

The Locker of Memory Memorial Project



Jungfernhof concentration camp, December 2021.

Photo: Nikolajs Krasnopevcevs

Project Description

Prof. Karen Frostig, Director

Locker of Memory is a multimedia memorial project dealing with the history and legacy of genocide at the Jungfernhof concentration camp in Riga, Latvia. In December of 1941, four different transports from Nuremberg, Stuttgart, Vienna, and Hamburg brought 3,985 German and Austrian Jews to the Jungfernhof concentration camp, located four kilometers outside of Riga, Latvia. Up to 800 prisoners were killed or died of inhumane treatment during that first winter and were buried at the site. Elderly prisoners deemed unfit for working were taken routinely to nearby forests and shot. Up to two thousand more were murdered in the Bikernieki Massacre, referred to as the Dünamünde Action. Four hundred remained at the camp, which was converted into a slave labor farm. Only 148 persons survived. Prof. Karen Frostig, granddaughter of victims deported to Jungfernhof, first visited the concentration camp in 2007 and again in 2010 to present a memorial for the site. She proposed a second memorial for the site in 2019. During that visit, she learned that in 2013, Latvia's first Nazi concentration camp established under German occupation, had been converted into a public park, an idyllic setting for relaxation and recreation.

The Locker of Memory project is dedicated to restoring memory to the land belonging to the former Jungfernhof concentration camp. During the spring of 2022, the website will post three major, interdisciplinary, research projects under development. The first project represents a 3-D tour of eight killing sites: the Jungfernhof concentration camp, the Skirotava train station, the Riga Ghetto, Bikernieki and Rumbula Forests, Salaspils and Kaiserwald concentration camps, and the remains of a Soviet runway. The 3-D tour also features two dozen narrations depicting the harsh reality and daily existence at the camp, as well as random murders by SS officer

Rudolf Seck, occurring on a daily basis. The tour includes an accompanying essay and timeline, featuring five distinct narratives, taking place over 800 years. Second, a twenty-minute video uses contemporary footage to depict the history of the Jungfernhof concentration camp. The visible loss of the Jewish narrative on the land is addressed, as is our effort to recover the history of camp life and the location of the mass grave. The third project is presented as a curated video of archival photos depicting four transports bound for Riga. Developed as a nighttime projection onto the Skirotava train station, the video was developed to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the earliest deportations to Riga.

Each of the three videos captures and preserves a unique perspective regarding the camp's invisible presence on the land. The project in its entirety represents a collective reckoning with the past. These projects are generously funded by the German Embassy in Latvia. During the summer and fall of 2022, Frostig will begin preparation for the development of a lasting memorial at the site. The first of two commemorative ceremonies, will take place at the camp. On July 4, 2022, Ilya Lensky will create an initial presentation of the site to visiting mayors from Germany, coinciding with phase two of scientific land explorations. During this event, a laying of wreaths will convey the significance of the site. A second, more elaborate commemorative event will take place during the summer of 2023. At this time, we will have conclusive data identifying the location of the mass grave. A formal commemorative event will take place at the gravesite embellished with two symbolic artifacts. A large-scale expertly crafted "Mourning Shroud for 800 Souls" will be used to cover the mass grave in a symbolic act of commemoration. Four metal stakes engraved with detailed data about the four transports, will be inserted into the ground to correspond with the perimeter of the recovered mass grave. The stakes will remain in the ground and be incorporated into a memorial fence that will surround and protect the gravesite from foot traffic. These acts of remembrance will lay the groundwork for establishing a permanent memorial at the camp site. Developed as an inclusive event, dignitaries and VIP's from three countries, survivors, descendants, leaders of Jewish communities, Holocaust scholars, local residents, and students will be invited to participate in the ceremony. At this time, a public statement regarding the truth about the past, the nature of the crimes, and the willingness of nations to remember the past, will go on record in preparation for memorial development.

