



# VIKTOR

THE TRUE STORY OF AN AMERICAN  
PRIEST IN NAZI GERMANY

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## A WORLD WAR II STORY

# *Unlike Any Other... ♦ ♦ ♦*

In the sleepy farm village of Schwarzenfeld, Germany, a sun-gold monastery and eighteenth-century pilgrimage church rise from the crown of a grassy hill. A plaque adorns the church's facade. The German text engraved upon its granite face translates as follows:

**“In gratitude to honorary citizen Fr. Viktor Koch C.P., Provincial of the Passionist Order. Through personal engagement and civil courage, he prevented in April 1945 an act of retribution by U.S. troops upon the population of Schwarzenfeld.”**

The plaque summarizes the story of an American priest named Father Viktor Koch, C.P. He left American shores in 1922 to co-establish a new province of the Passionist Order in Germany and Austria. His tale of struggle and sacrifice behind enemy lines culminated in April 1945, when the American army arrived in Schwarzenfeld and threatened reprisals against the obscure Bavarian town.

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This e-book is based on a paper I authored for *Gathered Fragments*, the journal of the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. Contact the historians at [catholichistorywpa.org](http://catholichistorywpa.org) to read the full article, plus an essay

revealing the “story behind the story” on our family research project.

Father Viktor Koch is my paternal great granduncle. My father Gary and I have been researching his story since 2004. Our desire to learn the narrative has taken us from the Passionist Archives in Union City, New Jersey, to the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and finally to the town of Schwarzenfeld, Germany.

Over the past ten years, the “Father Viktor Project” has generated research papers, articles, and a historical fiction novel tentatively titled *The Sower of Black Field*. At the time of this writing (2014), the novel is in the final editing stages.

Like this e-book? Visit the website [viktorkoch.com](http://viktorkoch.com) and browse our gallery of photos compiled from family albums and archival research. You’ll also find an online form that will help you get in touch with us.

Happy reading!

Katherine Koch  
*Author and Researcher*

# Who is FATHER VIKTOR KOCH?<sup>1</sup>

His story starts with Nikolaus and Viktoria Elser Koch, two young immigrants who left their native Fatherland in the 1850s for the promise of freedom and prosperity on American shores. Nikolaus Koch hailed from Noswendel, a small farm town in the Saarland region. Viktoria Elser immigrated from Baden-Württemberg.

They both settled with their families in Mercer County, Pennsylvania, where they met and then married in July 1868.<sup>2</sup> Back at that time, Mercer's population consisted largely of first and second-generation German immigrants, a fact that is evident in the city's cemeteries: etched in the weathered surfaces of their oldest tombstones are the words, *Hier Rhut in Gott* (Here Rests in God). During the 1800s, coal was abundant in the area, and to support his wife and children, Nikolaus became a coal miner.



Suffering was a concept he understood intimately. During the most formative years of his life, he became well-acquainted with the pain of the human condition.

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The Kochs were instrumental in establishing a new parish church near their homestead on Dutch Lane — St. Rose of Lima.<sup>3</sup> The Koch children all grew up with a church in their backyard.<sup>4</sup>

On May 26, 1873, Viktoria gave birth to the couple's third child.<sup>5</sup> He was their first son, and in German custom, they named him after his father. Young Nikolaus was bilingual, learning to speak English at school and fluent *Hochdeutsch* (High German) at home. He was a precocious child, and his teachers tapped him to help tutor children in the lower grades.<sup>6</sup>

### Early Sorrows

During the most formative years of his life, young Nikolaus became well-acquainted with the pain of the human condition. He was



**THE GRAVE OF NIKOLAUS KOCH, SR., Sharon, PA. At the tender age of eight, young Nikolaus watched his father die of typhoid fever.**

only seven when his mother gave birth to the family's sixth child, a son named Fadius. For reasons unknown, the infant died a day after he was born.<sup>7</sup> Then, in 1881,

at the tender age of eight, Nikolaus watched his father die of typhoid fever.<sup>8</sup> At the time in his life when he needed a father most, he found himself bereaved and catapulted into a paternal role, raising his two younger brothers, Peter and Albert. The widowed Viktoria worked to support five children and depended upon her two eldest daughters to manage the farm.

The family was subsequently stricken by yet another tragedy. Fourteen months after losing his father, young Nikolaus lost his paternal grandmother.<sup>9</sup> His mother, a woman of hardy spiritual character, accepted this chain of sorrows with grace and often quoted a verse from the Book of Job: "God had given, and God hath taken away. Praised be His holy name."<sup>10</sup> Her attitude shaped young Nikolaus's view of hardship, and prepared him for the event that would change his life.

## **The Passionist Visitation**

In April 1889, when Nikolaus was sixteen years old, three members of the Congregation of



**BEGINNING A VOCATION.** At age 16, Nikolaus Koch professes his vows as a Passionist.

the Passion conducted a parish mission at St. Rose of Lima. This order, commonly known as the Passionists, has a distinctive creed: its members vigorously promote the memory of Christ's Passion.<sup>11</sup> Both priest and parishioner alike are encouraged to "see the face of Christ" in all who suffer, and devote their lives to providing

# About the Passionists

The Passionists were founded in 1720 by St. Paul of the Cross (Paolo Francesco Danei, 1694-1775). It was his lifelong conviction that God's presence is most easily found in the Passion of Jesus Christ. He devoted his life to spreading this message and founding a community whose members would follow the same creed.<sup>12</sup>

The Passionists are “active contemplatives,” meaning that they creatively intertwine a schedule of spiritual contemplation with pastoral and missionary pursuits. At present, there are over 2,000 members serving in 59 countries worldwide.



justice, comfort, and compassion to that powerful specter through their afflicted fellows.

When the Passionists preached this creed from the pulpit at St. Rose of Lima, their words must have touched upon years of painful memories for young Nikolaus and struck him like an epiphany. The sorrows that marred his childhood were suddenly imbued with meaning. The realization struck so profoundly

that he entered the Passionist preparatory school in Dunkirk, New York, that year (1889).<sup>13</sup> On December 2, 1890, he professed his vows, donned the Passionist habit, and received a new name signifying his rebirth into Christ's service. On September 19, 1896, at age 23, he was ordained a Passionist priest. From that point forward, the former Nikolaus Koch would be forever known as Father Viktor, C.P.

## Early Work

Laboring as a curate, parish priest, and a rector in various parishes during the next 26 years, Father Viktor earned a reputation for self-sacrifice and perseverance.<sup>14</sup>

His commitment to the Passionist message was reflected by his decision to produce “Veronica’s Veil,” a Passion Play that had never been seen before in North America. The first Pittsburgh staging occurred in 1910 at St. Michael Auditorium on the city’s south side. During its peak in the 1920s, it drew 25,000 attendees.<sup>15</sup>

His work came to the attention of Fr. Silvio Di Vezza, C.P., the Passionist Father General in Rome. Fr. Silvio was searching for a candidate to establish a new branch of the order in Germany. The task would be formidable: in the wake of World War I, Germany reeled from the burden of war reparations and political turmoil. The Father General tapped fellow Passionist Father Valentine Lenherd, C.P. to serve as co-founder.<sup>16</sup> Like Viktor, Father Valentin hailed from a transplanted German community,



**A NEW LIFE IN CHRIST.** On September 19, 1896, at age 23, Father Viktor Koch is ordained a Passionist priest.

and both priests shared an interest in their ancestral homeland.

Undaunted by challenges awaiting him on distant shores, Father Viktor resigned his position as rector of St. Paul of the Cross Monastery in Pittsburgh. He boarded the *RMS Mauretania* with Father Valentine and set sail for Western Europe. There, in the land of his ancestors, he began the work that would define his life.



**THE MISSIONARIES:** After their arrival in Europe, Father Viktor (left) and Father Valentine Lenherd (right) visit the Marian grotto in Lourdes, France.

# Mission Impossible

## ESTABLISHING THE PASSIONIST GERMAN-AUSTRIAN FOUNDATION



MONASTERIES IN THE GERMAN-AUSTRIAN FOUNDATION: Schloss Gatterburg, Maria Schutz, and Schwarzenfeld. Countries are depicted with post-World War I boundaries.

Three aspects must have been searingly clear to Fathers Viktor and Valentine soon after their arrival in Munich. First, given the crippled state of the German economy, they would have to support their new province entirely on American funding. Second, their chances of success hinged

upon gaining admission into a Bavarian diocese: a new Catholic order could not hope for support in the Protestant regions of the North. Third — and much to their chagrin — their mission was virtually destined to fail. At the end of World War I, religious orders exiled from Germany during the *Kulturkampf*

“...The history of our admission to the Archdiocese of Munich is not without interest. We first met His Eminence, Cardinal Faulhaber, Archbishop of Munich, in Rome. ... He received us very kindly indeed, but was positive in assuring us that he had no place for us and gave us anything but encouragement for applying elsewhere, especially in Bavaria. Apparently our Mission to make a Foundation in Germany was to fail at the very start...”

— *Father Viktor to superiors in the St. Paul of the Cross Province Chapter, June 15, 1923.*<sup>17</sup>

## ***Political and Religious Factors Influencing 1920s Germany***

Turmoil wracked Germany in the 1920s. The Treaty of Versailles demanded that the country accept full responsibility for damages incurred during World War I.<sup>18</sup> Germany's fragile economy shattered beneath the weight of reparations, subjecting a disillusioned population to staggering poverty. In 1919, one loaf of bread cost one German Mark; by 1923, that same loaf cost 100 billion Marks.<sup>19</sup> When inflation peaked in November 1923, 4.2 trillion Marks equaled one U.S. dollar.<sup>20</sup>

The politics of the late nineteenth century had also shaped the religious landscape. During the 1870s, Germany's Protestant majority embraced modernism and liberalism, prompting them to view Catholicism as the backward religion of farm peasants.<sup>21</sup> Prussian Prime Minister Otto von Bismarck, a devout Protestant, enacted policies to reduce the influence of the Catholic Church. Laws curtailed the freedom of religious orders in Prussia, and eventually banned them altogether. This *Kulturkampf*, or “culture struggle,” lasted until 1878, leaving northern Germany dominated by Protestants, and southern Germany — most notably Bavaria — a bastion of Catholicism.



