

THE MAUTHAUSEN CONCENTRATION CAMP IN AUSTRIA

Read this account and you will gain insight into what average Austrian citizens might have known about a concentration camp in their area:

Mauthausen sits amid lovely rolling hills whose fields cover the Austrian landscape like the bedspread of a giant. The town nuzzles peacefully along the north bank of the Danube, whose swift current is quickened by the nearby confluence of the Enns, a major alpine waterway. Mauthausen is a stroller's paradise. Marked hiking routes provide shaded paths to nearby churches and castles. Beautified resting spots afford pleasing views of the Alps and of the Bohemian forest. Mauthausen lies just 14 miles downriver from Linz, the provincial capital of the province of Upper Austria; 90 miles due east the spire of St. Stephen's Cathedral, the landmark of Vienna, rises to meet the sky. To the north and beyond lies the forests of the *Mühlviertel*, home to deer and rabbits, pheasant and grouse, pigeons and owls, running buck and wild boar: a hunter's haven. Of all the area's treasure, however, those most significant to our story are the great, yawning pits of granite.

Mauthausen is synonymous with its rock quarries. The town was long esteemed as a principal supplier of granite construction material for the streets, bridges, and monuments of Vienna, Budapest, and host of lesser cities in Central Europe. It was the presence of the hard and durable stones that drew the attention of Heinrich Himmler who, in March 1938, was embarking on a bold expansion of his SS-operated economic empire. Accessible by river and by rail, the modest town of Mauthausen proved an ideal setting for the establishment of what was to become one of the most notorious camps in the history of the Third Reich.

Under the best of conditions, stone quarrying is dangerous, even violent work. Granite is hard and requires enormous effort to loosen and break apart. The rock is stubborn and must be blown clear by means of explosives. Much difficult labor is involved in blasting, hammering, picking, and hauling blocks of stone. One needs a rugged constitution for outdoor activity, keen eyes with which to work the rock, and healthy feet to remain standing long hours. During the labor, stone dust may rain down upon the work site, and strong lungs are required to withstand it. In working the rock, fingers have a way of being overlooked; hands are bloodied in handling sharp edges; bones may snap or a body flattens in a fall from great heights. . . The construction business was to be an important source of revenue for Heinrich Himmler's S.S. organization.

All that was needed to destroy a man was implicit in the stones. Himmler and his lieutenants instinctively saw in the quarry a natural embodiment of the terror and punishment they were to perfect in the concentration camp. They read into the steep 300-foot cliffs, the heavy rocks, the explosions needed to pry loose vast slabs and boulders a natural setting of terror. The concentration camp was born of the quarry. Inmates lifted the edifice stone by stone, arduously climbing to the rim of the canyon to assemble the camp of Concentration Camp Mauthausen would yield up hundreds of thousands of stones for streets and monuments and buildings – stones that were all blasted free of the quarry walls, hammered loose, and heaved upon the shoulders of inmates weakened by meager rations, long hours, and inhuman treatment from their overseers.

Stone manifests additional qualities: opaqueness, strength, silence, and terror. Stone obstructs vision. When dislodged from the sides of a cliff, stacked and cemented into a wall, stone encloses. Whatever lies within its boundary will be invisible to those viewing it from the outside. Nevertheless, the quarry walls do not form a perfect circle. On one side the Mauthausen quarry opens, and borders a roadway. The stone perimeter of the camp, hauled from the stone pit above which it stands, is completed with wire. The camp is built with gates for passage in and out. No dome save the dark of night covers the quarry and the camp. Just as the dust of explosions in the quarry may scatter with the four winds, so too will the ash spewing from the chimneys of the camp carry the refuse of a man from the ovens below, upward and over the walls, raining down on field and forest.

The Concentration Camp Mauthausen did not spring from a wilderness. The area was inhabited. Less than three miles away lay the center of a town. From the beginning the camp confronted civilian authority and touched the lives of the citizenry. In carving a place for itself, the camp asserted its dominance and enforced compliance. Its first tasks were bound up with achieving title to the land; gaining superiority over existing public authorities and placing itself above the law; securing the material and logistical assistance of local contractors, suppliers, and laborers; and winning the compliance of the local population. This was not accomplished without a measure of tension. Neither the mayor, the district governor, the police, nor the state's attorney willingly abided overt disruption of public order. In the face of the camps' superior power, however, their challenges proved ineffectual and the camp personnel ran roughshod over the rights and sensitivities of the town residents. In their off-duty hours, SS men behaved boorishly. Drunkenness, petty thievery, desecration of religious symbols, and brawling became a source of concern to the local population.

On the other hand, the camp offered material benefits to the townspeople. It revived the stone industry and provided jobs for civilian workers and supervisors in the SS owned and operated quarries. The camp passed out contracts to shippers, suppliers, and craftsmen. Townspeople were able to compensate for wartime shortages through lucrative exchanges of scarce agricultural commodities for rare items seized from the prisoners.

Beyond overcoming the objections of local authorities, the camp sought the complicity of residents living in the immediate vicinity. True, after the first prisoners arrived in August 1938, the camp attempted to keep people from showing undue curiosity. Gaping at the inmates was prohibited. However, the SS was unable to prevent citizens from noticing the mistreatment of prisoners marched through the town from the railway station or to work sites in the area. Inevitably, residents were witness to beatings and shootings. Accumulating evidence of brutality set in motion a series of discussions within the population. The question was less what was happening in and around the camp than how they should interpret what they saw.

It may be argued that in the physical space of Mauthausen there existed two distinct worlds; that of the camp, embodied in the fearful SS organization and the inmates upon whom they worked their will, and that of the town and its residents. Yet the boundaries separating these worlds were never impermeable. The requisites of daily life, and the life of the camp itself, demanded personal as well as commercial bonds that necessitated contact between the two spheres.