

## Julia Lentini, Sinti and Roma Survivor Deprivation and Perseverance

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Julia Lentini was born to Ludwig and Johanna Bäcker on April 15, 1926, in Eisern, Germany. Julia and her fourteen siblings spent their summer months traveling in a wagon with their parents throughout Germany. Julia's father, a basket weaver and horse trader, was also a talented woodworker who built traveling family wagons. She recalled a happy childhood in a close-knit Sinti and Roma (Gypsy) family, who spoke Romani at home but conversed in German with friends.

Julia's life did not change much when the Nazis first came to power in Germany in 1933. She sometimes peeked through windows into Hitler Youth meetings or gave the "Heil, Hitler" greeting because she didn't want to seem different. After the Bäckers relocated to Biedenkopf, Germany, Julia and her sisters worked in a knitting factory and on local farms.

On March 8, 1943, the Bäckers were taken from their home and put on a train, holding hands during the three-day journey to Auschwitz-Birkenau. They had known nothing of the existence of such camps. Julia remembered it took hours to be processed into the camp and that other than her mother's plea that the family be kept together, her family remained mostly silent. Julia and three of her sisters were assigned to kitchen duty. There Julia contracted typhoid fever and was transferred to a sick block (*revier*). Within six months, Julia's mother and father and sister Mathilde had all succumbed to disease and starvation. Around the same time, her brother William was taken away and never heard from again.

In early 1944, Julia was transferred without her siblings from Auschwitz-Birkenau to the Schlieben concentration camp, where she was again placed on kitchen duty. She was ordered to receive 150 lashes in front of all the other prisoners after she was caught stealing food. While she was recuperating, a nearby munitions factory was blown up, causing panic in the camp. The camp guards took all the provisions and abandoned the camp, leaving the prisoners behind the electrified fence. A few days later, Russian soldiers arrived to liberate Schlieben and during relocation, Julia and three friends snuck into a nearby American camp. Aboard an American military truck, Julia returned to Biedenkopf, as her mother had instructed all the children to do. There she found a few of her siblings and her home still standing although stripped of all the family's possessions.

While in Biedenkopf, Julia met Henry Lentini, an American soldier. Eight months later, despite language barriers, they married: Julia wearing a borrowed dress and Henry in his uniform. In 1946, Julia and Henry arrived in America to start their new life together, settling in California. They had two daughters, Cynthia and Rosanne; three grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren at the time of Julia's interview in 1995.