**FIRST MONASTERY:** The Schloss Gatterburg in Munich, Germany.

were returning to Germany, concentrating in Bavaria.<sup>22</sup> Fearing that the resurgence might instigate another *Kulturkampf*, the bishops of Bavaria unanimously decided to forbid new orders from entering the region. Mustering his characteristic tenacity, Fr. Viktor continued promoting the Passionist cause in Germany until Michael Cardinal von Faulhaber and Vicar General Dr. Michael Buchberger took interest in his mission.<sup>23</sup>

The solution to his impasse involved wheeling and dealing

on Fr. Viktor's part. Orders from Rome restricted the Passionists to the creation of new monasteries. Cardinal von Faulhaber, on the other hand, refused to support Passionist admission in Bavaria unless the Fathers assumed ownership of a parish.<sup>24</sup> Father Viktor purchased a tract of land in Munich and constructed a church to appease the Cardinal. He resolved the conflict of interest by making it clear that the Passionists would have no obligation to operate the parish itself once construction was complete.<sup>25</sup>



**SECOND MONASTERY:** The Shrine of Maria Schutz in the Austrian Alps.

## Reactions From America

Father Viktor's struggles were not confined to Europe alone. The tedious nature of his agreements with Cardinal von Faulhaber inspired no confidence in Father Stanislaus Grennan, the superior in Pittsburgh charged with the oversight of the foreign missions.<sup>26</sup> It irked him that American donors had paid for a church that the Passionists would not run. Moreover, the Passionists had also launched a new province in Hunan, China. Given a choice between supporting one mission

in a predominantly Christian country and another that sowed Christianity in a pagan land, many in the order felt the latter was a better use of funding and manpower.

"We regret the sad possibility of the German foundation proving to be a total failure," Father Stanislaus informed Rome in 1925. "Like all true Passionists we wish to see the Congregation grow and spread, and we would be delighted to have a strong German province. But we are forced to admit the prospects are very dark."

Father Viktor's determination permeates his response:

"You speak of this foundation possibly proving a failure," he wrote to doubtful superiors. "It is a puzzle to me how such a [concept] could ever [be entertained] ... To the best of my knowledge, such a thought has never entered our minds here ... Everything considered, it seems to me we are doing wonderfully well ... I am absolutely convinced that God is blessing this foundation, and therefore it will succeed eventually... The work must and will succeed!"

## Proving the Skeptics Wrong

The German foundation not only survived — it thrived. Following advice from Dr. Michael Buchberger, Fathers Viktor and Valentine managed to acquire the Schloss Gatterburg, a Neoclassical mansion spacious enough to serve as a Passionist preparatory school. By 1925, enough students had advanced in their training to necessitate a second monastery — a novitiate for Passionist novices.

Vienna Archbishop Friedrich Gustav Cardinal Piffl assisted the Passionists by granting them ownership of Maria Schutz, a shrine nestled amidst the Austrian Alps.<sup>27</sup> At the time of acquisition, the abandoned, 200-year-old shrine required extensive repairs. Father Viktor transferred his residence to Austria. Additional Passionists left America to help the new province train its novices.

The specter of defeat loomed over the mission once again in 1933: Adolf Hitler came to power, and within months he issued decrees prohibiting Germans from crossing the border into Austria unless they deposited 1,000 Reichsmarks with the government. It was the first step in bringing Austria to her knees and forcing her to join the Third Reich.<sup>28</sup> On a yearly basis, the Passionists sent 20 to 30 students from the Preparatory School in Munich, Germany, to the novitiate in Maria Schutz, Austria, and they could hardly afford to pay such exorbitant duties. The province's survival depended upon opening a new monastery in Germany.



**FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES:** Father Viktor (standing, center) is seen with Friedrich Gustav Piffl, the cardinal of Vienna (seated, center). The Provincial of the German-Austrian foundation proved to be a politician. In order to surmount his difficulties, he forged friendships and alliances with people of influence. Also pictured are German Passionist Father Adolf Schmit, C.P. (standing, left) and American Passionist Father Christopher Berlo, C.P. (standing, right).

THE DAY THAT CHANGED

# Schwarzenfeld



MAY 21, 1934: Miesbergkloster groundbreaking ceremony

It's hard to understate the significance of Father Viktor's arrival in the Bavarian farm town, and his decision to build his third Passionist monastery on its outskirts. The watershed moment marked a confluence of events

that set Schwarzenfeld apart from other towns in the Third Reich.

During the 1920s, the German economy faltered under the burden of enormous war reparations. Conditions improved when American companies began

“The relationship between the [Passionists at the] Miesberg and the town was not superficial, but based on material need. ... The new building measure was a welcome opportunity to give Schwarzenfelders work and bread in the time of widespread unemployment in the early 1930s.

— *Schwarzenfeld Town Chronicle*<sup>29</sup>

## *About Schwarzenfeld and the Miesberg*

Schwarzenfeld lies in the northeastern quarter of Bavaria, in a lush, hilly region known as the *Oberpfalz* (Upper Palatinate).<sup>30</sup> The town’s name means “Black Field” in English. When its founders established a settlement on the banks of the Naab River in 1015, they named it after the fertile loam that nourished their crops.

When he first visited the town in 1933, Father Viktor was intrigued by the 200-year-old pilgrimage church soaring from a grassy hill, a stop for travelers making their way to shrines across Europe. Locals called the hill *der Miesberg*, and the church upon its peak the *Miesbergkirche* (Miesberg church). The church had been constructed in 1721 — the same year that St. Paul of the Cross founded the Passionist order. The coincidence was an omen: he’d found the location for his third monastery.<sup>31</sup>





**MOBILIZING A TOWN:** Schwarzenfeld's men dig the foundations of the new Passionist monastery, the Miesbergkloster.

investing in German industry, but the reprieve was short-lived: the Great Depression of 1929 severed this lifeline, plunging the country back into a state of abject poverty.

Like their fellow Germans, the citizens of Schwarzenfeld were impoverished and desperate for work. In 1933, Father Viktor purchased the Miesbergkirche, a prim pilgrimage church crowning the grassy hill of the Miesberg, and contracted the town to construct a new monastery, the Miesbergkloster. He had \$200,000

in U.S. funds at his disposal — enough to hire every able-bodied laborer in the backwater village, plus indigents and tradesmen roaming the countryside in search of work.<sup>32</sup> The exchange rate between the dollar and the languishing Reichsmark easily doubled (and possibly tripled) the money at his disposal.<sup>33</sup>

### **A Broader Context**

The implications for Schwarzenfeld are startling when we examine events within their

historical context. Throughout Germany, a restive population turned to Adolf Hitler to solve their woes. The Nazi propaganda machine brazenly trumpeted that the *Führer* would bring about an “economic miracle,” a claim that average Germans found empty — until their living conditions steadily improved. Economic recovery served as one of the initial lures that garnered widespread approval and popularity for Hitler.<sup>34</sup> The Schwarzenfelders,

on the other hand, saw an entirely different picture: in their eyes, Providence — not Hitler — swept them from poverty into plenty. The leader restoring a sense of stability and hope was an American citizen, and it won him their unwavering loyalty. At his pulpit he spoke the clear, consistent language of pain, imploring them to see Christ’s face in all who suffer. Within the context of Nazi Germany, no message could have been more powerful — nor more necessary.

**THIRD MONASTERY:** The Miesbergkloster is the H-shaped structure extending from the back of the church.



The Miesbergkloster project caused unemployment to plunge so dramatically in the Oberpfalz that the economic impact — which fell in line with Hitler's promise to restore the German economy — took precedence over Nazi objections to the new monastery.

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## Treading on Perilous Ground

New dictates in the Third Reich forbade the Catholic Church from establishing new institutions in Germany. Thus, Father Viktor was building a new monastery at a time when the Nazis were confiscating and secularizing existing ones.<sup>35</sup> For the first time, Schwarzenfeld's leaders found themselves in contention with the Nazi regime. In the end, they took the simplest option possible: they neglected to alert Party authorities of their intentions to build a monastery.<sup>36</sup>

The maneuver succeeded. When the Nazis became wise to the ruse, they were forced to let construction continue. The Miesbergkloster project caused unemployment to plunge so dramatically in the Oberpfalz

region that the economic impact — which fell in line with Hitler's promise to restore the German economy — took precedence over objections to the new monastery.<sup>37</sup> The repercussions came later: Schwarzenfeld's Catholic mayor was deposed for having enthusiastically supported the project. He was replaced by an *Alter Kämpfer* (old fighter), a member of the Nazi party since Hitler's beer hall *putsch* of November 1923.

On September 7, 1935, a carnival atmosphere pervaded Schwarzenfeld as its residents celebrated the Miesbergkloster's completion and consecration. But for the Nazis, the battle lines were drawn. They were determined to outmaneuver the enemies who navigated around them, and attain ownership of the monastery.



**TRIUMPHANT PROVINCIAL:** Father Viktor stands on the steps of the completed monastery in Schwarzenfeld.

# God Giveth...

## AND GOD TAKETH AWAY: RISE OF THE THIRD REICH AND WORLD WAR II

By 1937, Father Viktor had spent fifteen years building the German-Austrian Passionist foundation. Over the next five, he'd be forced to watch the Nazis dismantle the entire province.

The first seeds of trouble sprouted in 1933, after the Third Reich entered into negotiations with the Vatican on the governance of Catholic organizations within Germany.

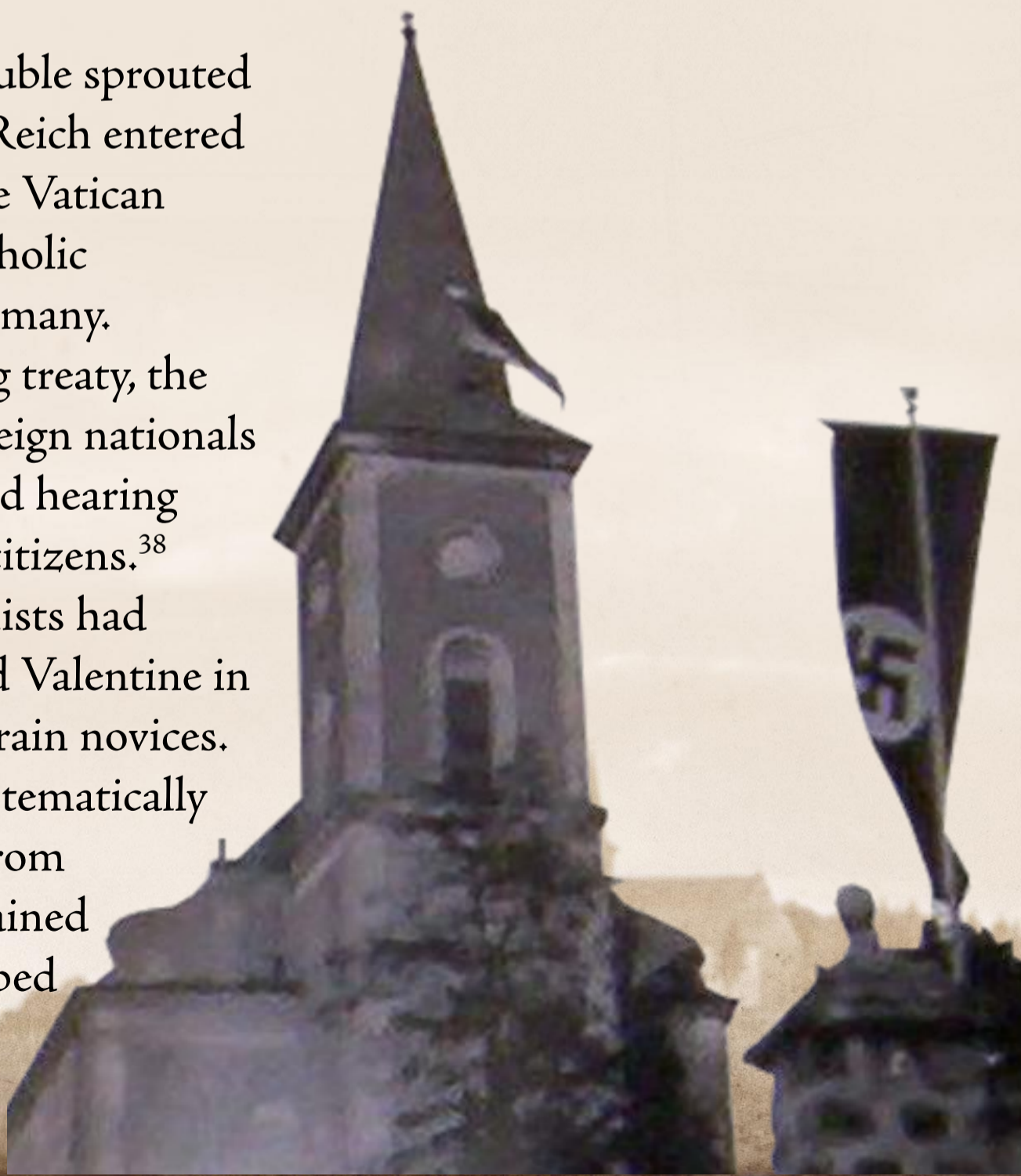
Article 14 of the resulting treaty, the *Concordat*, prohibited foreign nationals from celebrating Mass and hearing confessions for German citizens.<sup>38</sup>

