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On Holocaust Remembrance Day, the U.N. Hears of a Little-Known Killing Field

At the United Nations' annual ceremony to mark the Nazi horrors, Karen Frostig described her work to commemorate a concentration camp where thousands of Jews, including her grandparents, were murdered.



With the portraits of her grandparents flanking her, Karen Frostig tells the United Nations of her efforts to commemorate the concentration camp where they died. Credit... Hilary Swift for The New York Times

By [Ralph Blumenthal](#)

Ralph Blumenthal has written extensively about the hunt for Nazi war criminals and the Holocaust. He covered West Germany for The New York Times in 1968-69.

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When Karen Frostig made her way to the podium of a packed United Nations General Assembly on Friday, the projections of grainy passport photos of her grandparents, Moses and Beile Samuely Frostig, towered above her.

These images had been in the living room of her childhood home in Waltham, Mass., outside Boston, the only portraits that hung in the house. But they weren't much discussed. No one in the Frostig home wanted to talk about the Holocaust, about how Moses and Beile, Jews who lived in Vienna, had been loaded onto trains that the Germans sent into the forests of Latvia.

Ms. Frostig said her grandparents' portraits "hung in silence as an open wound."

In the decades since, Ms. Frostig, an experimental artist and professor from Newton, Mass., has resurfaced that unspoken history as she traced the last days of her grandparents and of thousands of others who perished at a concentration camp that has been largely forgotten — Jungfernhof, outside Riga, Latvia.

There are no known photos of the camp in operation. Its specific boundaries remain uncharted.

Peter Klein, the co-author of the 2009 book "[The Final Solution in Riga](#)," which references Jungfernhof, said the camp had been "largely neglected" in the histories of places where Jews were transported to their deaths.

But Ms. Frostig has made it her mission to correct that — to spotlight the final destination of her grandparents and many others, deported to their deaths in December 1941, eight years before she was born.



Moses Frostig, passport photo, 1939.
Credit...Karen Frostig



Beile Samuely Frostig, passport photo, 1939.
Credit...Karen Frostig

On Friday, [at a U.N. ceremony](#) that marked the 1945 liberation of the most notorious Nazi death camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Ms. Frostig in a strong, clear voice described her research into a lesser-known killing ground, one that is now a public park with a splashing fountain and dog runs. Underneath the parkland, she told hundreds gathered for the annual Holocaust remembrance ceremony, there is evidence of a mass grave with the remains of the many who died there.

Now, she said, she and Latvian officials were committed to creating a permanent camp memorial, a sanctuary of grief that would share the park as a “heartfelt place of remembrance.” She also hoped to proceed with plans, interrupted by Covid and travel

restrictions, to project photos and names of the deported Jews onto the train station of Skirotava, outside Riga, where the Nazi transports discharged their human cargo.

In her allotted three minutes at the U.N., Ms. Frostig could tell only a bit of what she has discovered about Jungfernhof through her research, which included examining deportation rosters and witness testimonies and a long-hidden box of her own family's papers.



Ms. Frostig pieced together her family's history from, among other things, documents found in her mother's basement. Credit...Karen Frostig

In a week of record cold in late November to early December 1941, trainloads of 3,985 Reich Jews like her grandparents, who had been rounded up across Austria and Germany, left Nuremberg, Hamburg, Stuttgart and Vienna for Skirotava, where they were marched two miles to the desolate camp. There was no fence; the remoteness

and armed patrols by Latvian auxiliaries barred escape. Prisoners were executed or worked to death, starved, or died from disease.

An estimated 60,000 other deported Jews were shot in the nearby Rumbula and Bikernieki forests. In March 1942, the Nazis pretended they were relocating some 2,000 Jungfernhof prisoners to a fictional refuge where they would have jobs and medical care, but instead sent them to their execution, in forests outside Riga, a massacre known as the Dünamünde Action.

By the time the approaching Red Army sent the Germans fleeing in 1944, no more than 28 prisoners at Jungfernhof were left alive, Ms. Frostig established. They were among the 149 people known to have once been at the camp who survived. Six are known to be still alive, she said, including two 93-year-old childhood friends from Würzburg whose video interview last year is online in an extensive project she created, [“Locker of Memory.”](#)

Herbert Mai of Boynton Beach, Fla., and Fred Zielberger of Cedarhurst, N.Y., were 12 when they and their families were forced aboard a transport from Nuremberg to Riga in November 1941. There they were marched several kilometers to the camp.

“Anybody that couldn’t walk was shot,” Mr. Mai said.

Seats on a bus were offered. “My mother wanted to get on,” he remembered, but he dissuaded her. “We walked.” Everyone on the bus was taken to be shot.

In 1951, Jungfernhof’s commandant, Rudolf Joachim Seck, was sentenced in Hamburg to life in prison, though he was later released early.

