

## NEWSROOM

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## UNEARTHING SECRETS

## CHRISTOPHER NEWPORT TEAM SEARCHES FOR HOLOCAUST GRAVES.

by [Jim Hanchett](#) | July 27, 2021

*Above: Kayla Singleton (left) and Mikaela Martínez Dettinger look for clues at a Holocaust burial site in Latvia.*

*Read time: about 6 min*

Two Christopher Newport undergraduates, Kayla Singleton '23, an [anthropology](#) major, [political science](#) major Mikaela Martínez Dettinger '22, and Dr. Richard Freund, Bertram and Gladys Aaron Professor of Jewish Studies, are conducting research on Holocaust sites in Europe. As part of Christopher Newport's signature [Summer Scholars program](#), they are traveling to Latvia, Lithuania and Poland over the course of three weeks, along with students and researchers from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Dettinger is blogging about each stop on the trip. Below are excerpts from the early stops in Latvia.

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Leading up to this trip Dr. Freund helped me in doing a lot of research on the Holocaust, resistance movements and on the specific sites we would be visiting. He showed me stories of individuals who had lived and died at these places, and connected me to their back stories so that I would recognize that the story of the Holocaust is a story about humans, not just a story about a great event or a historical period to be coldly analyzed. I felt prepared for each of our sites in Latvia.

I knew the names and faces of the people that lay in the graves for which I would be searching. I knew that they had families, dreams and that they hoped to survive the persecution by Nazis. Arriving at these sites, for me, was like arriving at Gettysburg battlefield. The sense of loss and human suffering lingered in the air even 70 years later.

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Our first target in Riga, Latvia was to look for possible mass graves at the site of the Jungfernhof concentration camp and killing site. For a brief recap, Jungfernhof was used as a concentration camp for the Jewish elite of Hamburg, Berlin, Vienna, Nuremberg, and other major European cities. It was a remote location where these prisoners would be completely isolated from anyone who spoke their language. It was so isolated that the camp did not even have walls or barbed wire around its perimeter. There was no need since most of the prisoners would not have known where they were, and even if they did they would have no way of making their way back to the cities they were deported from.

Today, Jungfernhof is an open field in a park. When we arrived at around 9:45 a.m. there were runners, dog walkers and families out for a stroll. Even knowing the history of the site from our research, it was hard to remember that the park we were working in is the site of mass graves. There was little signage about the location's use during the Holocaust, and I truly wondered whether the average Latvian citizen using the park knew about the significance of the site. But, this is why we came.

We used several techniques throughout the day that would complement each other to give us an idea of what was below the subsurface of the field. Our team used ground-penetrating radar (GPR) and electrical resistivity tomography (ERT) to look at the layers of sediment below the surface of the field. While this was being done, other members of our team used GPS, Total Station Mapping, GeoSLAM and Drone photogrammetry to gather data on the exact location of our work as well as differences in the subtle changes in elevation at the site. All of these different techniques are complementary in that they work to confirm the findings that each tool found or they serve to provide more data to make the findings more accurate. For example, GPR and ERT were done at the same points in the field so that the results of each could be compared to look for any correlations or differences that might help to explain the results. Furthermore, the mapping techniques serve to give exact locations for the ERT and GPR results as well as to allow for the technology to be properly adjusted to account for changes in elevation.

Because GPR and ERT are time-consuming pieces of technology, we had to strategically select only two locations on the field to give us a sample of what might be below the surface. In order to do this, we worked with Ilya Lensky of the Jewish Museum of Latvia. His knowledge of the area's use during the Holocaust allowed him to suggest locations where historical evidence suggested that mass graves might be located.

The preliminary results of our work where we ran the ERT and the GPR indicate findings consistent with that of a mass grave. The results showed a trench that was approximately 20 meters by 20 meters and about 4 to 6 meters deep with 90-degree-angle sides. While we cannot specifically confirm the presence of human remains to say conclusively that it is a mass grave, this information can be used by local archaeology teams to further investigate the site or to properly memorialize it.

While we were there, we wanted to share our work with the local people so that they could learn about the site and understand the type of non-invasive archaeology that can be used at sensitive sites. During our day, everyone from local residents to school groups, to the minister of monuments came by the site to talk with us about our work and the implications of it. Hopefully, in the future, the information we share with them will give residents of Riga the tools to better understand and research the history of their area.

