An international team led by University of Hartford Professor of Jewish History and archaeologist Richard Freund has discovered a 100-foot-long underground tunnel made by 80 Jews who attempted a courageous escape from the extermination pits at Paneriai, Lithuania, on the last night of Passover in April 1944. Although the entrance to the tunnel was known, its exact path remained a mystery until the discovery made in early June, 2016.

Calling it one of the “great Jewish escapes” of the Holocaust, Freund, who also is director of the University’s Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies, likens the discovery to finding a very well-known needle in a haystack. Noninvasive ground-penetrating radar equipment was used to find the tunnel in order to protect the sanctity of the site. As many as 100,000 people are believed to be buried there and Freund and his team found unknown burial pits in the forest adjacent to the site.

Freund initiated the investigation of the Lithuanian archaeological sites with geophysicists from Worley Parsons, Inc.’s Advisian Division in Canada, and is working with the Antiquities Authority of Israel, The Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum, Duquesne University, and University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, as well as students and staff.
As far back as Nicole Awad ’17 can remember, she has wanted to be an archaeologist. But never in her wildest dreams did this history major from New Canaan, Conn., imagine that, as an undergraduate, she would play a part in an archaeological discovery that would make headlines around the world.

This summer, Nicole was a member of an international team—led by archaeologist Richard Freund, the University of Hartford’s Maurice Greenberg Professor of Jewish History—that discovered the location of a Holocaust escape tunnel hand-dug by 80 Jewish prisoners at the extermination pits in Paneriai, Lithuania. Called the “burning brigade,” the prisoners were forced by the Nazis to incinerate bodies to hide evidence of the destruction of Lithuanian Jews during World War II. Only 12 prisoners survived the courageous escape via the tunnel, which took place on the last night of Passover in April 1944, and 11 of the 12 lived to tell the harrowing story of digging for 76 nights using only their hands, spoons, and other crude tools.

Immediately after its announcement in June, news about the discovery spread quickly throughout the world with articles and interviews appearing in countless newspapers, television stations, and online media, including The New York Times, USA Today, The Atlantic, Yahoo, and the BBC. Nicole, Freund, others from the team, and descendants of the escapees were featured in a documentary being produced by the award-winning science series NOVA. It is scheduled to air on PBS in 2017.

Nicole was amazed to learn that people from all over the world, regardless of faith or locale, care about the discovery. “As someone who wants to become an archaeologist, it is really amazing for me to see the emotion archaeology can provide,” Nicole says. She adds that, while people still care about archaeological digs at castles from the 1500s or at ancient structures, the tunnel discovery strikes a chord with many people because it’s part of recent history.

Calling the tunnel discovery monumental, Nicole says, “You find what these people did to survive and it almost feels like—not only are you discovering a real story, but you are doing them a service. It’s hearsay when someone says, ‘there’s a tunnel there’—there’s no substance to it. But now their voices can be heard and we can provide a whole community with a story of hope and liberation from this terrible and awful thing that happened.”

This was not Nicole’s first time working on an archeological project. Throughout her years as an undergraduate, she has worked on projects from Griswold, Conn. to Rhodes, Greece, and learned cutting-edge strategies along the way. The contours and direction of the 100-foot-long escape tunnel were found at levels of 3 to 15 feet underground using Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) equipment, which Nicole has operated at numerous archaeological “digs.” Originally developed for the gas and oil industry, the noninvasive technique was used in Lithuania because of its ability to identify the location of the tunnel without disturbing the resting places of some 100,000 bodies buried there.

When she came to the University of Hartford, Nicole thought she would be working on only small projects like digging in someone’s backyard for arrowheads. She credits Professor Freund with providing opportunities and invaluable experiences that will contribute to her future success. “The University of Hartford literally gave me everything,” she says. “I wouldn’t have been able to do archaeology if not for the University. The level at which the University cares about your career is astounding to me.”

Nicole is now applying to graduate school to continue her study of archaeology and finds many of the admission applications require fieldwork and real-life experiences. Looking to the future, she says her dream is to work in Egypt. “I’ve studied Egypt all my life and ever since I was 3, I wanted to be an Egyptologist. My parents said I was crazy, but here I am still trying to do it. But as long as I’m digging, I’ll be happy.”