

# An Investigation of the Geospatial and Religious Dimensions of the Forgotten Jewish Community of Aizpute, Latvia

Lydia G. Kruse\*, Harry M. Jol<sup>1</sup>, Jake J. Cipar<sup>2</sup>, Lauren Claas<sup>1</sup>, Sasha R. Kvasnik<sup>1</sup>, Amik W. Redland<sup>1</sup>, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Department of Geography and Anthropology<sup>1</sup>, Department of Geology and Environmental Science<sup>2</sup>, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies<sup>3</sup>, Emma H. McConnell<sup>2</sup>, Joseph M. Reeder<sup>2</sup>, Philip Reeder<sup>2</sup>, Duquesne University<sup>2</sup>, Mikaela Martinez Dettinger<sup>3</sup>, Jewish Studies Program Indiana University<sup>3</sup>

## Introductions

The small Jewish community of Aizpute, Latvia was among the many victims of the Holocaust that have been forgotten for the last 80 years. Aizpute was home to 534 Jewish residents as of June 1941, which was 15.5% of the town's population (Vitola, et al 2012). The Jewish community contributed greatly to the cultural and economic success of Aizpute, including several Jewish Associations and organizations, shops, and commercial establishments. Their contributions to the community did not deter Nazi Germany and local antisemites from annihilating the entire Aizpute Jewish community. Only thirty-three individuals were able to flee at the beginning of the war, the rest of the Jewish community was brutally murdered in nearby forests with some transferred to local cemeteries. Four years after the war's end, locals were tasked with exhuming mass graves for a proper burial in the old Jewish Cemetery of Aizpute. Shockingly, testimony reveals the appalling lack of compassion and respect during this process, as some individuals, intoxicated and callous, engaged in despicable acts while handling the decomposed bodies of the victims, including extracting gold teeth from the



bodies (Vitola, Ieva, et al 2012). With few people left to remember the Jewish community that once helped Aizpute flourish, their history has been forgotten and the exact burial grounds of the 501 Aizpute Jews is unknown (Vitola, et al 2012).

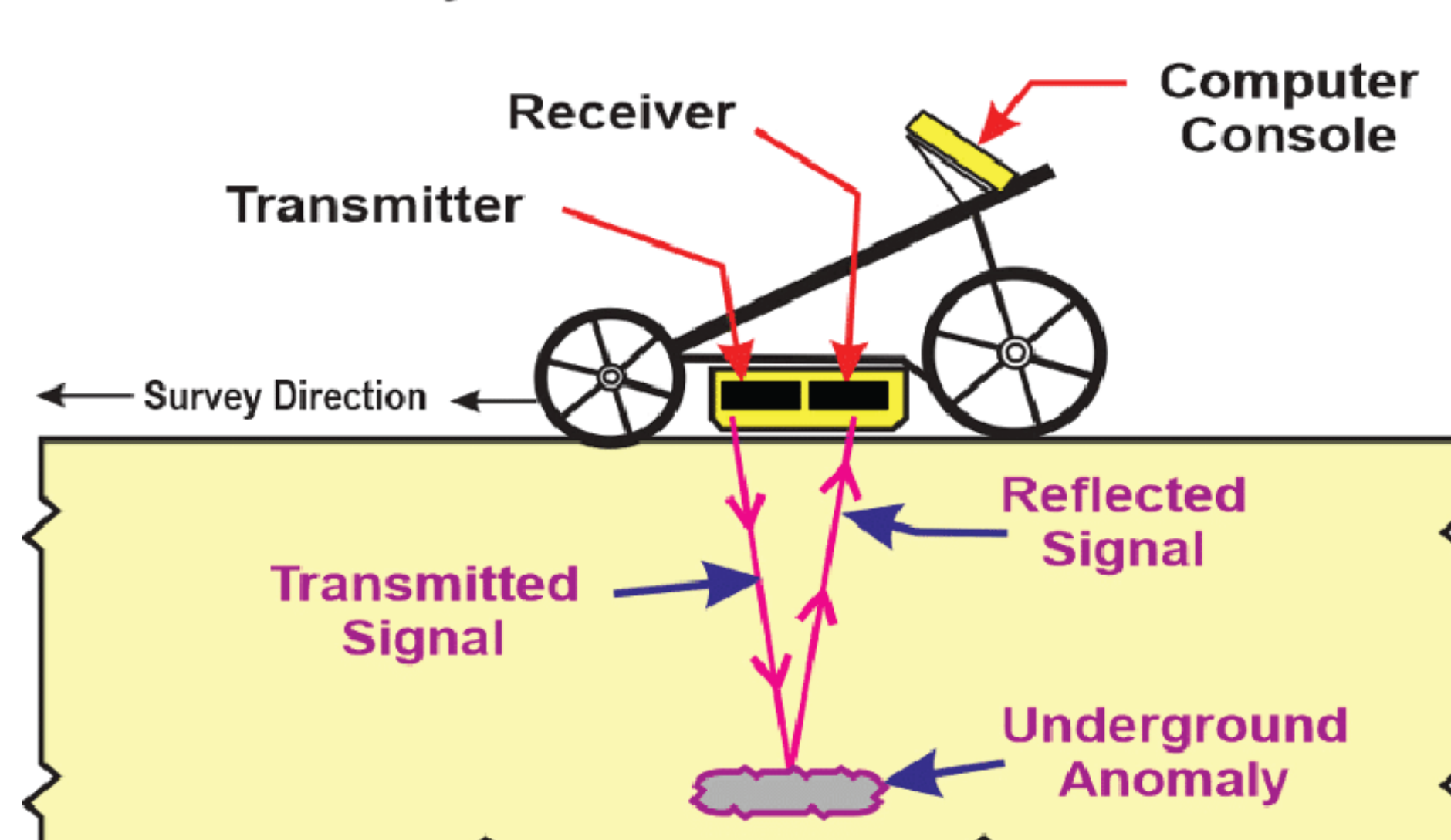
Varis Sants, a lifelong resident of Aizpute, is one of the few that bears the burden of guilt for the persecution of the Jewish community. Sants erected a stone memorial symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel near the potential burial site. The question arises: why would an agnostic Latvian take it upon himself to show compassion and memorialize these killing sites? The research team in collaboration with Jewish heritage associations, anthropologists, and scientists are using a variety of methods to search for killing and burial sites across eastern Europe. Once