Eleven American Passionists had joined Fathers Viktor and Valentine in Germany, helping them train novices.

Gestapo agents began systematically expelling the foreigners from

Germany, and newly ordained German Passionists stepped

up to succeed them.<sup>39</sup>



In 1938, Fathers Viktor and Valentine discovered a convenient loophole allowing them to circumnavigate the new decrees. In March of that year, Germany annexed Austria (the *Anschluss*), automatically granting all Austrians citizenship in the Third Reich. Both Passionists had lived at Maria Schutz long enough to satisfy Austria's residency requirement, thus qualifying them as citizens of an expanded Germany. The next time authorities scrutinized Father

Viktor's papers, they found to their dismay that he was now "German-American." He could legally claim citizenship in the Third Reich.<sup>40</sup>

The next setback hit the besieged province in 1937, when Nazi authorities closed the preparatory school in Munich and confiscated the Schloss Gatterburg.<sup>41</sup> Young monastic hopefuls were sent back home, leaving only the older novices, priests, and brothers in Maria Schutz, Austria, and the Miesbergkloster in Schwarzenfeld.

**CONFISCATED MONASTERIES: The Miesbergkloster in Schwarzenfeld (left) and the Schloss Gatterburg in Munich (below). Only Maria Schutz remained in Passionist possession during the war years.**





**PRIESTS TURNED SOLDIERS:** Father Viktor (far left) and Father Paul Böhminghaus (far right) pose for a picture with two German Passionists on furlough.

## World War II Begins

War broke out on September 1, 1939, and all German men of fighting age received army-call up notices.<sup>42</sup> A German Passionist community forty-one members strong dropped to thirteen overnight. Father Viktor maintained correspondences with each of his “spiritual sons,” insisting that they send letters weekly to provide a sign of life. They wrote him from the front lines, all addressing their letters to *Lieber Papa*, “Dear Dad.”<sup>43</sup> When parishioners stumbled into the

Miesbergkirche and sank into a pew, praying fervently for sons fighting on the front lines, or grieving for ones who had fallen in combat, Father Viktor could empathize. In his own way, he bore that same cross.

The most devastating blows occurred in 1941. On February 28, Father Valentine — Father Viktor’s co-founder and friend through trial and tribulation — died (possibly of cancer). The full burden of the broken province now settled squarely upon Father Viktor’s shoulders, but he barely



“[The goodwill between the Passionists and the people of Schwarzenfeld] has continued even in the dark days after the Miesberg monastery had been taken from us, and it was dangerous to assist us. In spite of it all, they said: ‘As long as we have something to eat, you won’t starve.’”

— *Chronicle of the Passionist German Foundation*<sup>44</sup>

**PEACEFUL PROTEST:** After the Nazis confiscate the Miesberg monastery, Father Viktor and fellow Passionist Father Paul Böhminghaus take up residence in the church sacristy.

had time to grieve before the next setback struck. The local branch of the National Socialist People’s Welfare Organization (NSV) needed a building to house children evacuated from cities threatened by air raids. They had chosen the Miesbergkloster in Schwarzenfeld to serve as the boarding house.<sup>45</sup>

On April 16, Nazi officials hammered upon the door of the monastery, ordering Father Viktor and his brethren to pack their belongings and leave within one hour. The Passionists had no choice but to comply. If they defied the order to abandon the monastery, they risked arrest.<sup>46</sup>

## Peaceful Protest

During his youth, Father Viktor had learned how to process hardship. Sorrow was the cornerstone of his faith. Moreover, he had been born with a obstinacy that ran deep through the Koch family line. The Nazis had ordered him to abandon the monastery, but they had said nothing about the Miesbergkirche. Instead of conceding defeat and returning home, Father Viktor stayed in Schwarzenfeld, defiantly taking up residence in a dilapidated flower sacristy in the church.<sup>47</sup> Elderly priests and brothers returned to Maria Schutz, the only monastery remaining in Passionist possession. Awed by Father Viktor's tenacity, Austrian Passionist Father Paul Böhminghaus, C.P. refurbished the flower sacristy and stayed with him.

## The Schwarzenfelders Choose Sides

After the eviction, the Schwarzenfelders proved where their loyalties lay, and it wasn't with the Reich. Aware that Fathers Viktor and Paul lacked access

to a kitchen, Frau Paula Dirrigl volunteered to cook for them every other day. She packed meals into a basket, which her maid, Fräulein Anna Thanner, concealed under a shawl and delivered to the sacristy. On alternating days, nuns from a local convent performed the cooking.<sup>48</sup> The priests had access to nothing more than a public toilet on church grounds, so the Gindele family invited them to their house to take baths.<sup>49</sup>

As witnesses to this protest, the Schwarzenfelders were learning a valuable lesson. They were products of a culture that accepted subservience to authority as a way of life. Father Viktor, on the other hand, had been born and raised on American liberty and the right of the individual to protest an injustice — even one inflicted by the State. They knew that outright rebellion resulted in arrest.<sup>50</sup>

However, for the first time, the people of this staunchly Catholic town saw a middle ground between unquestioning compliance and vigorous resistance: they could find ways to morally resist the Third Reich on their own terms.



+ PASSIONISTENKLOSTER SCHWARZENFELD, OBERPFALZ

17.IX. 1942.

Mein lieber Leonhard !

Deinen Brief vom 12 August habe ich erhalten und kannst dir denken daß ich froh war wieder etwas von dir zu hören. Hoffentlich wird du jetzt aber auch öfters schreiben wie meine andere geistlichen Söhne, mit denen ich einen regulären Verkehr habe. Alle schauen zu mir als

wenigsten  
meinst in  
erkündigt  
warst habe  
und habe a  
erhalten,  
Adresse ge  
Um etwas w  
das musst  
wohl ich b  
aber um di  
kanonische  
die Gelüb  
der Ordens  
der Obern,  
auch beson  
Ordensman  
z.B. gewes  
Regensburg



Geboren am 7. Oktober 1919  
Eingekleidet 29. September 1936  
Profesß 30. September 1937

Das Leiden Jesu Christi sei stets in unse-  
rem Herzen! (Hl. Paul vom Kreuz)

GEDENKET IM GEBETE  
an den



Theologen

Confr. Leonhard Wölfl C. P.

Passionist

Zugführer und Feldwebel

welcher am 4. Oktober 1942  
im Osten im 23. Lebensjahr  
für Gott u. Vaterland gefallen ist.

R. I. P.

Mein Jesus Barmherzigkeit!  
Süßes Herz Jesu, sei meine Liebe!  
Süßes Herz Mariä, sei meine  
Rettung!

Vater unser!

Ave Maria!

Buchdruckerei H. Leingärtner, Nabburg

SPLIT BETWEEN WORLDS: Father Viktor prayed for Allied victory while feeling the grief of the enemy. He wrote the letter above to a Passionist student, Confrator Leonhard Wölfl, C.P. "My dear Leonhard! I received your letter from August 12, and you can imagine that I was glad to hear something from you again. Hopefully you will write repeatedly like my other religious sons, with whom I have a regular communication. All look to me as their dad, and on average, they write once a month..."<sup>51</sup> His response was a death card, delivered just days later. Given the tenor of this letter, the loss was deeply felt.

PICTURED BELOW: Herr Norbert Gindele, owner of the Gindele bakery. Once the war ended, he became one of Schwarzenfeld's most beloved mayors.

# *The War Years*

## FATHER VIKTOR'S FLOCK

### **An Unusual Town Milieu**

At this point, it is useful to consider the confluence of events in Schwarzenfeld and reflect upon the broader historiography of the Third Reich. Extraordinary circumstances permitted Father Viktor to remain on German soil. Schwarzenfeld is likely the only German town where the population sought moral and spiritual guidance from an American. Moreover, the Passionists were all but driven from Germany. When Fathers Viktor and Paul began preaching at the Miesbergkirche, Schwarzenfeld also became the only German town whose residents were regularly exhorted to “see Christ in all who suffer.”



A discharged soldier who had served the Reich in Poland and France, Norbert loathed the war effort so much that he spoke against it — in public — with little self-restraint. “Tell him not to speak any more,” friends pleaded with his wife Maria, “He is putting himself in danger.”

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Father Viktor saturated the town culture with Passionist doctrine. No records were made of his sermons, yet parishioners from the era still remember the conviction that flowed in his accented voice. They described him as being “full of his mission.”<sup>51</sup>

Additional evidence lies in the *poesiealbums* of parishioners who knew him personally. A *poesiealbum* is a scrapbook in which German children collect poems, pictures, adages — any nugget of life that they wish to carry with them until they are old and gray.<sup>52</sup> Aside from the owner, only cherished friends are permitted to write in them. The albums of Schwarzenfeld’s elderly Catholics contain Bible



**PAULA AND MICHAEL DIRRIGL.** When Fathers Viktor and Paul were evicted, Paula Dirrigl voluntarily cooked meals for them every other day. Anna Thanner, her maid, delivered them to the church.

Quellen der reinen Liebe  
& Freude gibt es nicht, gewiss,  
ein reines Gewissen und  
eine feurige Liebe zu Gott.  
Wer diese zwei Quellen  
in sich nicht findet,  
desen Freuden bricht  
mehr da und ab, als der  
Schnee vor der Sonne.

