

The Boston Globe

Karen Frostig's 'Locker of Memory' reclaims lost Holocaust history

'No memorial works unless people participate in remembering,' says the cultural historian and 'public memory artist,' who teaches at Lesley University

By Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent, Updated January 29, 2023, 12:01 a.m.

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Karen Frostig photographed at her home. Her "Locker of Memory" project is a memorial to

victims of Jungfernhof concentration camp, which was on the outskirts of Riga, Latvia. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

When Karen Frostig was a child in the 1950s and '60s, passport photos of her paternal grandparents hung on the wall of her house in Waltham. Frostig's father, as a young Jewish man, had fled Vienna in 1938 and ultimately landed in Cuba. In late 1941, his parents were deported to [Jungfernhof](#), the first Nazi concentration camp in Latvia. They died there, probably within months.

Her father never talked about the Holocaust.

“Those photos were hanging in our living room in silence for my whole life, and I walked by them every day,” Frostig said in a recent Zoom interview with the Globe from her home in Newton. “No one in the family talked about those pictures.”

Frostig, who is a cultural historian and “public memory artist,” as well as a professor of art at Lesley University, an affiliated scholar at Brandeis, and an alumna of MassArt, makes works that step into that silence. Her “[Locker of Memory](#)” multimedia project memorializes the nearly [4,000 Jewish people deported](#) from Germany and Austria to Jungfernhof in late 1941. She and a [team](#) of scholars have uncovered and documented the forgotten history of the camp.



Ruins at the Jungfernhof concentration camp in Riga, Latvia. NIKOLAJS KRASNOPEVCEVS

Her work prompted an invitation to speak to the United Nations General Assembly on [International Holocaust Remembrance Day](#) on Jan. 27.

“This privilege I don’t take lightly,” she said. “It’s huge.”

Jungfernhof was a makeshift camp on a 500-acre farming estate 3 miles outside of Latvia’s capital city, Riga, and when Frostig’s grandparents and other prisoners arrived, there were no real barracks, no beds, no fences — just sheds, barns, and the empty winter landscape, according to survivor Margers Vestermanis in a “Locker of Memory” [video interview](#).

Records from the camp have been destroyed, Frostig said. There’s currently no memorial there, although its role in the Holocaust is briefly mentioned in a sign that chronicles the centuries-long history of the area. In 2013, the land was turned into a recreation area.

Frostig’s team combed through firsthand accounts, from which they extrapolated a [timeline](#) charting events and population in the camp. They posit that up to 800 people might be buried at Jungfernhof. In March 1942, between 1,800 and 2,000 prisoners were taken to [Bikernieki Forest](#), stripped of their clothes, and shot. It was part of a larger massacre known as the Dünamünde Action.



Drone view of memorial at Bikernieki Forest, Riga, Latvia, for the "Locker of Memory" 3-D tour. JEVGENIJS LUHNEVS

She has detailed these stark numbers in a [“Population Change”](#) chart. Those who remained did forced labor. Many survivors — ultimately, there were fewer than 150 — were moved to the Riga Ghetto and nearby camps. The remaining

27 or 28 Jewish prisoners were sent to [Kaiserwald](#), another Latvian camp, in July 1944.

“Locker of Memory” has an extensive online component including video interviews with survivors and historians, timelines, and an interactive map of sites where prisoners were killed. This summer, Frostig will stage a memorial ceremony at Jungfernhof.

She has organized a descendants group, including Needham’s Alan Stern, whose father and uncle, both still living, were small children at Jungfernhof, sent with their parents from Nuremberg.

“They were in the concentration camp and then the Riga Ghetto for close to 2½ years,” Stern told the Globe. His paternal grandfather was ultimately murdered in [Buchenwald](#), he said. His grandmother and the two boys were shipped to [Ravensbrück](#) and then [Bergen-Belsen](#), where they were liberated on April 15, 1945.



A still from the “1941 Deportations to Riga” video by Karen Frostig and Nikolajs Krasnopevccevs features imagery from 1944, when remaining prisoners at Jungfernhof were transferred to Kaiserwald concentration camp. Names of Jungfernhof prisoners scroll throughout the video. LATVIAN NATIONAL ARCHIVES/LATVIAN STATE HISTORICAL ARCHIVES

Stern said Frostig’s research has been revelatory.

“I’d heard stories from my father over the years, but it’s hard for me to picture what their experiences were like,” he said. “This allows me to do more research into the raw experiences these people had.”

When Frostig first visited the site of Jungfernhof in 2007, “there was nothing there but ruins and trees and overgrown brush,” she said.

“I call it an unremembered site,” she said. “It’s not forgotten, but it’s unremembered.”

There had been a culture of forgetting in Latvia for the more than 40 years it was [part of the Soviet Union](#). Latvia declared its independence in [1991](#).