located, these sites will be properly memorialized to commemorate the killing and burial sites. Two of these sites were the potential killing and burial sites of the Aizpute Jewish community that reside at a shooting range in the woods of a grapeseed farm, as well as the Jewish Cemetery (Vitola, et al 2012). Ground penetrating radar (GPR) was used to examine these locations' subsurface to search for burial sites.

## Methodology

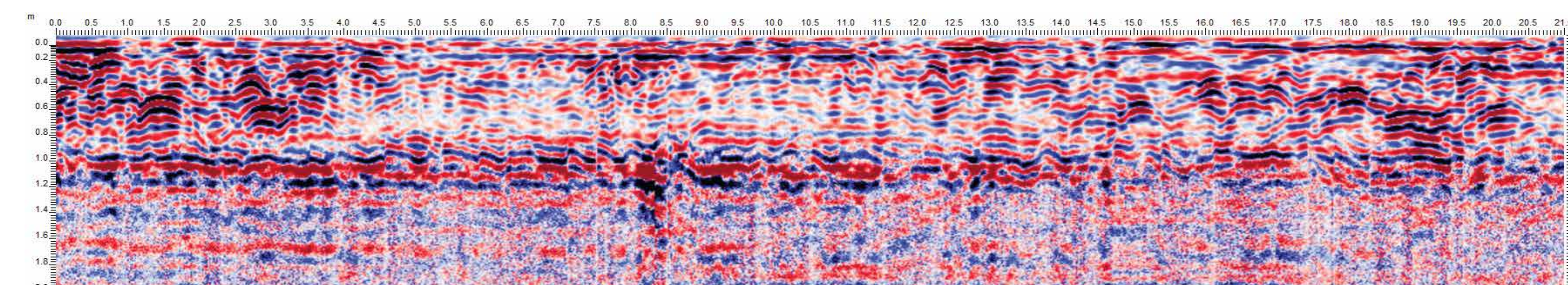
The ground penetrating radar (GPR) acquisition systems (Sensors and Software pulseEKKO Pro) were employed to collect data. GPR is a noninvasive geospatial tool that collects images of the subsurface. Drone imagery and soil probing in conjunction with GPR surveys collected in the forest and cemetery of Aizpute, were used to help interpret characteristics of collected data. In collaboration with local Aizpute community members, it was decided that the potential mass burial site was located near a shooting range in the forest of a grapeseed farm. To collect the GPR survey and 3D data, a 4.5m X 17m grid with line spaces of 0.25 meters was set up in the forest. In addition, a 45m line was collected in the same area. The grid was collected with 500 MHz antennae which traces collected every 0.02m. There were limitations to collecting data due to the dense vegetation, trees, visible roots, ground depressions and saturated soil from rain.

GPR Survey Cart - 400 MHz Antenna and Console



## Geospatial Dimensions

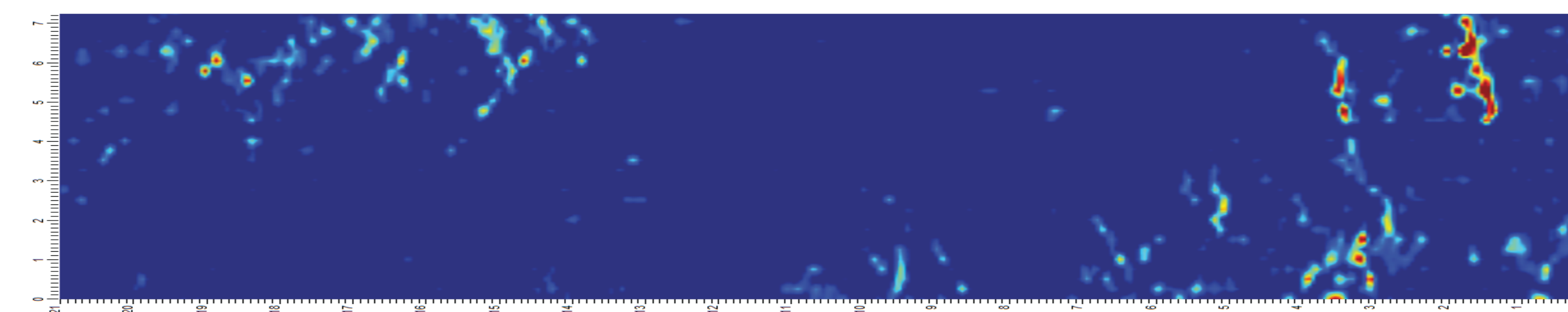
The data indicates the environment is not conducive to this site being the location of a mass burial. However, evidence of clothes, shoes, bullets, and bones found near the site in the past and during our investigation corroborates with local testimonials which suggests that the location of the mass burial is in proximity to the site.



