

## NEWSROOM

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## 'WOULD I HAVE HAD THE COURAGE?'

## CHRISTOPHER NEWPORT TEAM REFLECTS ON SEARCH FOR HOLOCAUST GRAVES

by [Jim Hanchett](#) | September 1, 2021

*Above: Producers of a documentary interview Kayla Singleton and Mikaela Martinez Dettinger. Photo courtesy of Colin Miazga*

*Read time: about 4 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, conducted research on Holocaust sites in Europe. As part of Christopher Newport's signature [Summer Scholars program](#), they traveled to Latvia, Lithuania and Poland over the course of three weeks, along with students and researchers from the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Dettinger blogged about each stop on the trip. What follows are excerpts from the final stops. [Read about the first part of the journey.](#)

*Fort IX was a prison camp in Kaunas, Lithuania. It is now a museum but the grounds are not fully explored.*

Aside from getting to visit the museum, we also got to contribute our own efforts to exposing the crimes the Nazis wanted to be forgotten. We worked with electrical resistivity tomography (ERT) instruments in the "Battlefield" where 14 mass graves are said to still exist because there was not enough time for the Nazis to burn all the bodies. In past research, this team had mapped and discovered several burial trenches, but one area of the field was still left unstudied. There, we found that our ERT line located approximately eight different burial trenches of the 14. Now, there is physical and scientific evidence corroborating the testimonies of the escapees' work so that the truth

of what happened at Fort IX becomes even more undeniable.

I felt that this work was extremely important because, today, the “Battlefield” is the site of weddings, picnics and more. While life marches on, even at places where tragedy has occurred, it is important that we don’t forget such important aspects of the past in our march through time, lest we repeat it.

Fort IX was a powerful experience. The museum and our findings brought the Holocaust into the 21st century. I felt as if I came to know the place intimately and the stories of those who died there will always have a place in my memory.

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In Warsaw, Poland, the group went to the Mila #18 Bunker.

This bunker is where the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and members of the resistance movement retreated to as the Nazis closed in. On May 8, 1943, when the Nazis surrounded the bunker, there were 300 people inside, including smugglers who were guiding the resistance leaders through the sewers and Jewish women who could pass as Polish who would bring news and arms into the Ghetto. The location of the bunker is known and memorialized, but our mission today was to map the underground tunnels and sewer systems that were used by the members of the Jewish resistance organization and the smugglers who helped them.

We mapped areas that had not been mapped in previous years’ research using ERT lines that ran along the direction of the sewers and cut across the field to see if there were more sewers or tunnels. We also used ground penetrating radar (GPR) to similarly search for indications in the data of tunnels and sewers. All together the ERT and GPR work in a complimentary fashion to confirm and provide more details on the other’s results.

It is such an honor to visit their monument and be able to work to provide better documentation of the tunnel systems they used to launch one of the largest and most successful resistance movements against the Nazis. The man who is credited with leading the uprising, Mordechai Anielewicz, and his girlfriend and fellow leader, Mira Fuchrer, were 24 and 23 years old, respectively. Being 20 years old myself I thought a lot about what I would do in their situation. They chose to stay and die with honor at the hands of the Nazis rather than flee through the sewers when they easily could have. They did this out of a sense of purpose granted to them by their faith and their desire to fight against their persecutors.

Could I have done the same with so much of my life ahead of me? Would I have had the courage?

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The trip ended in Vilnius, Lithuania with a visit to the Great Synagogue.

Dr. Freund has a great sense for storytelling and it shows through his choice to end with excavating portions of the Great Synagogue. This archaeological season is the fifth year of working at this site for some of the professionals, and it all started with geoscience. Dr. Freund and his team of geoscientists came to the schoolyard where the Great Synagogue once stood. Using ERT lines, GPR data, multispectral imaging and more of the tools that I have gotten to use on this trip, they were able to identify the layout of the remains of the synagogue that were lost to history and buried underground.

The current excavations of the site are representative of why geoscience is so important. Without being able to identify where and what was below the surface, it would have been nearly impossible to get the consent of the government to excavate the land around and in an elementary and middle school that is still in use. The overwhelming evidence that geoscience can yield is a powerful tool because it provides tangible proof that persuades the necessary authorities that invasive archaeology is necessary and worthwhile.

For us students, the excavation at the Great Synagogue is valuable on a few different levels. On one level, it shows us the value of the geoscience we have been doing. I am not a scientist and I never thought I would find myself discussing electrical resistivity or electromagnetic wave reflections. Even while I was doing it, I don’t think I really understood what the results meant. Now, at the Great Synagogue, I can see the ERT results and the GPR results from the previous years and look out into the archaeological trenches and see the objects that created the results I saw on the screen.

Furthermore, working on the excavation is giving us the field experience and connections that most students don’t get until they go to graduate school and do their field studies. For example, Kayla and I got to work with world-

renowned conservationist and curator Shuli Levinboim as she instructed us on how to delicately uncover the terrazzo plaster floor of the *bimah* of the Great Synagogue. It was one of the most beautiful pieces of art I have ever seen. Lastly, for both Kayla and I, this trip has confirmed for us both that our interest in archaeology, anthropology, history and religion that lead us to this trip is more than mere interest. We have found that this work is our passion, and moreover, we have found that it is possible to do the work that we are passionate about.

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