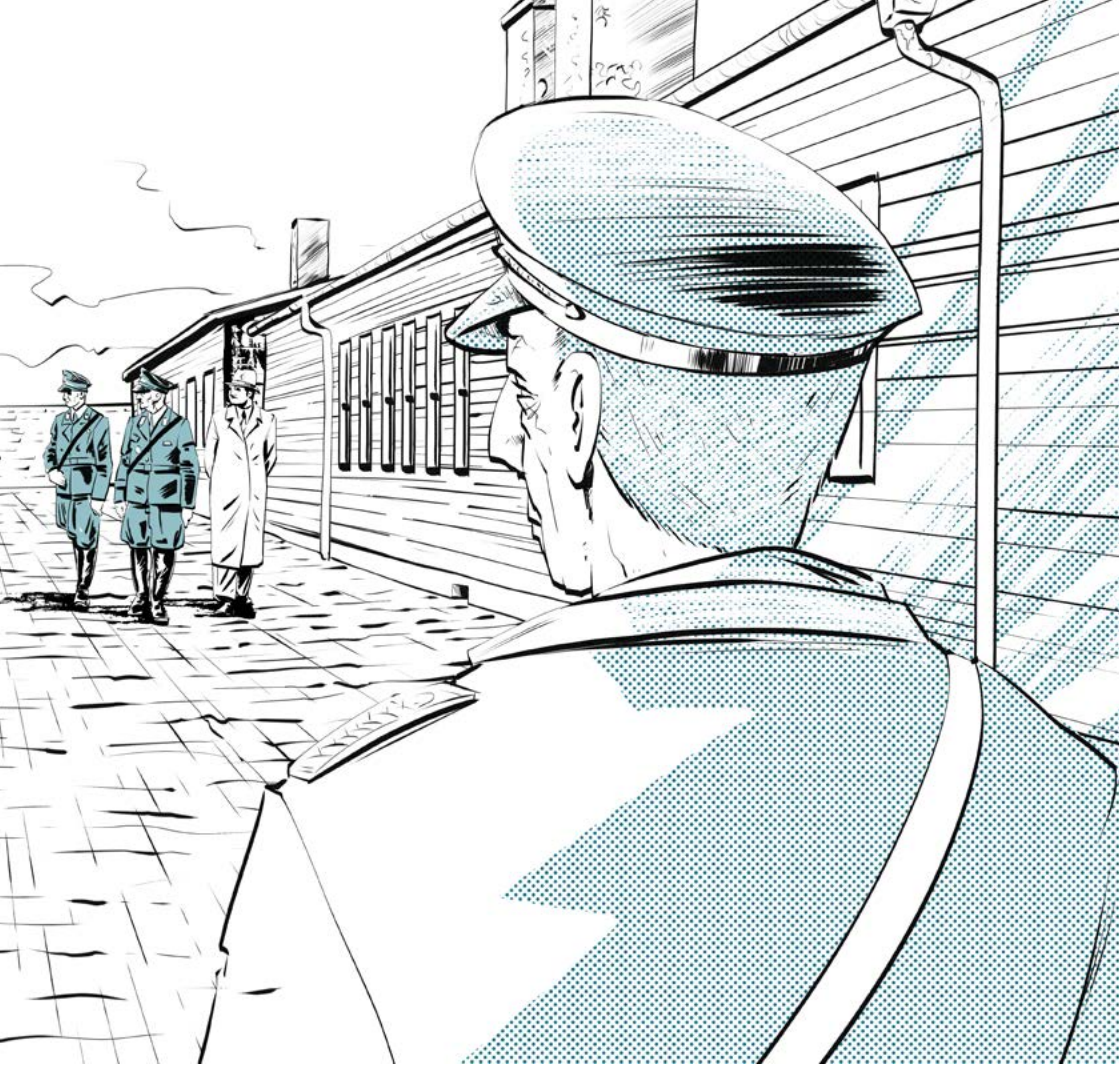
Richard Dietl is born in Wels, Upper Austria, in 1911. From his early youth, he stands up for the rights of working-class people. At the age of 18, he joins the youth organisation of the Communist Party of Austria. He marries Paula Köpl and begins his professional life as an office worker.

When Austria's Christian Social government establishes a dictatorship in Austria in 1933, the Communist Party is one of the organisations it bans. Richard Dietl is arrested several times.



With the 'Anschluss' ('Annexation') of Austria in March 1938, the country becomes part of the Nazi German Reich. Large sections of the population are jubilant, but some people form groups to resist the regime – especially Communists. Richard Dietl is part of one of these resistance groups. He distributes flyers denouncing the Nazi regime.

In September 1944, the group is denounced and arrested by the [Gestapo](#). The women are sent to the Kaplanhof prison in Linz, while the men are transferred to the Mauthausen concentration camp.



