

Good afternoon!

My name is Ivan Luksic, from Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. I, along with my son Matthew, are pleased to have been invited here for this commemoration ceremony in honour of those who perished at the Neckarelz Concentration Camp.

My grandmother's brother, Ivan Karlic, was the first inmate to die in this camp. He died 80 years ago yesterday. Our family is very touched that this memorial is being unveiled on the 80th anniversary of his death.

Ivan Karlic was born in Istria on June 14, 1900. At the time of his birth, Istria was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Istria had a mixed population of Croats, Italians, Slovenians and other ethnic groups. Various nationalist identities were competing in this area. Among the ethnic Italians there was a desire for unification with Italy. Italian was the language of administration and commerce. It was felt that the local Croats and Slovenes, many of whom lacked schools, would assimilate and acquire an Italian identity.

A few years after his birth, a Croatian language school was built in his native village Tupljak by the St Cyril and Methodius Society. This society was establishing schools in Croatian and Slovenian villages and was opposed by Italian nationalists, because they felt that educating these peasants would prevent assimilation.

The Karlic family was by no means rich, but they were better off than most. My grandmother, who was five years younger than my great-uncle, had about four years of private education in Croatian, taught by the local priest. I assume my great-uncle had a similar education.

After the First World War, Istria was given to Italy. Only Italian was taught in schools and administrative services were only available in Italian. As fascism took hold in Italy, conditions worsened for the Croats and Slovenians. Catholic priests were criticized for having sermons in Croatian, and people were punished by speaking their native language. Still, in our village, people sang Croatian patriotic songs, but they risked punishment if the police heard them.

In 1926, Italy introduced legislation to replace all first names and family names with Italian variants. Ivan Karlic thus became Giovanni Carli.

There was no choice in the matter: all names were changed.

In Tupljak the children quickly gained fluency in Italian, but everyone maintained their local Croatian dialect within the family and when speaking with neighbours.

Ivan married Ivana Smilovic in 1923. They did not have children, but they helped raise nieces Evelina and Ada and were fond second parents to them.

My aunt Letizia, who passed away three weeks ago at the age of 99, has very happy memories of Ivan.

She remembers a very kind person who would buy her candies, particularly during the village celebrations marking their patron saint - St Bartholomew.

Ivan had a brother Marko who was killed by the Italian police in the 1930s.

During the Second World War, many local men were conscripted into the Italian army. Few, if any, were enthusiastic supporters of the regime, and there are stories among villagers of local men hiding in battle, waiting for the chance to be taken by the British in Africa as POWs.

In September 1943, after the fall of Mussolini, there was a rebellion in Istria. It was a combination of peasants, religious leaders and communists who led this struggle in the partisan movement.

Soon the German army arrived to restore order. There were many atrocities during this period. There was a fear that the local men would join the partisan movement. This fear, and the need for labour, led the Germans to take prisoners.

My great-uncle was sent to Dachau with at least two neighbours, Franjo and Anton Kalcic.

They arrived at Dachau on January 16, 1944.

There were many others from their village that were sent to Dachau, including my dad's best friend's father, and my father's one-time boss. A total of 21,000 Istrians were sent to various camps, of which 6,000 perished.

Ivan was transferred to Neckarelz and arrived here on March 21, 1944.

He was among the first to arrive at this camp and he was tasked with building beds, constructing barracks and laying fences. Conditions were terrible and sadly, Ivan passed away on April 13, 1944 due to pneumonia and heart failure.

After the war not much was relayed back home regarding Ivan. The family was told that he died in Dachau but not much else was revealed.

My interest in Ivan was sparked on my first trip to Croatia in 1989 when I saw a headstone with his name with the words "Died in Dachau" inscribed.

His widow Ivana passed away in 1992, having never remarried.

Information is now more readily available, but when I started my research in the mid 2000s, my request for information took 2 years to be answered. Today, information is ready online, at our fingertips, if we want it.

About 15 years ago my father and I journeyed to Dachau and learned for the first time that Ivan was the first to be transferred to Neckarelz and was the first to die. The next year we visited Neckarelz. The museum was under construction so we did not see much. We then traveled here to this Cemetery and looked for his remains. We did not find out until three years ago that they were transferred to Frankfurt.

We were saddened that there was no marker for him in this cemetery, only a tiny marker for Polish victims, and no one else. We left this Cemetery very disappointed.

This is why we are very heartened that this monument has been erected. In this quiet place, we will honour their memory with the dignity that they deserve.

Thank you to the students of Elisabeth von Thadden School for your determination and hard work. Confronting history is never an easy task. My family, and I am sure the families of all the victims, are happy to see that these victims have not been forgotten. You have lived up to the ideals of your school's namesake.

I would like to thank the school, the Neckarelz Concentration Camp Museum, my guides Beate, Arno, Huth and Irene for your hospitality, and for helping me piece together parts of our family's difficult history.

I am ever thankful for the invitation extended to me and my son, to be here on this important day.

To my great-uncle:  
Barba Ive, počivao u miru Božjem!

Uncle Ive, rest in the peace of the Lord.

May Ivan Karlic and all the victims of this camp, rest in peace!