Schwanzenfeld, 28. Feb. 1915

P. Viktor O.P.

Das Leiden unseres Herrn Jesus  
Christi sei stets in unserem Herzen  
O.



**POESIEALBUM OF LIEBHARDA GINDELE.** At the end, Father Viktor writes the Passionist credo: May the sufferings of Jesus Christ remain ever in our hearts!

verses in Father Viktor's bold, wiry handwriting, followed by the motto of the Passionists in German: *Das Leiden Jesu Christi sei stets in unserem Herzen!* (May the sufferings of Jesus Christ remain ever in our hearts!)<sup>53</sup>

## Norbert and Maria Gindele

Father Viktor's influence is evident in members of the staunchly Catholic Gindele family. Norbert Gindele, father of the family, operated one of the town's four bakeries before and during the war

years.<sup>54</sup> A discharged soldier who had served the Reich in Poland and France, Norbert loathed the war effort so much that he spoke against it — in public — with little self-restraint. "Tell him not to speak any more," friends pleaded with his wife Maria, "He is putting himself in danger."<sup>55</sup> He frequently teetered on the brink of arrest, but authorities depended upon him to provide bread, a critical staple in the German diet. They intimidated him with interrogations, then grudgingly released him a few hours later.

Norbert and Maria were acutely aware of the disparagement of foreign laborers in Germany. Like many towns in the Third Reich, Schwarzenfeld had suffered a manpower shortage due to army call-up notices. The Party solved this problem by delivering POWs — Frenchmen, Poles, and eventually Russians — to replace German men fighting on the front.<sup>56</sup> In Schwarzenfeld, a large percentage of these laborers performed grueling work necessary to run the Buchtalwerk A.G., a ceramics factory incorporated into the expansive Hermann Göring Works.<sup>57</sup> Strenuous labor caused them to go through their rations quickly, and when they exhausted them completely, the laborers took their empty ration books to the Gindele bakery.

German law obligated Maria Gindele to turn them away until Monday, when they received new rations for the week. Instead, she tucked empty cards into her lap, pretending to cut stamps, and doled out bread for free. As a result, foreign laborers heavily patronized the Gindele bakery.<sup>58</sup>

This simple act of compassion is infused with significance. Each ration book specified *down to the gram* how much bread a customer could purchase in a given week. The Reich Office of Nutrition required each bakery to collect customer stamps and record how much bread was sold. The Nutrition Office then tallied stamps, assessed the bakery's needs, and authorized the baker to obtain supplies needed to support his business — again specified down to the gram.<sup>59</sup>

Minimally, a discrepancy between supply and demand should have prompted an audit. If Nazi authorities had found that bread was being freely distributed to Slavic laborers, the consequences would have been disastrous. Norbert Gindele relied upon a miller to fictionalize the amount of wheat he ground for the bakery, and thus they evaded detection.<sup>60</sup> This implies that the Gindeles — and their conspirators — recognized the suffering of the men in their midst, and felt a moral obligation to respond, regardless of the danger.

In July 1944, one of the Passionist novices impressed into the German army wrote Fathers Viktor and Paul about Marian apparitions appearing in the town of Bergamo, Italy. The Blessed Virgin predicted that a miracle would occur on July 13, one that would “bring joy to the world.” Father Paul Böhminghaus read the letter aloud at the pulpit during Sunday Mass, prompting both awe and elation from parishioners. Schwarzenfeld’s Catholics speculated about the purported miracle: they interpreted it as a sign that Hitler would be assassinated.

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## The “Mother’s Revolt” and Letter Incident

Two other incidents hint that Schwarzenfeld had an unusual milieu. In the summer of 1941, Nazi authorities removed crosses from classrooms throughout Germany. When students returned in the fall, they discovered that Hitler’s portrait had replaced the crucifixes.<sup>61</sup> The realization incited an unprecedented wave of protests and demonstrations throughout Bavaria — mostly by women, and especially mothers. For this reason, the event became known as the “Mother’s Revolt.”

Schwarzenfeld’s reaction is telling: the townspeople circulated a petition to have the crosses reinstated.<sup>62</sup> This method of dissent was not unknown to the Germans, though they used it infrequently, for the prospect of handing a list of names to Nazi authorities endangered all who signed the document.<sup>63</sup> Father Viktor, on the other hand, would have considered this a common form of peaceful protest. It is likely that the idea originated from him, perhaps through an innocent suggestion.



**LEARNING THE NARRATIVE: Miesbergkirche parishioners discuss memories of Father Viktor with the author during her visit to Schwarzenfeld in 2005.**

On another occasion in July 1944, one of the Passionists impressed into the German army wrote Fathers Viktor and Paul about Marian apparitions appearing in the town of Bergamo, Italy. The Blessed Virgin predicted that a miracle would occur on July 13, one that would “bring joy to the world.”<sup>64</sup> Father Paul Böhminghaus read the letter at the pulpit during Sunday Mass, prompting both awe and elation from parishioners. Speculation ran rampant. The town’s Catholics interpreted it as a sign that Hitler would be assassinated.

The rumor snared Gestapo attention. Identifying Father Paul as the instigator of the rumor, the secret police paraded him down Schwarzenfeld’s main street and imprisoned him for six months.<sup>65</sup> To Father Viktor’s relief, the Nazis released him in January 1945.

As Allied forces descended upon Germany’s borders, the Passionists prayed for peace and an end to war, but their most arduous trial still lay ahead. The priests and their flock were about to face the result of Nazi hatred, and the fate of Schwarzenfeld would rest with Father Viktor Koch.

# *The Atrocity*

## SCHWARZENFELD AND THE FLOSSENBÜRG DEATH MARCH<sup>66</sup>



SCHWARZENFELD TRAIN STATION. Photo by Dr. Christopher Mauriello

By April 1945, General Patton's Third Army had crossed the Siegfried Line and begun its advance into Germany. SS guards operating concentration camps perceived that the invasion marked the beginning of the end for the

Third Reich. Fearing that the Allies would liberate the Jews in their captivity, the SS herded them into trains or forced them to march on foot, driving them toward camps far from the rapidly advancing front.

Flossenbürg, a labor camp fifty miles north of Schwarzenfeld, spawned a number of death marches throughout Bavaria. One train carrying approximately 14,000 Jews departed from the camp on April 15, 1945, and headed south for the death camp at Dachau.<sup>67</sup> The convoy found itself targeted by American low-flying planes that were monitoring the area. Pilots had been instructed to fire upon all

trains crossing German territory, assuming that they carried troops and supplies to the enemy front.<sup>68</sup>

## The Train Station Attack and Flossenbürg Death March

The most devastating attack occurred on April 19, just hours after the train pulled into Schwarzenfeld's railway station.<sup>69</sup> The SS opened the boxcar doors,

**THE SITE OF HORRORS:** Schwarzenfeld's train station (left) and a feed warehouse (below). The train from Flossenbürg arrived late on the night of April 18, before the station opened, and it limped into the train yard early on April 19. Only hours later, the train was attacked by American low-fliers. In the shadow of these two buildings, SS guards executed Jews too injured to walk.





**SURVIVORS.** These three Jews evaded SS guards during the Flossenburg Death March by hiding in a barn in Schwarzenfeld. They emerged from hiding only after American forces arrived in town on April 22, 1945.

letting Jews evacuate the doomed train, and at last the pilots realized the true nature of the transport. They refocused their fire upon the locomotive and destroyed the engine, preventing SS guards from taking prisoners any farther by railway.<sup>70</sup>

Despite the setback, the SS remained determined to prevent captives from falling into Allied hands. They executed prisoners too injured to walk and then marched the rest on foot through Schwarzenfeld.

From all accounts, Frs. Viktor and Paul had been up in the Miesbergkirche, far from the sights and events transpiring in town. Their parishioners, on the other hand, were keenly aware. Schwarzenfeld's Catholics peered out doors and windows and saw emaciated prisoners marching by, drawing bony fingers to their lips in a silent plea for food and water. After absorbing years of Passionist teaching, parishioners needed no prompting to see Christ in those tormented faces. One courageous

“They were starving, begging us for food by pointing to their mouths. In the Gindele bakery, we were working as quickly as possible, cutting slices of bread for them. I dashed out the door, carrying a basket of bread and some water ... I was shouting to the guards, ‘Don’t you see that these people are starving? Let them go!’”

— *Frau Barbara Friese, eyewitness and resident of Schwarzenfeld*

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woman named Frau Barbara Friese worked as a maid for the Gindeles. She confronted the guards:

“They were starving, begging us for food by pointing to their mouths. In the Gindele bakery, we were working as quickly as possible, cutting slices of bread for them. I dashed out the door, carrying a basket of bread and some water ... I was shouting to the guards, ‘Don’t you see that these people are starving? Let them go!’ The guards were very angry, but finally I convinced them and it

was possible to give the prisoners something.”

While Frau Friese proceeded to distribute bread, another stunning episode was occurring just down the road. Realizing that no guards stood in sight, a prisoner broke from the march and fled to the *Gasthof Bauer*, Schwarzenfeld’s guest house and brewery. According to eyewitness Herta Arata, the Jew’s presence wrenched a crowded barroom to silence. Herr Georg Bauer, the guest house owner, shoved back

## *About Flossenbürg and the Death March*

Flossenbürg was the third largest concentration camp in Germany. It consisted of a main camp in Floß, Germany, and over 100 subcamps. Between 1938 and 1945, more than 100,000 inmates from all over Europe were held prisoner. Nearly 30,000 died there.<sup>71</sup> Among them was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran theologian who vocally opposed Adolf Hitler's genocidal persecution of the Jews, and allegedly associated with the July 20th plot to assassinate him.<sup>72</sup>