Andrejs Pildegovics, Latvia's ambassador to the United Nations, credited Ms. Frostig with heroic efforts to illuminate the park's grim history. He took the lead with Germany, Austria and the United States in arranging her talk at the U.N.'s International Holocaust Remembrance Day, an annual ceremony since 2006.

"Karen managed to identify the deportations and possible location of the burial place," Mr. Pildegovics said in an interview at the Latvian mission near the U.N. He said that the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police collaborated brutally with the Nazis. The Soviets who took over held power for 40 years, but they arranged their own deportations of dissidents to Siberia during that time and later downplayed the suffering of Jews during the Holocaust.



On her first visit to the camp site, Ms. Frostig found an area strewn with rubble. Credit...Karen Frostig



The ruins of an old manor house that had been part of the camp.
Credit...Karen Frostig



The land on which the camp once stood is now a public park.
Credit...Karen Frostig

The ambassador said that when the park came to occupy the grounds of the former camp, it became a center for sports activities. “Young kids were running over the bones,” he said.

Latvia is now aggressively advancing Holocaust research and [last year](#) [appropriated](#) \$46 million to reimburse the Latvian Jewish community for buildings expropriated by the Germans.

In interviews, Ms. Frostig recalled how seldom her father, Benjamin, a Vienna-trained lawyer who became an insurance salesman in America, alluded to the horrors of the Holocaust, or to the very personal suffering of his parents. Once, she said, she was in the car with him when he abruptly held up his hand and intoned, “Six million.” She thought he was talking finance.

“We represent the disaster of the Holocaust,” she said. “A family splintered.”

Image



Ms. Frostig told the U.N. of the chilling moment when she first visited the camp site and recognized that somewhere in those grounds her grandparents had been buried.
Credit...Hilary Swift for The New York Times

She learned later that her father had narrowly escaped the Gestapo, who had at one time held him in prison in Vienna. He fled to Rotterdam, where he booked passage on ships to Lisbon and then Mexico. In 1939, he boarded a steamer, the Orizaba, from Veracruz to Havana. On board, as it happened, was the Cuban Army's chief of staff, [Col. Fulgencio Batista](#), soon to be elected the country's president.

According to Ms. Frostig and a Jewish Telegraphic Agency dispatch at the time, Benjamin slipped a letter under Batista's cabin door asking for help for himself and seven other Jewish refugees aboard. Batista arranged their safe entry into Cuba, and despite some mishaps, Benjamin was able to emigrate to Florida in November 1939. After his escape, he tried to rescue his parents, to no avail. He died at 59 in 1971, Ms. Frostig said, "silenced by trauma and shame."

Ms. Frostig, who describes herself as a "public memory artist," holds degrees from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Union Institute and University in Cincinnati and Lesley University. She now teaches graduates and undergraduates at Lesley and is an affiliated scholar with a program at Brandeis University.

In addition to the work she has done regarding Latvia, Ms. Frostig has created other memory projects. In one, she projected the names of more than 88,000 Nazi victims onto the walls of the Austrian National Library at the Hofburg palace in Vienna. In another, she crisscrossed Vienna spray-painting 38 Nazi-linked sites with the slogan, in 12 languages, "What Happens When We Forget to Remember?"

Image



One of Ms. Frostig's prior "memory projects" was a projection of 88,000 names of murdered Holocaust victims onto a building in Vienna. Credit...Christian Wind



Among the documents Ms. Frostig consulted were letters written to her father by his parents. Credit...Karen Frostig

Her work in reconstructing her family's painful history was aided by her father's younger brother, her uncle Herman, who also managed to escape Vienna. Other relatives in England shared letters and other documents with her decades after her father had died.

At an art show in 2007, Ms. Frostig met a survivor of the camp who pointed her to information on Jungfernhof. Eager to learn more, she traveled to the site outside Riga, finding an area littered with trash. She returned in 2010 and met with Ilya Lensky, director of the Jews in Latvia Museum, who helped with her research. The site was still a dump then, but when she returned again in 2019, she found a manicured public park and a sign that discussed the history of the grounds, which had once been a farm. Jungfernhof translates roughly as "maiden farm." Only one sentence on the sign mentioned the concentration camp and it did not list its name.

In 2021, she arranged for geographers and students from Christopher Newport University in Newport News, Va., to use ground-penetrating radar, electrical resistivity tomography and other technologies to peer under the earth at Jungfernhof. They found evidence of an excavation of about 20 square meters, four to six meters below the surface — possibly the camp's mass grave. Later research by scholars suggested that it may lie elsewhere but nearby.

On Thursday night, for strength and inspiration, Ms. Frostig said she slept with her remarks for her U.N. appearance tucked beneath her pillow. On Friday, at the podium, she tried to depict for the diplomats, invited guests and Holocaust survivors how her work in Latvia was fueled by her first visit to the tract where the camp once stood.

“This ground,” she said, “contained my grandparents’ bodies somewhere in an unmarked mass grave. It was a chilling moment. And it was also a moment filled with love and a yearning to be close to my grandparents, to protect them with my memory.”

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