Once there, Dietl and his comrades have to line up against the [‘Wailing Wall’](#). The [SS](#) keeps them there for four days and three nights without food or water. They have to relieve themselves in their clothes. SS men repeatedly beat the prisoners. Several times, Dietl is taken for interrogation in the [Political Department](#), where his hands are tied behind his back, and he is hung up from them for minutes at a time. Despite the pain, he doesn’t reveal any information.



At the 'Wailing Wall', Richard Dietl has to watch while his best friend Karl Scharrer is beaten so brutally that he dies a few days later. In this moment, it becomes clear to him that he must do everything in his power to survive so that the murderers receive their just punishment.

Dietl and his comrades are assigned to the 'Strafkompanie' (['penal company'](#)) in the quarry. Without shoes on, they have to carry the heavy granite blocks up the ['stairs of death'](#) into the camp. One time, when climbing the steep steps, Dietl meets his comrades Karl Schwarzlmüller and Alois Fritz coming the other way. They implore him to pass on a message to their families for them, because they see him as the strongest of the group and therefore likely to survive. Then they say their farewells. After two days in the penal company, twelve comrades are dead – tortured to death or shot.

In late April 1945, Nazi Germany is on the brink of collapse. On 27 April 1945, out of 68 comrades from Richard Dietl's resistance group, only 34 are still alive in the Mauthausen concentration camp. The [Gauleiter](#) (regional leader) of the Upper Danube zone, August Eigruber, orders their execution so that they won't be able to continue their political activity after the war.

The secret [prisoners' committee](#) in the Mauthausen concentration camp tries to save the resistance fighters. Preparations are made for a night-time escape over the camp fence. But the men are so weakened they can't muster the strength and will for this dangerous undertaking. When the prisoners are spotted by the guards in the darkness, they run back into their [barracks](#). The group's situation is now hopeless.

But Richard Dietl refuses to accept his fate. After a sleepless night, he walks up as confidently as he possibly can to the SS man at the gate of the prisoners' camp. Attention! Cap off! 'Prisoner 96,969 reporting at the entrance to the depot!' The SS man looks up and down the list with his finger and can't find him. 'When did you go in?' 'Quarter of an hour ago, Herr Unterscharführer!' The SS man checks the list again and still cannot find him. Then he shouts at him. 'Clear off!'



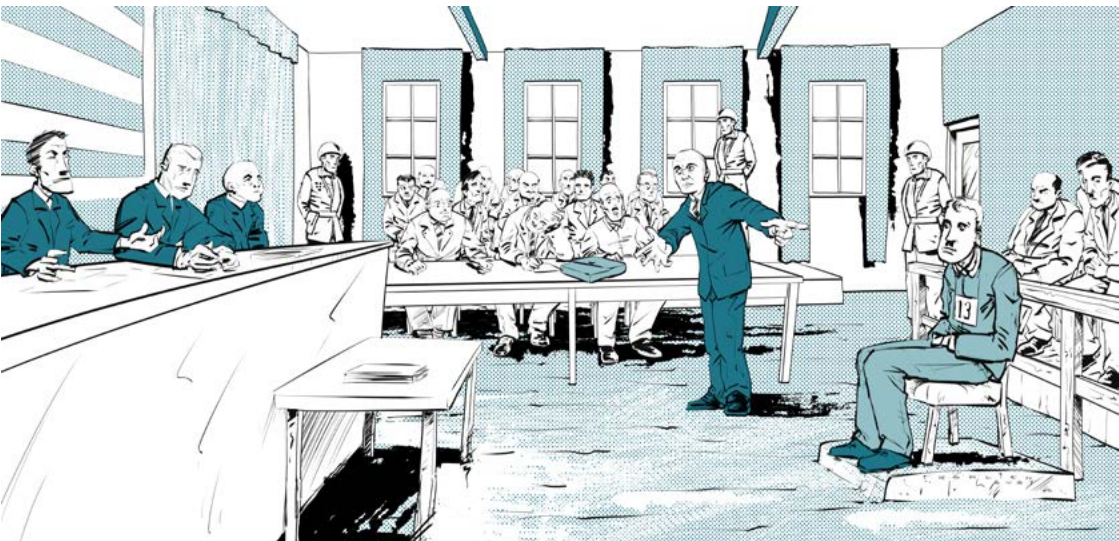
Dietl is out of the prisoners' camp but not yet in safety. He goes to the [Infirmary Camp](#), where he hides in Barrack 7. This hut is used to house prisoners with typhoid fever and is avoided by the SS because of the risk of infection. Dietl hides under dead and nearly-dead prisoners for a whole week, until American tanks enter the camp on 5 May 1945. Richard Dietl is free. His comrades, however, were murdered in the [gas chamber](#) on the morning of 28 April 1945, a week before the liberation of the camp.