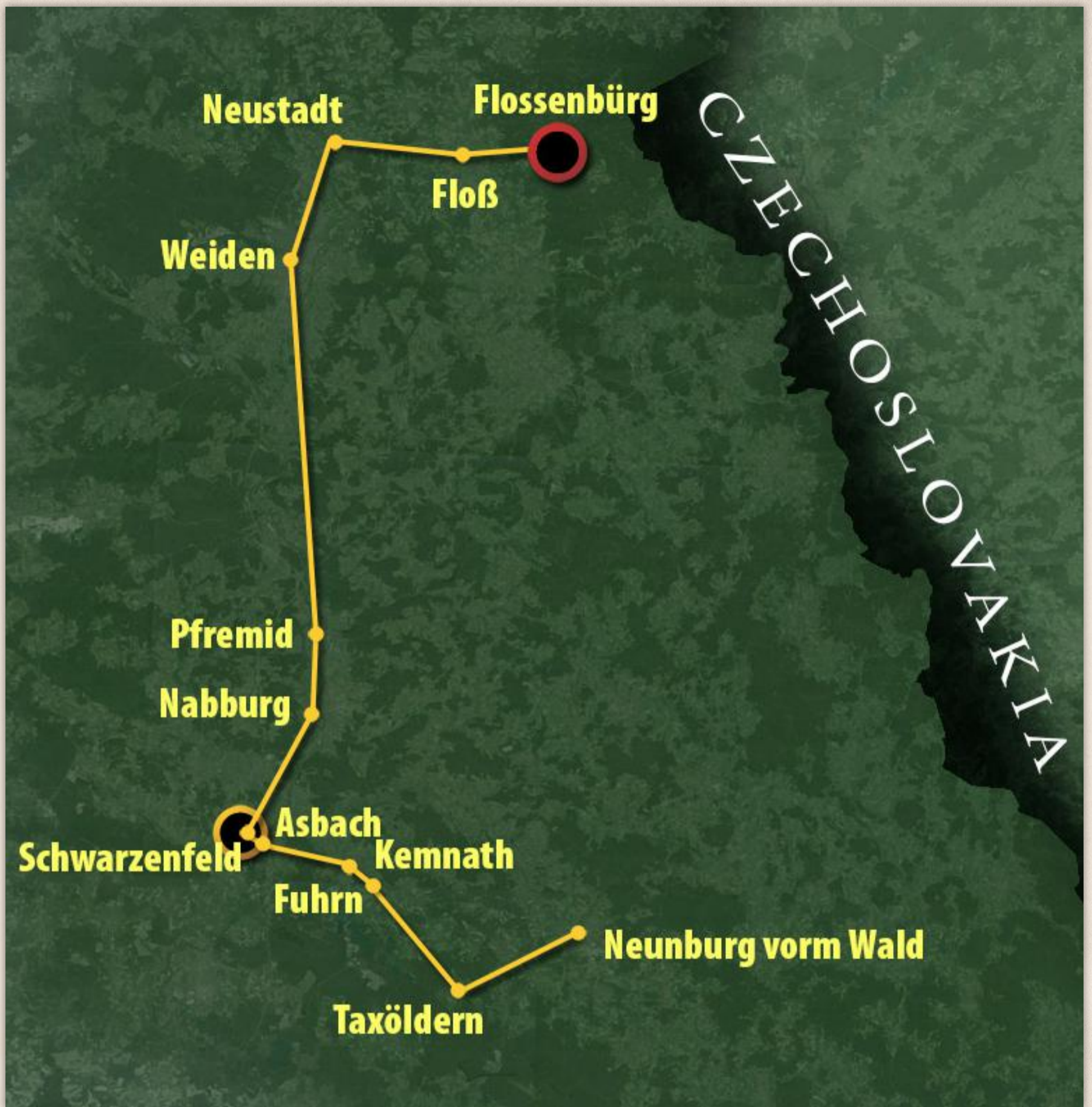
As elements of the Third Army closed in on the main camp in April 1945, SS guards evacuated over 16,000 Jews to prevent their liberation, and subjected them to death marches under the harshest conditions. During the march, over 7,000 inmates had been shot, or had collapsed and died from exhaustion.

a wall of gawking onlookers and guided him to a table, where a waiter rushed over with a soup bowl. Herta's mother Rosa was inspired. Emboldened by the atmosphere of sorrow and concern for the prisoner, the German woman put an arm around him in motherly fashion and encouraged him to eat slower.<sup>73</sup>

The spontaneity of these reactions further demonstrates the strong moral influences at work in Schwarzenfeld.

The Flossenbürg Death March left the town's Nazi administration

with a grim dilemma: the remnants of a massacre lay scattered throughout the train station yard, and U.S. forces would arrive within days. The mayor and his subordinates feared that if the Americans discovered 140 dead Jewish prisoners lying at the station, they would retaliate against the town, or investigate its leaders for suspected war crimes. Their solution opened the darkest chapter of Schwarzenfeld's history and the events that would establish Fr. Viktor as a hero in the eyes of its population.<sup>74</sup>



**FLOSSENBÜRG DEATH MARCH PATH.** Some convoys of prisoners left the Flossenbürg by train, and others left on foot. As a result, the Flossenburg Death March has many paths. The path that is relevant to Schwarzenfeld's story is highlighted above in gold. The train departed from Flossenbürg, and sustained its first attack by American low-fliers outside the city of Floß. The second attack occurred on route between Weiden and Pfreimid. The third and most violent occurred in the train station of Schwarzenfeld. From there, the prisoners were driven on foot to the town of Neunburg vorm Wald, where elements of the U.S. Third Army liberated the survivors. *Special thanks to Dr. Christopher Mauriello of Salem State University for his assistance on this research.*

# A Town in Crisis

## THE AMERICAN ARRIVAL AND 48-HOUR ULTIMATUM



**CARRYING THE DEAD.** Men of Schwarzenfeld hoist a coffin upon a litter and carry it to the cemetery for the funeral ceremony.

By Sunday, April 22, 1945, Schwarzenfeld was embroiled in bedlam. The locals had witnessed a death march passing through town. Panic-stricken German refugees surged from the east, fleeing Russian forces only forty miles away. Another battered crowd of civilians staggered

up from the south, where the neighboring city of Schwandorf had been carpet-bombed by the RAF just days before.<sup>75</sup> To make matters worse, a Hungarian SS crew arrived with orders to destroy a bridge over the nearby Naab River, frustrating the American advance into Germany. While

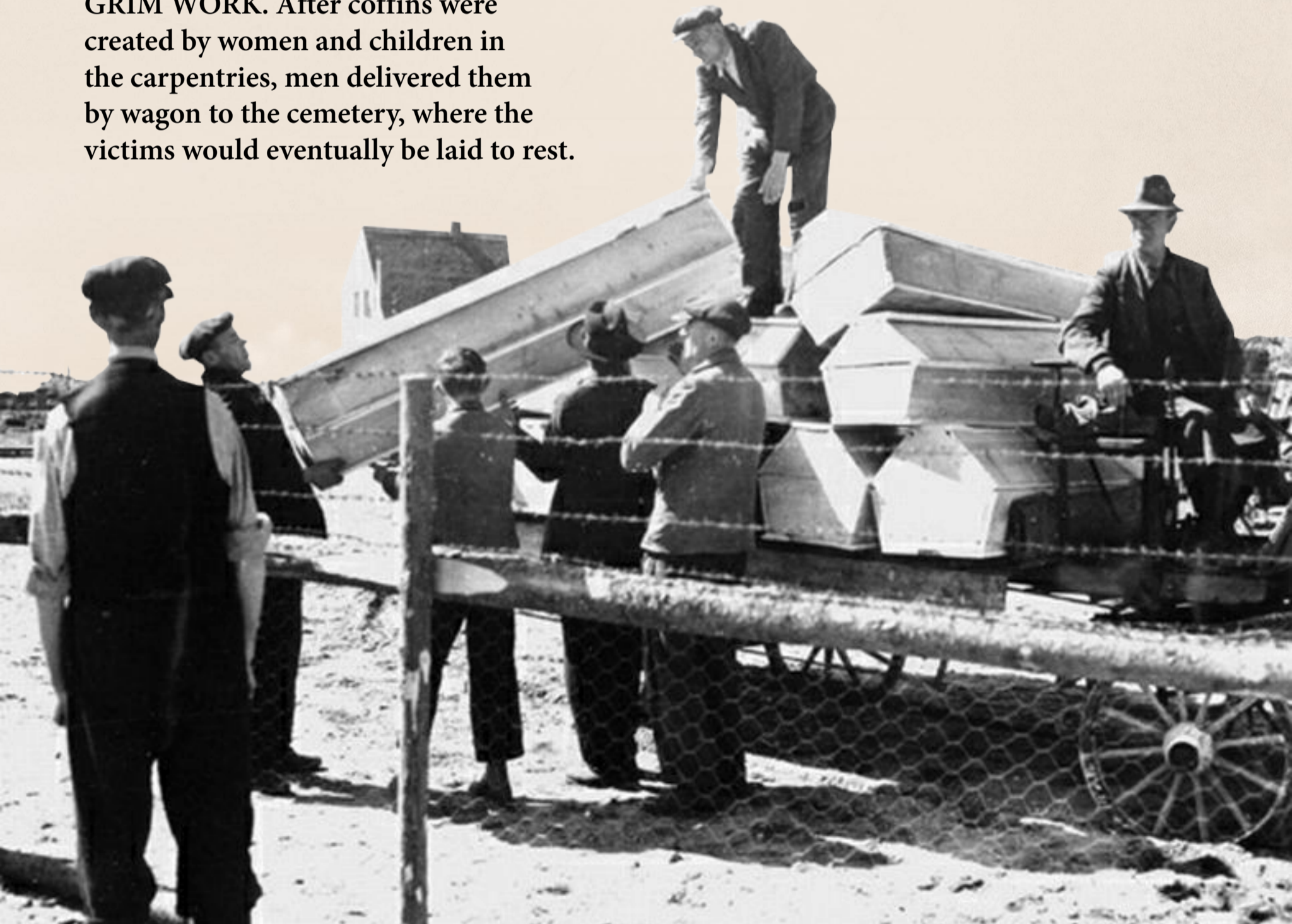
Father Viktor celebrated a First Communion Mass less than a mile away, the SS were unpacking crates of dynamite and wiring up bridge piers.<sup>76</sup> Only the grit of real life yields moments this surreal.

God's grace shone on Schwarzenfeld that evening. A storm gusted in. When the Hungarian SS caught sight of American tanks at 6:00 PM, they groped for matches and found them thoroughly soaked by rain.<sup>77</sup> Father Viktor emerged from the

Miesbergkirche, met his American countrymen, spoke English — to their great surprise — and arranged Schwarzenfeld's peaceful surrender to military forces.

At this point, Father Viktor still seemed oblivious to the death march. He and Father Paul had been entrenched in the Miesbergkirche, and parishioners had not taken the time to inform them of events. This is attributable to the panic percolating through town, and the prospect of an

**GRIM WORK.** After coffins were created by women and children in the carpentries, men delivered them by wagon to the cemetery, where the victims would eventually be laid to rest.



“We were terrified, working a whole day and night, and despite the long hours we spent hammering the caskets together, we knew that we would never be able to finish in time. I kept looking at the old carpenter who ran the shop and thinking, ‘He will die.’

“American soldiers burst through the door. We shrank away, crying, crying .... Then, like an angel, Father Viktor appeared in the doorway and physically pushed the soldiers back... He told us, ‘We have another day to complete this task. It’s all right. We have another day ....’”

