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Nazi sign at shuttered Mich. plant finally removed



By Niraj Warikoo, Detroit Free Press Staff Writer

Letters mimicked infamous sign at entrance of Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland.

DETROIT -- A sign at a decaying former automobile plant in Detroit that [drew outrage for its similarity to a sign at the Auschwitz concentration camp](#) has been removed.

Randy Wilcox, who runs the website DetroitFunk.com, told the Free Press he took down the letters attached to an overpass at the Packard Plant Tuesday because "like most reasonable people, I was shocked and disgusted at the use of a concentration camp sign in such a fashion. I can't imagine what the people who did it were thinking."

Earlier, Jewish groups had expressed concern over the sign that was similar to one placed at the entrance to the death camp in Poland.

"This graffiti is offensive to Jews and particularly to Holocaust survivors," said Heidi Budaj, regional director of the Anti-Defamation League, the leading Jewish civil rights group in the U.S.

Letters placed at the Packard Plant read "Arbeit Macht Frei," the same German words at the entrance to the concentration camps in Poland where Jews were forced to work and were murdered.

The phrase was German for "Work makes you free."

Stephen Goldman, executive director of the Holocaust Memorial Center Zekelman Family Campus in Farmington Hills, said: "This message is offensive on so many levels. It ... needs to be taken down." He noted that many Holocaust survivors live in Michigan.

"It's an ironic sign because the Nazis had no intention of making people free by working there," Goldman said. "They were worked to death."

When Rabbi Aaron Bergman heard Tuesday about the sign, he was upset.

In the spring of 1944, Rabbi Aaron Bergman's father entered the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland as a 13-year-old, passing under the infamous "Arbeit macht frei" sign.

David Bergman survived, but his parents, brother and sister all perished in Nazi-run concentration camps in Auschwitz and elsewhere. So "It was chilling for me because my dad is a Holocaust survivor," said Bergman of Adat Shalom, a synagogue in Farmington Hills, Mich. "A sick mind would come up with something like this."

John Bologna, an attorney for the plant's owner, called the sign "an abomination" and said the owners intended to remove it.

"I was distressed to hear of the" sign, Budaj said. "The prominent display of this quote at a historic Detroit landmark is disturbing and deeply offensive to victims of the Holocaust and to those who fought valiantly in World War II."

It was unclear who was behind the sign as people debated whether it was an act of hate or extreme satire intended to highlight the degeneration of manufacturing and cities such as Detroit.

The plant has become a symbol of urban blight and industrial decline. Designed by noted architect Albert Kahn, the 110-year-old Packard Plant used to be an auto manufacturing facility where thousands worked and was once a symbol of the strength of blue-collar labor in the Midwest. But in the decades after the plant closed in 1958, it began to wither, and its empty buildings attracted everyone from vagrants to graffiti artists to scrappers.

In recent years, some artists have used the site to make social statements.

Goldman realizes that artists use satire to make points, but said that using a Nazi slogan is "a poor image to use."

"I see no value in this," he said.

Regardless of the motive, Wilcox and Jewish groups said making references to the killings of 6 million people is unacceptable.

The placing of the letters "was either done with great malice, or done in complete stone ignorance of what Nazi symbolism" means, Wilcox said. He said the people who put up the letters appeared to have "spent some time and effort and money doing this. ... The boxes from the 16-gauge wire were still on the floor. ... The panels each had six eye bolts fastened to them."

The style of the lettering in the Packard Plant sign has specific similarities to the Nazi sign at Auschwitz that made it unique. For example, the upper half of the letter "B" in "Arbeit" ("Work") is bigger than the lower half, just like it was at Auschwitz.

FBI Detroit spokesman Simon Shaykhet said he could neither confirm nor deny whether the FBI is investigating the sign as a possible hate crime.

After surviving the Holocaust, Rabbi Bergman's father later immigrated to the U.S., where he worked as an engineer. As part of his job in Michigan, David Bergman would work with auto companies, which makes the Packard sign all the more painful.

For decades, David Bergman, now 81 and living in Florida, has worked to educate the public about the Holocaust, lecturing at numerous schools across metro Detroit, his son said.

Bergman and his father visited the site of Auschwitz in 1999, even posing for photos under the sign.

Maybe the Packard sign was meant to be "horribly ironic," Rabbi Bergman said. But for him and others, "it's just hate."