Phase One: Research

Over a two-year period, Frostig established a multi-dimensional team of historians, scientists, artists, technologists, and educators. The history team, led by chief advisor, Ilya Lensky, Director of the Museum Jews in Latvia and chief historian Dr. Richards Plavnieks, in collaboration with historian, Evan Robins and Fred Zimmak, independent scholar and descendant of two survivors, have recovered scores of files and documents. This material, containing valuable historic data, lies on the back shelves of various archives. The scientific team, led by world-renowned Holocaust archeologist, Prof. Richard Freund and joined by Prof. Harry Jol, geographer and cartographer, Prof. Phillip Reeder, geographer and cartographer, and Paul Bauman, distinguished geophysicist are credited for finding the lost mass grave containing up to 800 bodies at the Jungfernhof camp site, Non-invasive land explorations began in July

2021 and will resume in July 2022. The technology team led by Hazal Uzunkaya, Head of the Makerlab at Brandeis University and joined by Shalini Prasad, Integrative design faculty at Lesley University, Jevgenijs Luhnevs 3-D photographer and students from both universities developed the 3-D tour, seamlessly integrating history with scientific findings. The 3-D tour becomes a significant meeting ground within the project's history. Corresponding to the overarching ideas and vision of the project, including the five-part narrative of the site put forth by Director Karen Frostig, the tour represents a complex interdisciplinary collaboration, involving all members of the project team. While sometimes the whole is greater than the parts, in this instance, individual initiatives as well as an integrated presentation of the work, are not mutually exclusive. Adding to this concept, Frostig engaged faculty, Ulrike Krippner and Julia Backhausen-Nikolic, at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences in Vienna, to develop an educational seminar for landscape architectural students, to address memorial development at the site. Frostig joined the seminar on multiple occasions to stimulate alternative approaches to landscape architecture, in relation to memorial development. Additional team members included Kabren Levinson, website designer, Nikolajs Krasnopevcevs, videographer, and Camillo Spiegelfeld, Facebook coordinator. This phase of project development will continue into 2023.

Phase Two: Online presentation of the research

History focuses on the past. Memorialization focuses on the past in the present. Exhibitions become curated arenas, inviting visitors to examine history with a new lens, provoking new questions and possibly producing new perspectives.

A fully developed exhibition combining history, art, science, and technology, will tell the complete story about this forgotten camp. Populated with pictures, maps, data-driven graphics, and models, the research also becomes a form of documentation.

Initially, we will present the work on the website. Content is extensive, containing 3-D tours, 3-D maps, archival maps, base maps, photogrammetry, video, photography, digital drawings, ERT archeological data, animated models, animated timelines, animated maps, family heirlooms optimized by VR, printed tapestries, a wall-sized projection video, and architectural drawings are in the works. Identifying appropriate venues for a traveling exhibition is the next step.

Phase Three: Memorial development

Memorials combine scientific evidence with the artistry of social engagement. Imbued with measures of social consciousness, memorials provide everyday citizens with a transformative experience of remembrance.

Memorial projects become gathering places to discuss difficult histories. Painful memories, often covered by shame and sometimes overlooked for decades, become a public call to action, a "Never Again" moment. Turning isolation into connection, memorials serve communities by strengthening national identity and bringing a degree of cohesion to bear on fractured memories.

The presence of a memorial installed at the site where crimes against humanity took place, carries enormous gravitas. The Locker of Memory memorial will tell the story of the camp as a three-tier experience. Four vertical steel tablets loosely clustered in a circular arrangement, will be inscribed with victims' names, corresponding to the four transports. Situated amid the steel tablets will be four transparent panels, ghostly in appearance, and engraved with four stark images—the train station, the mass grave, the forest, and the farm. The glass-like panels will capture the changing light of the park, presenting the invisible story of this forsaken camp, obliterated from public memory for 80 long years. Seen as a glistening apparition of an unspoken truth, the story of murder will linger on the land, sending a clear message that we can no longer bury the past. A floating canopy covering the mass grave will embody movement through light, simulating the rhythm of human breath. An imaginative memorial garden with a meandering commemorative walkway will create a reflective sense of place, connecting the names to the burial site.

---Karen Frostig, Director (2022)