“Many tragic events were not known, discussed, or reflected on during the Soviet period. Largely, the Holocaust was overlooked,” [Andrejs Pildegovics](#), Latvia’s Ambassador, Permanent Representative to the UN told the Globe. He, along with ambassadors from Austria, Germany, and the US co-sponsored Frostig’s UN remarks.

Since Latvian independence in the early 1990s, he added, more than 300 Holocaust [memorial sites](#) have been marked. “This work goes on,” he said.



Skirotava train station (back view), where deportees from Germany and Austria arrived in Riga, Latvia. From there they were sent to the Jungfernhof concentration camp. NIKOLAJŠ KRASNOPEVCEVS

The work seems particularly vital, he said, in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

“The Russians are pursuing a dehumanizing ideology against Ukraine, denying language and cultural identity and using force to change borders,” Pildegovics said. “We have to address all manifestations of xenophobia, antisemitism, and Holocaust denial. One way is with commemoration and research about the Holocaust.”

Frostig's previous work, “[The Vienna Project](#),” staged in Vienna in 2013 and 2014, culminated in video projections of names of more than 90,000 Austrian victims of the Holocaust on facades of historic buildings. Its tagline: “What Happens When We Forget to Remember?”

The number of Holocaust survivors is dwindling. “There's a shift from ‘what I saw,’ to ‘what I was told about,’ from memory to history,” Jonathan D. Sarna, professor of American Jewish History at Brandeis, told the Globe. He has advised Frostig on “Locker of Memory.”

That shift can be dangerous.

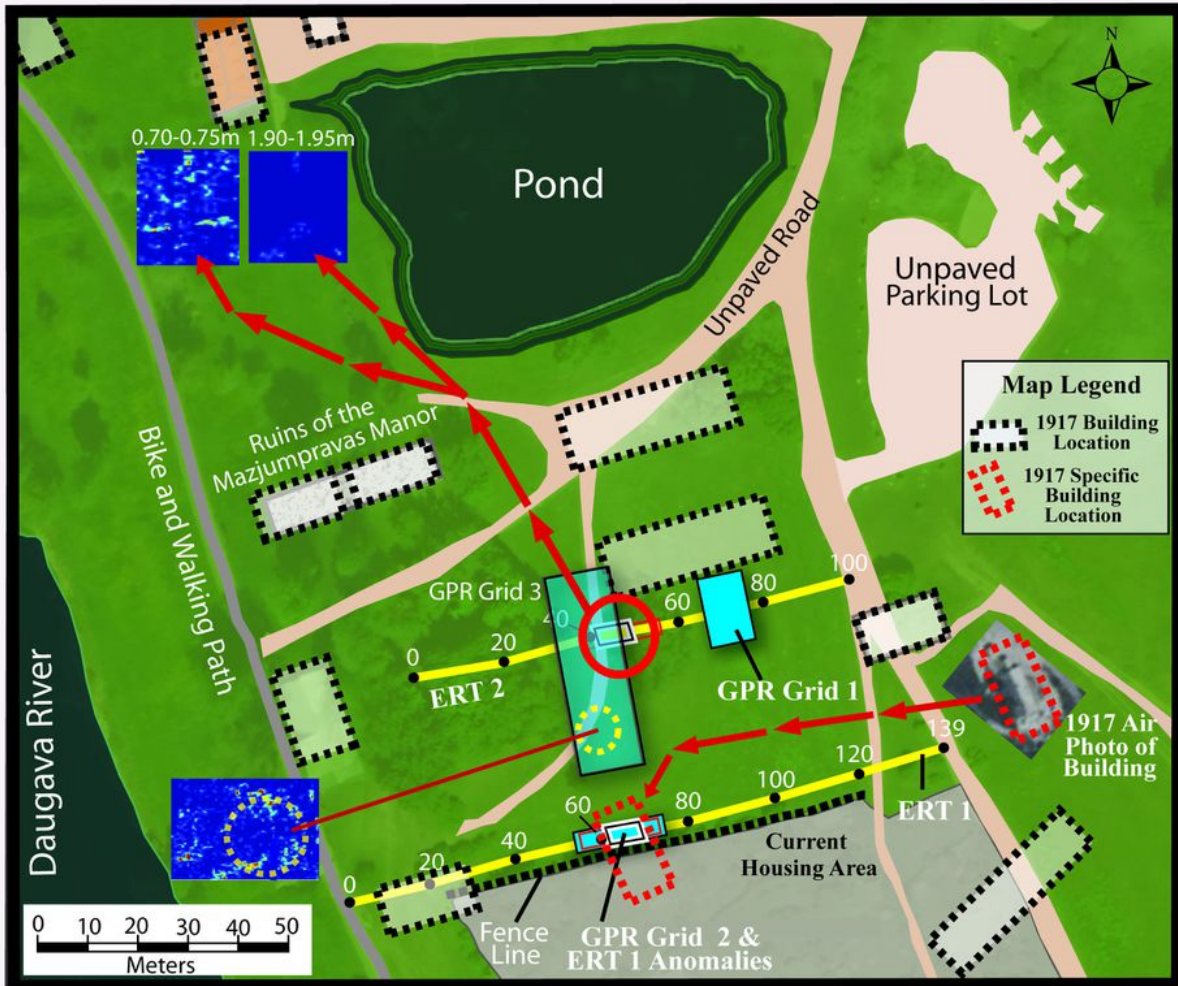
“As we look around the world, I think there’s a sense of the people who know the story of [the Shoah](#) — not that it’s being forgotten, but things nobody would say or do in the decades after World War II are now being said and done. The legitimization of antisemitic rhetoric, even here in the US. Decades ago, people would have said, ‘Didn’t we just fight a war about that?’” Sarna said.