— *Frau Zita Mueller, Schwarzenfeld Resident*

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imminent American invasion. Father Viktor reported “smoking a fine cigar” with the Americans on the evening of April 22, 1945, further indicating a lack of tension between himself and his countrymen.<sup>78</sup>

### **First Omen of Trouble**

On April 23, when he was summoned to Schwarzenfeld’s town hall by the Americans. The liberating units had departed and an infantry unit arrived to enforce marshal law.<sup>79</sup> Upon entering the town, American scouts stumbled

upon a ghastly find: 140 corpses lay rotting in Schwarzenfeld’s town dump, their bodies dusted with lime. Farmers used the mineral to reduce soil acidity and encourage crop growth. It also had additional properties that the Nazis found useful — it masked odors and inhibited bacterial growth.<sup>80</sup>

Outraged by the discovery, the commander of the American troop issued a devastating ultimatum: the Schwarzenfelders had to disinter the 140 bodies, wash them, clothe them in donated clothing, construct coffins for



EYEWITNESS TO HISTORY. Zita Mueller (left) sits with her husband Karlhans (right).

all corpses, dig a grave trench in the town cemetery, and hold a Christian funeral — all in 24 hours. If they failed to complete the task in that time, the male population would be executed.<sup>81</sup>

### **Coordinating the Effort**

The significance of sowing Passionist teaching in Germany likely dawned upon Father Viktor at that moment. He alone could see the disparity between American perceptions of Germans and the unlikely realities that he'd cultivated in Schwarzenfeld.

Half of his male parishioners were driven at gunpoint to the mass grave and ordered to disinter bodies; the other half rushed to the town cemetery, where they began the task of digging a trench broad enough to bury 140 coffins. The task of constructing caskets fell to Schwarzenfeld's women and children, none of whom had touched a hammer or saw in their lives. Wartime supply shortages further hampered the effort: the nails customarily used for carpentry work were in short supply, and children scampered



**THE FUNERAL CEREMONY.** Dean Josef Spangler delivers the funeral homily. Father Viktor is visible on the far right, translating his words into English for American troops.

to barns around town, collecting spent horseshoe nails.<sup>82</sup>

Father Viktor hastened from site to site, coordinating the effort.<sup>83</sup> Keenly aware that the Schwarzenfelders were failing to fulfill the ultimatum's conditions, he confronted the commander and pleaded on their behalf.

## **Psychological Impact of the Ultimatum**

Frau Zita Mueller, a resident of Schwarzenfeld, had constructed coffins in one of the town's three carpentries. Her recollections

convey the emotional magnitude of unfolding events:

“My mother, aunts, and sister were constructing caskets in the carpentry shop. We were terrified, working a whole day and night, and despite the long hours we spent hammering the caskets together, we knew that we would never be able to finish in time. I kept looking at the old carpenter who ran the shop and thinking, ‘He will die.’

“The next morning, American soldiers burst through the door. We shrank away, crying, crying ....



**THE FUNERAL.** After fulfilling the conditions of the ultimatum, Schwarzenfeld's citizens attend the funeral ceremony. Zita Mueller is the girl wearing a plaid skirt in the front row.

Then, like an angel, Father Viktor appeared in the doorway and pushed the soldiers back. He spoke stern words to them, then he spoke to us, calming us down. He told us, 'We have another day to complete this task. It is all right. We have another day ....'"<sup>84</sup>

On the morning of April 25th, 1945, Schwarzenfeld's five hundred men, women and children assembled in a grim human wall around 140 hastily constructed caskets, their heads bowed in prayer. Three Polish Jews had escaped the Flossenbürg Death

March by hiding in barns in Schwarzenfeld. They attended the funeral service and said *Kaddish* for the dead.<sup>85</sup> Father Viktor translated services in English for American soldiers witnessing the event. Despite catastrophes threatening to impede progress — a shortage of nails, a work force of women and children who had never performed carpentry work, and a widespread electrical power outage, to name a few — he successfully coordinated the effort that saved Schwarzenfeld.

# WORKING IN THE *Framework*



**THE HONOR CEREMONY.** Mayor Norbert Gindele (dark suit, second from the left) stands aside as Austrian Passionist priest Father Paul Böhminghaus (standing in the monastery doorway) delivers a speech. Father Viktor is visible on the far right.

In 1947, two years after Father Viktor defended Schwarzenfeld from U.S. forces, newly elected mayor Norbert Gindele signed documents that declared the American Passionist an *Ehrenbürger* — an honorary citizen of the town.<sup>86</sup> This prestigious distinction is common in Germany, recognizing people who have performed

outstanding services to the community, but it is extraordinary for a foreigner to receive this recognition. Father Viktor accepted the honor humbly, telling onlookers assembled at the Miesbergkloster: “Whether [I am an] honor citizen or not, I am and will remain always ready to help within the Framework God set for me.”<sup>87</sup>

In 1947, two years after Father Viktor defended Schwarzenfeld from American forces, newly elected mayor Norbert Gindele signed documents that declared the American Passionist an *Ehrenbürger* — an honorary citizen of the town. Father Viktor accepted the honor humbly, telling onlookers assembled at the Miesbergkloster: “Whether [I am an] honor citizen or not, I am and will remain always ready to help within the Framework that God has set for me.”

**A SPEECH TO REMEMBER.** Father Viktor offers a few words as mayor Norbert Gindele officially proclaims him as an honorary citizen of Schwarzenfeld.



In the eyes of the townspeople, the venerable old Passionist deserved the honor for more reasons than one. After preventing American forces from inflicting reprisals upon the town, he helped the townspeople cope with the trauma they had endured during the 48-hour incident.<sup>88</sup> He became an intermediary between the Germans and Americans, often pleading for the release of German soldiers held in Allied POW camps (particularly if the prisoners and their families were known to be conscientious people who had rejected National Socialism).<sup>89</sup> In addition, he arranged the delivery of CARE packages to Schwarzenfeld. During a visit to the United States in 1947, he ran donation drives, imploring American Catholics to donate money and goods to the indigent citizens of war-torn Germany.<sup>90</sup>

## Typhoid Outbreak and the St. Nikolaus Apothecary

Among Father Viktor's many efforts to affect a rebirth in the recovering town, his role in

establishing Schwarzenfeld's St. Nikolaus Apothecary proved especially critical. Frau Rita Wittleben, daughter of pharmacy founder Herr Emil Weiß, explains:

"At this time [June 1945] in a small village three kilometers away [named Grafenricht] occurred several cases of typhoid fever on a farm. The farmers had two concentration camp prisoners hidden on their farm. These

MIRACULOUS RESCUE:  
The St. Nikolaus  
Apotheke, 1945.





**VIKTOR-KOCH-STRASSE.** The street bearing Father Viktor's name is a major thoroughfare in Schwarzenfeld. The town Rathaus (town hall) is found on this street.

prisoners were able to escape from a prisoner transport during the bombing of the Schwarzenfeld train station, and hide on the mentioned farm. Unfortunately the prisoners were infected with typhoid fever, and they infected the farmers too.

“Father Viktor was impatient, because the pharmacy was operational, but without authorization, was not allowed to open. The danger of an epidemic loomed ... Father Viktor took

action and drove at once to Berlin, where a friend or acquaintance was High Commissioner. Father Viktor turned to him and described the precarious situation, that the population of Schwarzenfeld needed a pharmacy urgently to distribute the necessary medicine and prevent an imminent epidemic. The military government reacted promptly, and on December 6, 1945, we received temporary permission to open the pharmacy.”<sup>91</sup>

“Father Viktor did not think in terms of friend or enemy. ... For him it was people who mattered, and their salvation, which for him originates in the cross of Christ. He had come to implant this cross, and in doing so, had become a messenger of peace.”

— *Father Gregor Lenzen, C.P.*

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Schwarzenfeld’s veneration of Father Viktor didn’t end with honorary citizenship. When the town opened a new street that would serve as its main thoroughfare, officials named it *Viktor-Koch-Strasse*, in his memory. On April 22, 2005, devoted parishioners affixed a plaque upon the facade of the Miesbergkirche, honoring his intervention on Schwarzenfeld’s behalf. Every ten years, the town’s citizens organize exhibitions and seminars to remember the cataclysmic events that occurred at the end of World War II, and the actions that made the American Passionist so revered in their eyes.

Despite time’s passage, Father Viktor’s story continues to inspire successive generations of Germans, Americans, and Passionists.

“Father Viktor did not think in terms of friend or enemy,” explains Father Gregor Lenzen, C.P., one of his successors as Provincial. “As a German-American, and as a member of an international religious community, in which all treat each other as brothers, he was not marked by feelings of nationalism. For him it was people who mattered, and their salvation, which for him originates in the cross of Christ. He had come to implant this cross, and in doing so, had become a messenger of peace.”<sup>92</sup>

## *Father Viktor and Family Influence*

Father Viktor had a profound impact on his American family. His oldest sister Anna raised thirteen children with her husband John Bauer. Six children followed their uncle's example and pursued religious vocations.<sup>93</sup> Among them was Father Basil Bauer, C.P., who worked in West Hunan, China, for 28 years until the Communist regime expelled him in 1952.<sup>94</sup>

In addition, two cousins followed him into the Passionist Order — Father Benedict Huck, C.P., and Father Roland Flaherty, C.P.<sup>95</sup> Shortly after his ordination on April 28, 1947, Father Flaherty and four other American Passionists joined Father Viktor in Germany to help rebuild the shattered German-Austrian foundation. Father Flaherty worked in the province for a total of 18 years.



**FATHER VIKTOR'S FAMILY.** From left to right are Monsignor Joseph G. Mehler (his cousin), Fr. Benedict Huck, C.P. (his second cousin), Fr. Victor, C.P., Fr. Basil Bauer, C.P. (his nephew), and Fr. Roland Flaherty, C.P. (his third cousin). All four relatives followed him into the Passionist priesthood.

# Essay Notes

<sup>1</sup> Surviving documentation shows that the spelling of Fr. Viktor's name varies. In the United States he was known as "Fr. Victor." He adopted this version in correspondences with family, the U.S. military, and fellow American Passionists, and it is also the version used in American newspapers. However, German documentation identifies him as "Fr. Viktor," and he invariably uses this spelling when corresponding with German citizens and parishioners. The variance was likely a matter of pragmatism. Being a foreigner in a strange land was a detriment, and using the German spelling among the natives helped ease that difficulty. On the same token, using the Americanized version of his name — especially with Americans after World War II — convinced them that they were dealing with a countryman.

<sup>2</sup> Marriage certificate for Nikolaus Koch and Viktoria Elser, St. Joseph's Church Records (1868).

<sup>3</sup> The assertion that the Kochs helped found St. Rose of Lima is part of the oral tradition passed on through three generations of the Koch family. This has been confirmed by *The History of Mercer County, Pennsylvania, 1888* (Chicago: Brown, Runk & Co), 539-540. St. Rose of Lima was established in 1860, but changed its name to St. Joseph after a new church was constructed in the city of Sharon in 1893.

<sup>4</sup> The location of the house is confirmed by an 1873 map of Hickory Township, appearing at <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~pamerccer/PA/PL/Maps/1873/hickory/hickory-nw.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Viktoria Elser Koch obituary, Sharon Weekly Telegraph, July 29, 1910, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, Father Victor Koch obituary (1955), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Fadius Koch died on October 31, 1880. St. Joseph's Church Records, death record for Fadius Koch (1880).