The GPR survey indicates that at depths of 110-120 centimeters there is a horizontal compacted surface and all reflections from GPR data are attenuated below this. Clay mineralogy combined with water cause the soil to become more electrically conductive and act as an attenuating agent. Radar pulses are lost below a depth of 130 centimeters generating all attenuation of propagating waves (Conyers 2014).

Location	Sample	Texture	Struc. Type	Struc. Grade	Plasticity	Stickiness	Munsell Color	Color Name	Notes
100	1	c50%; s150%	bl	strong	sp	ss	7.5yr3/2	dark brown	surface (0 cm) to 10 cm
101	2	c50%; s 50%	bl	strong	sp	ss	7.5yr3/3	dark brown	10 to 20 cm
102	3	c50%; s 50%	bl	strong	sp	ss	10yr7/1	light gray	20 to 30 cm
103	4	c60%; s 40%	bl	strong	sp	ss	10yr5/2	grayish brown	30 to 40 cm
104	5	c90%; s110%	bl	strong	p	s	10yr5/4	yellowish brown	40 to 50 cm
105	6	c100%	bl	strong	p	s	10yr4/3	brown	50 to 60 cm
106	7	c100%	bl	strong	vp	vs	10yr5/4	yellowish brown	60 to 70 cm
107	8	c100%	bl	strong	vp	vs	10yr4/4	dark yellowish brown	70 to 80 cm
108	9	c100%	bl	strong	vp	vs	10yr5/3	brown	80 to 90 cm
109	10	c100%	bl	strong	vp	vs	10yr3/4	dark yellowish brown	90 to 100 cm
110	11	c100%	bl	strong	vp	vs	10yr4/4	dark yellowish brown	100 to 110 cm
111	12	c100%	bl	strong	vp	vs	10yr3/4	dark yellowish brown	110 to 120 cm
112	13	c100%	bl	strong	vp	vs	10yr4/4	dark yellowish brown	120 to 130 cm

The soil samples collected past 50 centimeters are 100% clay sediments with a strong structure gauge. Samples were not collected past 130 centimeters due to thick layering of clay.



At 0-50 centimeters depth there are visible hyperbolic reflections that align with the roots of the trees within the grid.

## Religious Dimensions

Latvian native, Varis Sants was born during Soviet occupation in 1964. Religion was forbidden during Soviet rule, despite the presence of many Christians in Latvia. Thus, Varis was not baptized as a child and did not hold any religious beliefs growing up. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he remained distant from religion. Several years following the Soviet Union's dissolution, Varis's mother developed dementia and moved into his home with him and his spouse. They began reading approximately thirty pages of the Christian Bible each evening, completing both the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) and New Testament in two years (Levin 2005). Concurrently, he delved into his family history, discovering family ties to Aizpute, Latvia. Varis remembers stories of his grandmother's friendship with the Jewish community of Aizpute, often offering her home as a safe haven before and during the Holocaust.



Varis's interest in Biblical and Hebrew stories, as well as his family history, sparked his curiosity in the Jewish community of Aizpute. Through his curiosity, he learned of the disregarded killing and burial sites of the Aizpute Jews. Upon discovering the potential killing and burial sites, Varis assumed the burden of honoring and commemorating these sites. Influenced by chapter four of the Book of Joshua in the Hebrew Bible, Varis carried twelve heavy stones through the forest in pouring rain to stack them near the potential site of the killings. A large stone with the Star of David engraved was placed near the stack as well. He chose stones as symbols of permanence amidst Latvia's ever-changing forests. After he completed this act of repentance, he read all 318 known names of the victims of Aizpute (Meler 2013). When asked about his motivation for memorializing the Jewish community, he emphasized it was driven not by religious beliefs, but by a sense of humanity. Though he identifies as agnostic, Varis's religious curiosity and compassion enabled him to bring solace to a forgotten community.

## Conclusion

- The geospatial investigation into the potential burial site of the Aizpute Jewish community reveals a landscape not indicative of a mass burial within the grid surveyed, however, evidence indicates the presence of mass graves near the study site.
- Although Varis identifies as agnostic, his sense of humanity and interest in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament influenced his motivations in memorializing the killing and burial sites.