Cultural activists such as Frostig are doing their part to keep awareness alive. Others include Todd Ruderman and Jody Kipnis, who aim to open a [Holocaust museum in Boston](#).

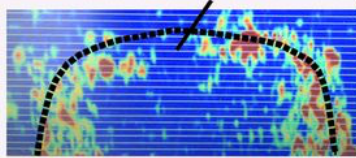
Jungfernhof Concentration Camp

Riga, Latvia

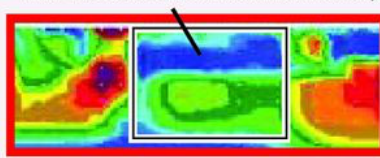
Participating Institutions: Museum of the Jews in Latvia, Christopher Newport University, Duquesne University, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, BGC Engineering, Inc.



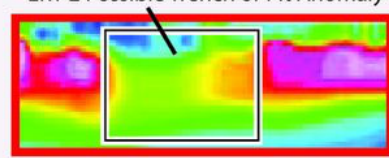
GPR 2 Possible Trench or Pit Anomaly



ERT 1 Possible Trench or Pit Anomaly



ERT 2 Possible Trench or Pit Anomaly



Cartography by Philip Reeder, Ph.D

Electrical resistivity tomography drone imagery, at the bottom, and a map of the site of a possible mass grave at the Jungfernhof concentration camp. PHILIP REEDER

In 2019, Frostig proposed “Locker of Memory” to Latvian officials, who welcomed the idea and suggested she begin by locating a mass grave at Jungfernhof. Frostig called in Holocaust archeologists, including [Richard Freund](#) of Christopher Newport University in Newport News, Va. Freund died last summer, but his team, which uses geospatial technology such as [electrical resistivity tomography](#) and [ground penetrating radar](#) to see what they can [under the earth](#), continues the project.

“They haven’t ultimately found the spot, but they think they will this summer,” Frostig said.

“For this project I use as a tagline, ‘we can no longer bury the past.’ And what I mean by that is literally, we can’t do that. We have new technologies. We can no longer say we don’t know what’s in the ground,” she said.

The technology has implications for any site of mass burials, which can be evidence of genocide. “This is an exploding new genre,” Frostig said. “And I think that must be terrifying for all countries that have this history.”

For the “Locker of Memory” memorial ceremony in July, Frostig is crafting a white linen mourning shroud to cover the mass grave, inscribed with the victims’ names and embroidered with Stars of David. The text, “May their memory be a blessing,” will line the edges. Stakes signifying Hamburg, Stuttgart, Nuremberg, and Vienna will be engraved with the date Jewish prisoners were deported and enumerate how many.

“I will have representatives from each city hammer those stakes into the ground that will outline the gravesite,” Frostig said.



1941 deportations to Riga from Bielefeld as seen in the “1941 Deportations to Riga” video by Karen Frostig and Nikolajs Krasnopevcvs. BIELEFELD MUNICIPAL ARCHIVES/STADTARCHIV BIELEFELD

The ceremony is as important as a permanent memorial, she said.

“No memorial works unless people participate in remembering,” she said. “It’s not about a static object, it’s about a meeting place and a gathering. I actually think that temporary memorials are more vibrant than permanent ones.”

She is working on plans for a permanent marker, as well.

Frostig intended to project her grandparents’ passport photos during her remarks at the UN on Friday.

“I think about my grandparents in some sort of sweet, yearning way — that they’re somehow going to know about my UN experience. And that they would be, ‘Oh my God, she did this,’” Frostig said. “To go from being completely murdered and forgotten to all of a sudden being visible.

“I know that that is every survivor’s wish, every descendant’s wish,” she continued. “And that it’s not given to everyone.”