<sup>8</sup> Nikolaus Koch died on April 7, 1881. St. Joseph's Church Records, death record for Nikolaus Koch (1881).

<sup>9</sup> Anna Barth Koch died on June 14, 1882. The cause of death on her death certificate is illegible, as the ink is worn. St. Joseph's Church Records, death record for Anna Barth Koch (1882).

<sup>10</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, Fr. Victor Koch obituary (1955), 3.

<sup>11</sup> K. O'Malley and C.J. Yuhaus, "Passionists," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume 10, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Detroit: Thomson/Gale 2003), 931-933.

<sup>12</sup> "Passionists," appearing at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passionists>.

<sup>13</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, Fr. Victor Koch obituary (1955), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>15</sup> "Baltimore Pastor Gets Pulpit Here," *The Pittsburg Press* (September 7, 1920), 20.

<sup>16</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, [Mickel/Snyder], *The Chronicle of the German Foundation*, 1. Fr. Lenherd was born July 20, 1868, professed February 3, 1888, and ordained December 17, 1892.

<sup>17</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, Letter of Fr. Viktor to superiors in the St. Paul of the Cross Province Chapter (June 15, 1923), 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> Article 231, which became known as the War Guilt Clause, was the opening article in the reparations section of the Treaty of Versailles. See "Article 231" appearing at: [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Treaty\\_of\\_Versailles/Part\\_VIII#Article\\_231](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Versailles/Part_VIII#Article_231).

<sup>19</sup> "Weimar Republic" appearing at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weimar\\_Republic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weimar_Republic). A note on monetary nomenclature: the German Mark became known as the Papiermark with the outbreak of World War I. The Papiermark was later replaced by the Rentenmark in 1923, and then by the Reichsmark in 1924. Information on the Rentenmark and Papiermark appears respectively at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rentenmark> and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German\\_Papiermark](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Papiermark).

<sup>20</sup> Judith G. Coffin, *Western Civilizations* (New York: W. W. Norton Inc, 2002), 918.

<sup>21</sup> Michael B. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism: Liberalism and the Anti-Catholic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>22</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, [Mickel/Snyder], *The Chronicle of the German Foundation*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Cardinal von Faulhaber was Archbishop of Munich for 35 years, from 1917 until his death in 1952. His profile appears at the Catholic Hierarchy website: <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bvfau.html>. Dr. Michael Buchberger was Vicar General of the Munich and Friesing Archdiocese, and later became the Bishop of Regensburg in 1928. His profile also appears the Catholic Hierarchy website: <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bbuch.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, [Mickel/Snyder], *The Chronicle of the German Foundation*, 3-5.

<sup>25</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, [Mickel/Snyder], *The Chronicle of the German Foundation*, 3-5, and Passionist Historical Archives, Letter of Fr. Stanislaus Grennan to Fr. Procurator Leone (February 17, 1925), 1-2.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, [Mickel/Snyder], *The Chronicle of the German Foundation*, 7. Maria Schutz is the largest site of Marian pilgrimages in Austria. The chapel dates from 1721, and the sanctuary from 1728. For more information, see “Maria Schutz” appearing at [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maria\\_Schutz](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maria_Schutz) and <http://pfarre-semmering.at/>. Friedrich Gustav Cardinal Piffl was archbishop of Vienna for approximately 19 years. His profile appears at the Catholic Hierarchy website: <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bpiffl.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, [Mickel/Snyder], *The Chronicle of the German Foundation*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> 250 Jahre Miesberg in Schwarzenfeld (Landshut, 1973), 71.

<sup>30</sup> The history of Schwarzenfeld appears at the website: <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schwarzenfeld>.

<sup>31</sup> When seeking sites for the third monastery in 1933, Fr. Viktor turned to Dr. Michael Buchberger, now Bishop of Regensburg, for advice. The bishop recommended several sites in his diocese, including Schwarzenfeld and Burglengelfeld. Passionist Historical Archives, [Mickel/Snyder], *The Chronicle of the German Foundation*, 11.

<sup>32</sup> Josef Schießl, “Pater Provinzial Viktor Koch ließ sich nict vom Miesberg in Schwarzenfeld vertreiben,” *Mittelbayerische Zeitung* (April 22-23, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> The date of monetary conversion happened in the period 1933-1934. In January 1933, Fr. Viktor would have received 4.2 Marks for every \$1 USD; in January 1934, he would have received 2.61 Marks for \$1 USD. See R.L. Bidwell, *Currency Conversion Tables: A Hundred Years of Change* (London: Rex Collings, 1970), 22-24.

<sup>34</sup> Ian Kershaw, *The “Hitler Myth”: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 48-49, 61-62.

<sup>35</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, Letter of Fr. Christopher Berlo, Battle Creek, Michigan (April 15, 1948), 2.

<sup>36</sup> 250 Jahre Miesberg in Schwarzenfeld, op. cit., 71.

<sup>37</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, [Mickel/Snyder], *The Chronicle of the German Foundation*, 12.

<sup>38</sup> *Persecution of the Catholic Church in the Third Reich: Facts and Documents Translated From the German* (Fort Collins: Roger A. McCaffrey Publishing, 2007), Appendix I, 518.

<sup>39</sup> *Passioni Domini Devoti*, op. cit., 116.

<sup>40</sup> The Burgermeister of Schwarzenfeld confirmed Fr. Viktor Koch’s German citizenship in an April 9, 1941 memo. SPR, memo from office of the Burgermeister of Schwarzenfeld (April 9, 1941).

<sup>41</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, Letter of Fr. Victor Koch to [Fr. Bonaventure Oberst], SS. Giovanni e Paolo, Rome (September 26, 1946), 1.

<sup>42</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, [Mickel/Snyder], *The Chronicle of the German Foundation*, 15.

<sup>43</sup> German Passionist Foundation Archives, Letter of Fr. Viktor Koch to Confrator Leonhard Wölfl, C.P, Schwarzenfeld, Germany (September 17, 1942).

<sup>44</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, [Mickel/Snyder], *The Chronicle of the German Foundation*, 12.

<sup>45</sup> From April 1941 to October 1943, the *Miesbergkloster* was occupied by the *Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt* (National Socialist People's Welfare Organization), which received the support of the *Gauleiter* (German state governor) of the *Bayerische Ostmark*. From 1943 until the end of the war, the monastery became the home of the *Institute für kontinentaleuropäische Forschung* (Continental European Research Institute). The institute was directed by Russian physicist Dr. Alexander Nikuradse and within the cloister's confines, he and his team experimented with "wonder weapon" technologies they hoped would turn the war in Germany's favor. Passionist Historical Archives, Letter of Fr. Victor Koch to [Fr. Bonaventure Oberst], SS. Giovanni e Paolo, Rome (September 26, 1946), 2; *Passioni Domini Devoti*, op. cit., 121-124.

<sup>46</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, [Mickel/Snyder], *The Chronicle of the German Foundation*, 17.

<sup>47</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, Letter of Fr. Victor Koch to [Fr. Bonaventure Oberst], SS. Giovanni e Paolo, Rome (September 26, 1946), 1.

<sup>48</sup> *250 Jahre Miesberg in Schwarzenfeld*, op. cit., 91.

<sup>49</sup> Koch Family Archives, Interview of the author with Liebharda Gindele and Josefine Gindele Vögel, Schwarzenfeld, Germany, Part I (May 13, 2005), 3:25.

<sup>50</sup> It was well-known that Germans who expressed dissent against the war — especially in the later years — would disappear. Koch Family Archives, Letter of Joe Koch to Fran Koch, Konegstein, Germany (June 23, 1945), 3.

<sup>51</sup> German Passionist Foundation Archives, Letter of Fr. Viktor Koch to Confrator Leonhard Wölfl, C.P, Schwarzenfeld, Germany (September 17, 1942), 1.

<sup>51</sup> Koch Family Archives, Interviews (taped) of the author with various eyewitnesses after Sunday Mass in Schwarzenfeld, Germany (May 15, 2005), 25:50. The observation about Fr. Viktor was made by Irmi Ehrenreich.

<sup>52</sup> A definition of "*Poesiealbum*" appears at <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poesiealbum>.

<sup>53</sup> Koch Family Archives, *Poesiealbums* of Josefine and Liebharda Gindele (digital scan by author and Gary Koch, 2005).

<sup>54</sup> In the postwar era, Norbert Gindele became one of Schwarzenfeld's most celebrated town mayors.

<sup>55</sup> Koch Family Archives, Interview of the author with Liebharda Gindele and Josefine Gindele Vögel, Part II, Schwarzenfeld, Germany (May 13, 2005), 2:40-10:30.

<sup>56</sup> A general account of foreign forced labor in Germany can be found in Ulrich Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers: Enforced Foreign Labour in Germany under the Third Reich* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>57</sup> As to Buchtalwerks A.G. Schwarzenfeld, see Gottfried Cremer, *Buchtal-Chronik Band I. Vorgeschichte und die Zeit der Gründung bis Ende 1955* (1982) and Winfried Nerdinger, *Bauen im Nationalsozialismus, Bayern 1933-1945*, (München, 1993). An early analysis of the Hermann Goring Works can be found in Kurt Lachmann, "The Hermann Göring Works," *Social Research*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (February 1941), 24-40. A well-documented summary of the Buchtalwerks appears at [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buchtal\\_A.G.](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buchtal_A.G.)

<sup>58</sup> Koch Family Archives, Interview of the author with Liebharda Gindele and Josefine Gindele Vögel, Part II, Schwarzenfeld, Germany (May 13, 2005), 19:55.

<sup>59</sup> Koch Family Archives, Letter of Liebharda Gindele to the author, Schwarzenfeld, Germany (April 14, 2008), 2.

<sup>60</sup> Koch Family Archives, Letter of Liebharda Gindele to the author, Schwarzenfeld, Germany (July 15, 2008), 2.

<sup>61</sup> German women—the vast majority of them mothers—led protests against the removal of crosses. For this reason, the event is frequently referred to as the "Mother's Revolt." Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich*, op. cit., 331-357.

<sup>62</sup> Koch Family Archives, Interview of the author with *Frau* Barbara Friese, Schwarzenfeld, Germany (May 13, 2005), 24:50. *Frau* Friese was the woman who spearheaded the effort to restore crosses in Schwarzenfeld's classrooms. She authored and circulated the petition.

<sup>63</sup> The author is aware of at least one other documented case where Catholic women circulated a petition to reinstate the crosses. A similar incident occurred in the town of Bodenmais, Bavaria. The incident caught the attention of the Gestapo.

<sup>64</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, Letter of Fr. Victor Koch to [Fr. Bonaventure Oberst], SS. Giovanni e Paolo, Rome (September 26, 1946), 2.