We have also been in communication with a team who is working to make a memorial dedicated to those who were killed at the Jungfernhof killing site. Dr. Karen Frostig, who has a familial relationship with Jungfernhof, gave us this message:

*Greetings to the team of scientists working in Latvia! I am the founding director of the Locker of Memory memorial project dedicated to restoring memory to the Jungfernhof concentration camp. I first visited the camp in 2007 as the granddaughter of two victims deported to the Jungfernhof concentration camp from Vienna. The site looked very different 14 years ago. It is my goal to create a Naming Memorial at the site to remember 3,984 Reich Jews from Greater Germany, who were killed at Jungfernhof and in the nearby forest. Dr. Freund is providing a key contribution to this effort. Finding a mass grave and traces of camp life would be a major breakthrough in establishing memory at the site.*

*Karen Frostig, PhD*

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The Rumbula forest, which is located just outside of the heart of Riga, is the site of many memorials to the victims of three massacres there. Twice in 1941 and again in 1944, many Jews were marched out to the forest and shot by

Nazis. They were shot in such a way that their remains fell into burial pits shaped like an inverted triangle. These massacres were a part of the “Holocaust by Bullets,” the form of extermination used by the Nazis before they created extermination camps.

Arriving at Rumbula, you immediately see monuments erected to memorialize the massacres and more monuments appear as you continue through the site. These monuments are beautiful, and they speak about the event like a piece of art would. However, there is no signage which explains the event with the exception of a Soviet-era sign erected in 1964 at the behest of Jewish activists. Even this sign, however, does not fully explain what happened here. At best, in the original Yiddish translation of the Russian sign, it calls the victims who are interred there “victims of fascism.” The lack of information at the memorial only represents a larger problem that is quickly becoming a pattern during our trip. There is memorialization, but without research to back it up. It is unknown where the burial pits are at the site. The closest thing we have to the pits are cement pits constructed to hold remains that were being washed from the earth by rainwater. This poses a problem because the cement pits very likely disturbed the graves in the process of their construction. We have no way of knowing if the original burial pits, which still contain remains of the victims, are buried perhaps under the parking lot or the walkway to the monuments!

This time, unlike Jungfernhof, we went in blind to run our tests. This time there were no flyovers, records, or witness testimonies available to us there to guide our research, but we made the best of it.

We ran an ERT line from within the forest, across two of the cement burial pits, across one of the walkways, and into the forest on the other side. Others worked with GPR on a small courtyard by the largest monument at the site as well as on top of one of the burial pits to see if they might locate an original burial pit and be able to see what, if anything, is really buried in the cement pits.

The results we received confirmed that there were trenches by both of the cement pits that we ran our lines over. Once again ERT and GPR do not have the ability to confirm the presence of human remains, but they do show man-made trenches. This, combined with the little information we had from the eyewitness testimony and the legend that the current cement pits were near the original pits, leads us to feel confident that the trenches we found could be the burial pits.

This is the second site of a mass killing we have worked on. Compared to the bustling park at Jungfernhof, Rumbula was a quiet and reflective place. The towering pines swayed in an almost silent breeze while boulders loomed over our work as if they were the victims themselves watching us. I noticed on all of the monuments there were small pebbles and sometimes small candles placed on top. I asked Dr. Freund if there was any significance to these tokens. He explained the Jewish belief called a *Dybbuk*. A *Dybbuk* is the soul of a deceased person which latches on to a person who visits their grave site. In Jewish mythology it is customary to place a rock on the tombstone to hold down the spirit from attaching to a visitor. Dr. Freund also gave me an anthropological answer. The pebbles represent a sign of respect for the dead. They show that someone has visited the grave to remember the dead.

Studying these sites is an amazing experience and a wonderful opportunity to learn, but I can’t forget that these sites are here for us to study because thousands of people were murdered just because of their faith. I wanted to pay my respects so Dr. Freund helped me pick out a good rock to leave on top of the original Soviet monument.

It is the small cultural aspects, like the rocks, that is a unique experience only gained by studying the Holocaust in person.

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