

# Josef Kohout

(January 24, 1915 - March 15, 1994)

*This essay was written by Pink Triangle Legacies Project Intern Grace Shaffer and is based on Josef Kohout's memoir as well as Dr. Klaus Mueller's efforts to secure a donation of Kohout's materials to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Thank you for your work in preserving queer history.*

Josef Kohout was born in 1915 to a Catholic family in Vienna, Austria. His father worked as a civil servant and mother stayed home to raise Josef and his three older sisters. Josef knew he was gay from the time he was sixteen. His mother told him, "remember, whatever happens, you are my son and you can always come to me with your problems."

While studying at university in 1938, he met the love of his life, Fred (likely a pseudonym). Unfortunately, Fred's father, a member of the Nazi party, discovered their relationship. Josef was questioned about his relationship with Fred and he insisted it was platonic until the Nazi authorities produced an intercepted love letter. He was sentenced to six months hard labor under Paragraph 175, the German penal code criminalizing homosexuality between men. After his sentence, Josef was transferred into the concentration camp system. He would not see his family for the next six years.



Josef Kohout, ca. 1950.  
*Schwules Museum*

The first camp Josef was sent to was Sachsenhausen. Here he was housed in a block made up of other homosexual men marked with the pink triangle badge. These badges were noticeably larger than other colors, making them easier to spot from afar. Men with the pink triangles were treated with cruelty by both guards and other prisoners. Josef came to realize that, in the hierarchy of camp prisoners, gay men were at the bottom—the “damnedest of the damned.”

Eventually, Josef's kapo offered him protection in exchange for sex. Josef agreed, thinking “why shouldn't I seize this opportunity to save my life, even if it was degrading?” It helped Josef secure safer work and increased food rations. Josef was transferred to Flossenbürg on May 15, 1940, where he was assigned a new prisoner number: 1896. He again established an arrangement with a kapo for food and greater security, thus finding a path toward survival.

In 1943, homosexuals were required to visit recently established camp brothels to 'cure' their condition. Josef found himself "shattered" by this experience and his homosexual orientation was reinforced.



This pink triangle badge, worn by Josef Kohout in Flossenbürg, survives to this day and is the only one of its kind. It is held in the archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

In spring 1945, Josef escaped during a death march to Dachau and was eventually liberated. After the war, Josef learned that his father had attempted to free him several times, but society ostracized the family for having a gay son, and Josef's father died by suicide in 1942.

Josef attempted to return to normalcy. He was plagued by frequent flashbacks. Josef found that he and other homosexual prisoners were not eligible for the financial compensation offered to other camp survivors. He felt the burden of this continued stigma, saying that "the progress of humanity had passed us homosexuals by."

In the late 1960s, Josef decided to work with Hanns Neumann, an Austrian journalist who was also homosexual, to share his story with the world. Homosexuality was still taboo, so Josef and Hanns needed to protect their identities. When the book was published in 1972 as *The Men with the Pink Triangle*, the pseudonym Heinz Heger was listed as the author. Inspired by the book's title and Kohout's courage to tell his truth, gay activists in West Germany reclaimed the pink triangle, transforming it from a badge of violence and shame into a rallying cry for gay rights, pride, and community across the world.

Josef passed away in 1994 at the age of 79. He was survived by his long-time partner, Wilhelm Kroepfl. Josef's life story has been instrumental in shaping our understanding of the experiences of queer people during the Holocaust.

## Sources & Further Reading

To read Josef's full memoir, see Heinz Heger. *The Men with the Pink Triangle: The True, Life-and-Death Story of Homosexuals in the Nazi Death Camps*. Translated by David Fernbach. Introduction by Klaus Mueller and foreword by Sarah Schulman. Haymarket Books, 2023.

Heger, Heinz Heger. *Die Männer mit dem Rosa Winkel: Der Bericht eines Homosexuellen über seine KZ-Haft von 1939-1945*. Merlin Verlag, 1972.

[Documenting Nazi Persecution of Gays: Josef Kohout/Wilhelm Kroepfl Collection](#) - Curators Corner Video #13, featuring Dr. Klaus Mueller. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. YouTube (Jan. 14, 2013).

Read more about Josef Kohout [online](#) and watch the video on [YouTube](#). For more LGBTQ+ Stories from Nazi Germany, visit [pinktrianglelegacies.com/stories](https://pinktrianglelegacies.com/stories).