Richard Dietl wants to bear witness to the crimes so that the murderers are punished. Shortly after the liberation his report on the Mauthausen concentration camp is printed in a newspaper. He names both the victims and the perpetrators.

In 1946, Dietl appears as a witness in the first major trial of those are primarily responsible for the crimes in the Mauthausen concentration camp. Among the defendants he faces in the American military tribunal is Eigruber, the former Gauleiter who had sentenced him and his 33 comrades to death one year earlier. Dietl's testimony plays a significant role in ensuring that Eigruber is convicted by the tribunal and executed in 1947.

Over the following years, Richard Dietl resumes his political work in the Communist Party. He is elected to the council of his home city Wels. He also runs a small tobacconist's shop.

In 1971, Richard Dietl dies in Wels at the age of 60.



Some words explained ...

Gestapo – Short for ‘Geheime Staatspolizei’, which means ‘Secret State Police’. The Gestapo persecuted political opponents and therefore played a key role in the mass murders under the Nazis.

‘Wailing Wall’ – The name given to the wall to the right of the area within the former camp gate at Mauthausen. This wall was the first thing many prisoners saw after their arrival in the camp. The name was chosen as an ironic allusion to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, a holy site for Jews.

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.

Political Department – The Political Department was one of the five SS departments in the concentration camps. Among its tasks was the registration of prisoners. This involved maintaining prisoner files with photos and personal records. The SS men of the Political Department carried out interrogations under torture and murdered the camp prisoners.

Penal company – A unit of prisoners who received particularly severe punishment within the concentration camp. In the Mauthausen concentration camp, the prisoners in the penal company had to carry granite blocks from the quarry via the ‘stairs of death’.

Stairs of death – Steps leading up from the quarry to the concentration camp. Prisoners had to make the 186 steps and later carry granite blocks up them while being beaten by the SS officers and ‘Kapos’ (fellow prisoners). Many did not survive the ordeal, hence the name of the stairs.

Gauleiter – Under National Socialism, Austria was part of the German Reich and was divided not into federal states as it is today but into ‘Gaus’. For example, the province of Upper Austria became the Gau Upper Danube. The Gauleiter (‘Gau leader’) was in charge of this region.

Prisoners’ Committee – Shortly before the liberation of the Mauthausen concentration camp, a group of prisoners secretly formed a committee that would later organise supplies for the camp in collaboration with its liberators in the US Army.

Infirmiry camp – Also known as a sick camp. Prisoners who were no longer able to work because they were ill or weak were taken there. Only a few of them survived.

Barracks – Often used to mean buildings for lodging soldiers. Here the term is also used to describe the wooden buildings in the concentration camps that were used for the prisoners.

Gas chamber – A room in which prisoners were killed with poison gas. The Nazis used this method to kill prisoners in concentration camps and extermination camps. The Mauthausen concentration camp had its own gas chamber.



Brief history

Richard Dietls is born in Wels - **1911**

1914 - 28 July, start of the First World War

1918 - 11 November, end of the First World War

He joins the _____
of the Communist Party of Austria - **1929**

1933 - 30 January, Adolf Hitler becomes Reich Chancellor in Germany
- In March, the Christian Social government shuts down the
Austrian parliament

Richard Dietl is arrested on several occasions - **1933 onwards**

1938 - 12 March, 'Anschluss' ('Annexation') of Austria to Nazi Germany
- 8 August, construction starts on the Mauthausen concentration camp

Richard Dietl joins a _____ ;
he distributes flyers - **ab 1938**

1939 - 1 September, start of the Second World War

The resistance group is denounced;
the arrested men are sent to the _____ - **1944**





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

Newspaper report with names of perpetrators and victims - **1945**

Richard Dietl appears as a witness
in the first _____ in Dachau - **1946**

Richard Dietls dies in Wels - **1971**

Further reflection in groups ...

-  In the biography you learn about Richard Dietl's attempted escape from the Mauthausen concentration camp. Today, there are still many people all over the world attempting to flee dangerous situations. What are these people trying to escape from?
-  Richard Dietl successfully tricks the guards in order to escape the prisoners' camp. A drawing shows how he hides in the infirmary camp. What risks is he taking by doing this?
-  After the end of the Second World War, many former perpetrators are convicted in the courts, but many are also acquitted. Richard Dietl testifies as a witness in one of these post-war trials. Why do think it's important for him to bear witness to the crimes?
-  In the quarry of the Mauthausen concentration camp, Richard Dietl has to carry granite blocks up the 'stairs of death'. During your tour of the Memorial, you'll see the quarry and its surroundings. Some of the houses you can see were already there when it was a concentration camp. How do you think the people who lived in these houses would have reacted to the prisoners in the quarry?



Notes

A series of ten horizontal dashed lines spanning the width of the page, intended for taking notes.

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