<sup>65</sup> Given the nature of the rumor spread by the people of Schwarzenfeld, one wonders if the Gestapo suspected Fr. Paul as a co-conspirator of the July 20<sup>th</sup> plot against Hitler. To date, the author has found no documentation to suggest that this was the case. His release implies that, had the Nazis suspected his involvement, they found no evidence to corroborate it — nor would they, since it was a coincidence. Also, he was apparently incarcerated in a jail outside the town of Schwandorf, not held in a camp of any kind. *250 Jahre Miesberg in Schwarzenfeld*, op. cit., 91; Passionist Historical Archives, Letter of Fr. Victor Koch to [Fr. Bonaventure Oberst], SS. Giovanni e Paolo, Rome (September 26, 1946), 2.

<sup>66</sup> The author thanks Dr. Christopher Mauriello, chair of History at Salem State University, for his assistance in researching material on the Flossenbürg Death March. Dr. Mauriello has investigated numerous cases of death marches that led to incidents of "forced confrontation," where U.S. forces compelled German civilians to view Nazi atrocity sites and tend the dead.

<sup>67</sup> Isabel Alcoff and Markus Stern, *Shema: Secret of My Survival* (1993), 59.

<sup>68</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, Weekly Intelligence Summary, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, Office of Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, No. 58 (April 29, 1945), record group 331, box 14, section 22. This intelligence summary details the shifting of Allied air attacks on railroads in western Germany to central and southern Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia from April 6 to April 29, 1945. It reports extensive damage to rail centers and rail lines with particular emphasis on the destruction of locomotives.

<sup>69</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Benno Fischer, "Death March April 14, 1945-April 24, 1945" (June 1945). See also a documentary film based on Fischer's testimony: *The Death March of the Jews From the Camp At Flossenbürg* (1997). See further Passionist Historical Archives, Letter of Fr. Victor Koch to [Fr. Bonaventure Oberst], SS. Giovanni e Paolo, Rome (September 26, 1946), 3.

<sup>70</sup> Survivor Mark Stern described the strafing by American low-fliers upon the train, as well as the ensuing death march. Alcott and Stern, *Shema: Secret of My Survival*, op. cit., 59-61.

<sup>71</sup> Statistics on the Flossenbürg Death March appear at [http://jewish1.fatcow.com/store/The Death March of the Jews from Flossenburg.htm](http://jewish1.fatcow.com/store/The_Death_March_of_the_Jews_from_Flossenburg.htm) and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flossenbürg\\_concentration\\_camp](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flossenbürg_concentration_camp).

<sup>72</sup> Information about Dietrich Bonhoeffer appears at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich\\_Bonhoeffer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich_Bonhoeffer) and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flossenbürg\\_concentration\\_camp#notable\\_inmates](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flossenbürg_concentration_camp#notable_inmates).

<sup>73</sup> Koch Family Archives, Letter of Herta Arata to the Koch family, Milford, MA (September 15, 2006), 20.

<sup>74</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Sworn Statement of Jakob Troidl and Translation of Sworn Statement of Wilhelm Geldner (May 30, 1945), M-1024, Roll 1.

<sup>75</sup> Schwandorf was firebombed using phosphorus bombs by Allied air forces on the evening on April 16 and into April 17, 1945. The main target was the train station, but hundreds of residences were also destroyed. Reliable sources estimate the death toll at 1,250. Georg Klitta, *Das Finale des Zweiten Weltkrieges in Schwandorf: Ein Dokumentation* (Meiller Druck und Verlag GmbH Schwandorf, 1970). The bombing continued through April 21, 1945 when the 392<sup>nd</sup> Bomber Group of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Division Group dropped a total of 236 500-pound GP bombs on Schwandorf. See "Mission #284" appearing at <http://www.b24.net/missions/MM042045.htm>.

<sup>76</sup> J. Ted Hartman, *Tank Driver With the 11th Armored from the Battle of the Bulge to VE Day* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 96. For First Communion reference, see Markus Glasier, *Die letzten Kriegstage in Schwarzenfeld: Chronologie der Ereignisse zwischen Ostern und 26. April 1945 in Schwarzenfeld* (Schwarzenfeld: eBook, 2005), 20.

<sup>77</sup> "Ein Mann mit einem weißen Bettlaken näherten sich die Amerikaner," *Mittelbayerische Zeitung* (May 11-12, 1985).

<sup>78</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, Letter of Fr. Victor Koch to [Fr. Bonaventure Oberst], SS. Giovanni e Paolo, Rome (September 26, 1946), 3.

<sup>79</sup> Two units of the 26th "Yankee" Division were in action in Schwarzenfeld between April 22 and April 25, 1945. Elements of the 11th Armored Division arrived first on Sunday, April 22, securing the town. They left at approximately 7:00 AM on April 23, and were replaced by the 328th Infantry Regiment. The unit engaged during the 48-hour ultimatum was the 328th. This is proven by a memo written by the unit's commanding officer. National Archives Records Administration, C.O. 328th Regiment memo to C.O. 26th Infantry Division (April 23, 1945), Record Group 407, Inf Rgt 328, Box 8305.

<sup>80</sup> A definition of "agricultural lime" appears at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agricultural\\_lime](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agricultural_lime). Schwarzenfeld's town mayor received orders from the *Landrat* (civil county leader) to bury the bodies before they spread disease. Presumably the disinfectant properties of lime would have proven useful.

<sup>81</sup> There are vague and conflicting explanations as to how the Americans concluded that the Schwarzenfelders were responsible for the atrocity. One account claimed that the Americans were given misinformation. Koch Family Archives, Letter of Fr. Klemens Hayduck, C.P., to Ed Pancoast, Schwarzenfeld, Germany (March 25, 2000). The terms of the ultimatum itself varied from one eyewitness to the next. Some remembered a 24-hour ultimatum, while others remembered a 48-hour ultimatum. Still others recalled no ultimatum at all. Eyewitness Josef Schmid recalled the Americans threatening to take the male population to the neighboring town of Deiselkühn, where they would be shot. The official record appears in *250 Jahre Miesberg in Schwarzenfeld*, op. cit., 42. See also Koch Family Archives, Letter of Oswald Wilhelm to the author, Schwarzenfeld, Germany (April 19, 2004); Koch Family Archives, Interview of the author with Josef Schmid (May 1, 2005), 26:30.

<sup>82</sup> Koch Family Archives, Letter of Peter Bartmann to the author, Schwarzenfeld, Germany (February 27, 2004). The difficulty in acquiring nails is further supported by eyewitness Josef Schmid. KFA, Interview of the author with Josef Schmid (May 1, 2005), 30:00.

<sup>83</sup> Koch Family Archives, Letter of Oswald Wilhelm to the author, Schwarzenfeld, Germany (April 19, 2004).

<sup>84</sup> Koch Family Archives, Interview of the author with Zita Mueller, Schwarzenfeld, Germany (May 12, 2005); Koch Family Archives, Letter of Zita Mueller to the Koch family, Schwarzenfeld, Germany (September 27, 2004).

<sup>85</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, Letter of Fr. Victor Koch to [Fr. Bonaventure Oberst], SS. Giovanni e Paolo, Rome (September 26, 1946), 3. The Americans had ordered Fr. Viktor and the Schwarzenfelders to hold a Christian funeral. It seems apparent that the Americans were determined to simply bury the dead in a decent manner, and no one stopped to investigate the victims' religion. Fr. Viktor himself stated that 'it remained to be proven' that all the victims were Jews. He was likely concerned that some might be Christian. In May 1957, the victims were exhumed and reburied in the Flossenbürg memorial cemetery. A memorial marker was left at the original grave site in Schwarzenfeld.

<sup>86</sup> Koch Family Archives, Letter of Oswald Wilhelm to the author, Schwarzenfeld, Germany (April 19, 2004).

<sup>87</sup> *250 Jahre Miesberg in Schwarzenfeld*, op. cit., 50.

<sup>88</sup> Ed Pancoast, "Schwarzenfeld, Germany — A Different Kind of Hero," *Yankee Doings*, LXXXI, No. 3 (September 2000), 30-33.

<sup>89</sup> Fr. Victor wrote many letters on behalf of German wives and farmers who were trying to bring their husbands and sons home from P.O.W. camps. Collectively, this comprised a considerable body of correspondence. The scope and magnitude are indicated in his letter to [Fr. Bonaventure Oberst], wherein he stated: "Not only the first days, but for a year and more I was kept busy, for all in the whole surrounding district came to me for advice and help. They came as far away as 50 to 200 kilometers. I was glad to give help where I could, because those who came were not the Nazis, but those who suffered under their regime." Passionist Historical Archives, Letter of Fr. Victor Koch to [Fr. Bonaventure Oberst], SS. Giovanni e Paolo, Rome (September 26, 1946), 4.

<sup>90</sup> During his 1947 visit to the United States, Fr. Victor attempted to convey the dire situation of Germans living in the postwar period. This is evident in the article, "Father Victor Koch Seeks Help For Starving Victims in Helpless War-torn Lands," *The Catholic Review* (October 10, 1947). During this trip, he also conducted a donation drive in Baltimore. Passionist Historical Archives, Fr. Victor Koch, C.P., Free Will Offering, St. Michael's Parish, Baltimore, Maryland (November 9, 1947).

<sup>91</sup> Koch Family Archives, Letter of Rita Wittleben to the Koch Family, Schwarzenfeld, Germany (February 26, 2004).

<sup>92</sup> Passionist Historical Archives, Fr. Gregor Lenzen, C.P., "The Befriended Enemy," *Passionist Heritage Newsletter*, (Summer 2005).

<sup>93</sup> Koch Family Archives and Bauer Family Archives. Three of Anna Bauer's grandchildren also joined the Passionists, but all three left during their time in the seminary.

<sup>94</sup> See the biography of Fr. Basil Bauer, C.P., appearing at the website of the Passionist Historical Archives: <http://cprovince.org/archives/bios/7/7-18b.php>.

<sup>95</sup> See the respective biographies of Fr. Roland Flaherty, C.P., and Fr. Benedict Huck, C.P., appearing at the Passionist Historical Archives website: <http://cprovince.org/archives/bios/1/1-22a.php> and <http://cprovince.org/archives/bios/9/9-30a.php>. Joseph G. Mehler also followed Fr. Victor into the Passionist order. He professed as a Passionist on February 20, 1891, was ordained Gilbert of St. Joseph on June 4, 1898, and dispensed of his Passionist vows on July 10, 1906 due to illness. He was later accepted into the Columbus, Ohio diocese. The Diocese of Steubenville was erected on October 21, 1944 out of territory taken from the Diocese of Columbus. Father Mehler, who had been serving within the territory that became part of the Steubenville diocese, was automatically incardinated into the new diocese. He became Right Reverend Monsignor Joseph G. Mehler on December 20, 1945. Koch Family Archives, Estelle Mehler Kidson, *Mehler – Cook Family Legacy: 1700's to 2003* (2003), 7.



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