Nazi Slogan Removed From Packard Plant

Holocaust survivor’s grandson helps take down Auschwitz-inspired graffiti.

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Contributing Writer

To this day, the ominous slogan “Arbeit Macht Frei” (Work Makes Free) hangs over the entrance to Auschwitz, the Nazi concentration camp in Poland where 1.3 million people died, many were starved or murdered in gas chambers. Last week, a hand-painted version of the same sign with similar lettering was discovered posted in the windows of the Grand Boulevard overpass at Detroit’s abandoned, dilapidated Packard Plant. The letters were spray-painted in red on what appeared to be aluminum sheets fastened to the window frame of the defunct automotive factory, according to Roni Lebovitch, 33, of Detroit.

The data analyst at a marketing and technology consulting firm took it upon himself to help rip the sign down along with Randy Wilcox of Harper Woods, an artist who runs the urban photo blog DetroitHill.com. The two men, who do not know each other, both showed up at the site in the late afternoon on Feb. 5 with the same idea — to remove the offensive message.

“When I saw it in person I thought someone definitely took time to plan it,” Lebovitch says. “The dimensions of the aluminum sheets were pretty well measured to fit the space of the frame. Whatever the motive was, it came out of ignorance. It shouldn’t have been created to begin with and the painting of it made it that much more appalling.”

Lebovitch was born in Israel and moved to Michigan in 1988. He’s the grandson of Holocaust survivor Tzipora Lebovitch, 94, of Netanya, Israel. She lost her parents and four sisters in the Nazi death camps but managed to make it out of Auschwitz alive.

“To me, it was disturbing to see those words because my grandmother is a survivor,” Lebovitch said. He first learned about the sign in a Detroit Free Press article.

“His immediate reaction was anger,” he added. “I felt like something should be done [to remove it] very quickly.”

After work, Lebovitch left his office in Midtown Detroit and drove 15 minutes northeast to the sprawling Packard Plant site. He says by the time he got there, Wilcox had already removed the first two letters. Lebovitch offered to help and Wilcox told him which staircase to climb in the crumbling structure to get to the covered bridge. While the men worked together, a local TV news crew doing a live report showed images of them on camera.

“I had some tools in my car so I brought a hammer with me,” Lebovitch says. “But we ended up using our hands. It felt gratifying to take it down. There was a sense of accomplishment — in some indirect way, justice. It was reassuring that someone else cared enough to do something about it as well.”

Wilcox (who is not Jewish) is also proud he took the sign down — even though his actions attracted some unwanted attention. In recent days, people have posted...
some nasty messages on his blog, some accusing him of "censorship." But, Wilcox stands by his decision to remove it.
"If that horrible sign was an act of free speech, then so was its tearing it down," he says. "The person who made the sign chose imagery that is radioactive and unacceptable and they displayed it in a public place with apparently no concern for who it would injure. If it's street art or graffiti, then it exists according to the rules of the street. That means it can get buffed or written over or destroyed."

Community Outrage
Heidi Bodaj, regional director of the Detroit chapter of the Anti-Defamation League, condemned the Auschwitz message, pointing out the infamous slogan was used by Nazis to taunt and dehumanize prisoners. In a strongly worded statement, she called the graffiti an "intentional and malicious act." The Anti-Defamation League is the world's leading organization fighting anti-Semitism, prejudice, bigotry and hatred.

"The prominent display of this quote at a historic Detroit landmark is disturbing and deeply offensive to victims of the Holocaust and those who fought valiantly in World War II," she said. "The fact that the perpetrators inverted the letter B, in a copy of the distinct lettering in the original sign at Auschwitz, is especially chilling. This message strikes at the very memory of a symbol representing the cruel cynicalism of Nazism. This sign greeted more than 1 million prisoners as they were herded into the Auschwitz nightmare with the duplicitous message that "work sets you free."

According to the initial Free Press report, Huntington Woods resident David Schulman, 53, reported the sign to the ADL. He told the newspaper he came across it while driving past the area recently. He also said his grandmother had family members murdered in the Holocaust.
"It's a form of hate speech," Schulman is quoted as saying. "It really appalled me."
Schulman did not respond to calls or a Facebook request for comment.

The Packard Plant, designed by architect Albert Kahn, dates back to the early 1900s. In its heyday it employed 36,000 workers; the last Packard luxury car rolled off the assembly line in 1954. The city of Detroit and state of Michigan foreclosed on the property in 1993. While the Detroit City Council has approved demolition, the 3.5-million-square-foot facility just sits there, deteriorating, on a more than 40-acre site. Fires break out regularly and scrapers, vandals, photographers, homeless people and other curious onlookers trespass constantly. There's a legal dispute over who owns the infamous ruins. Troy attorney John Bologna represents Dominic Cristini who says he is the plant's owner.
"This is a disgusting act," Bologna is quoted as saying. He told reporters he intended to have the sign taken down, but Leibovitch and Wilcox got to it first.

Stephen Goldman, executive director of the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills also spoke out about the Packard Plant sign and said he was glad to hear a Holocaust survivor's grandson helped take it down. It's unclear who posted the message or why. In blogs and other online forums, people debated whether it was an act of hate or some kind of artistic statement on the downfall of manufacturing.
"There is no good point; what is the point?" Goldman said in a TV interview. "Who are they trying to get a message to and what is that message? The only thing it shows is that there are anti-Semites, Holocaust deniers and those people who just don't care what their fellow citizens think. Our survivors are appropriately dismayed."