

## Contemporary Witness Katja Sturm-Schnabl



**Katja Sturm-Schnabl (Stanislawa Katharina) is 85 years old this year. She was born on 17 February 1936 in Zwinsdorf/Svinča near Klagenfurt and grew up on her family's farm estate in Carinthia with her sister Veronika and her brothers Andrej and Franci. They lived there with their parents, grandparents, two aunts, six to eight workers and, in harvest season, several day-labourers.**

Her early childhood was a very happy one, amidst her large family on the farm. Around her, people spoke mostly Slovenian. Her family was part of the ethnic group of Carinthian Slovenes and was involved in local cultural activities. As of 1938, these activities were increasingly restricted and groups such as the Slovenian choir or the cultural association were disbanded. In April 1942, the family was deported from their farm by armed military of the NS authorities and brought to a detention camp for Carinthian Slovenes. Katja and her parents and siblings were brought to Ebenthal camp near Klagenfurt, where they were reunited with her maternal grandmother. She was on a bed of straw in a barrack, next to her the uncle's youngest child, an eight-month-old baby. When the grandmother saw Katja's mother, she kept saying, again and again, "*Nemci nas nekam vlečejo.*" ("*The Germans are carting us off.*")

A few days later, Katja and her family were transferred from Ebenthal to Rehnitz camp by train.

*"Towards the evening, they herded us back to the train tracks, where cattle trucks were parked and people were squeezed into them, it was horrible for everyone. Then the doors closed, and we sat in darkness. Panic erupted, and screams and cries, an apocalyptic atmosphere set in. The journey was very, very long. And then we arrived in the village, it was called Rehnitz, in what today is Poland."*

After three months, Katja and her family were brought from the collection point (Rehnitz) to a forced labour camp run by the SS in Eichstätt in Middle Franconia (Upper Bavaria today), which was where they would stay until the liberation. The father was sent to Karlsruhe as a forced labourer, where he had to work in the arms industry. The mother had to work as a domestic helper at first, then she had to work in the shoe factory until the liberation. At Eichstätt camp, people as young as 14 years of age had to provide forced labour. For those younger than 14, there was a strict education ban; nobody was allowed to teach. *"At one point, an invalid person who also lived in the camp wanted to teach a school lesson. But that was prohibited immediately."* Katja wouldn't attend a primary school until 1946.

Another blow from which the family never recovered was a scarlet fever epidemic that broke out in Eichstätt camp. When her sister Veri (Veronika) fell ill and ran a high fever, their mother brought her to the camp physician. He gave the then eight-year-old child a lethal injection and she died in her mother's arms.



In 1945, the family was liberated by the US Army and returned to Villach/Carinthia in July of the same year. People in Austria did not give Katja and her family a warm welcome in 1945. Upon arriving at the train station, they were all stopped by British soldiers.

*"We arrived in Villach then and the Carinthian state government was functioning again in the meantime, the officials were the same, of course, they had informed the British, who were the occupying power in Carinthia, that we were all criminals and did not belong here. And then the British soldiers were waiting on the platform [their rifles at gunpoint] and did not want to let us get off the train. We still got off and persevered there on the ground for a few days, we did not let them drive us away until the British were informed, until they knew what was going on. Our home was looking very bleak; first of all, it was full of Hungarian soldiers, and then the animals were gone, too; [the person who had received the farm from the Nazis], had returned to Italy and taken everything that*

*had not been bolted to the floor."*



In 1946, Katja was able to attend primary school. In but one year, she did the equivalent of four years of school. She went on to high school and then studied Slavic studies, southern Slav literature, Russian, Art history, and Byzantine studies at the University of Vienna. In 1973, she graduated with a doctorate study on the Slovenian dialect and finally became a research associate at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Having participated in numerous international meetings, she published research in several languages and promoted international dialogue by translating selected key publications from literature and research. She received numerous awards such as the Gold Order of Merit of the Republic of Austria (2015) or the Vinzenz-Rizzi prize of the Central Association of Slovenian Organizations in Carinthia (2019). To this day she visits schools as a contemporary witness and talks about the things she experienced.

Sources:

- <https://www.oida.online/und-dann-stuermt-die-nazis-durchs-haus/>
- <https://www.nationalfonds.org/katja-sturm-schnabl#Ebenthal>
- [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katja\\_Sturm-Schnabl](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katja_Sturm-Schnabl)
- <https://www.weitererzaehlen.at/interviews/katja-sturm-schnabl>