

## **Viewpoint: Why the Auschwitz sign is irreplaceable**

**The theft of the "Arbeit Macht Frei" - Work Sets You Free - sign that hung over the entrance gate to the Auschwitz camp was nothing less than a desecration, writes Rabbi Andrew Baker.**

It is ironic that on the same day that the German government announced it would contribute 60m euro to help preserve the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, the iconic entry sign reading, "Arbeit macht frei", was stolen.

Auschwitz has become both symbol and shorthand for the Holocaust. And that sign - with its twisted and false message that work will bring one freedom rather than suffering and certain death - is immediately recognisable as its nameplate.

The Auschwitz State Museum, responsible for the preserving the site, had recently embarked on a major campaign to raise more than 100m euros (\$143m; 88m) to ensure the permanent protection and preservation of the site and its contents - from victims' suitcases, and inmates' graffiti, to wooden barracks, barbed wire fences, rail platform and crematoria.

There can be no copies or reproductions; visitors must see only what was real. In that way they will be bear witness to the very objects and structures which in turn remain the mute eyewitness to what happened there.

Perhaps that is what makes the theft of this sign so shocking and essentially irreplaceable. Auschwitz is surely the very antithesis of a cathedral - not a spiritual temple evoking heaven but a hellish factory of death.

Yet, in this opposite universe those scrolled letters were its altarpiece, and its theft a desecration.

These days museums instruct and educate with a wide variety of tools and techniques, reproductions, virtual images and the creative use of limited artefacts.

Both the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem tell the story in powerful and sophisticated ways, leaving the visitor shaken and emotionally distraught.

In contrast, the Auschwitz State Museum encompasses a collection of dated national pavilions housed in the camp's stone barracks. Designed in the 1950s, it is a poor pedagogic instrument in desperate need of updating.

But all this is really secondary. The visitor to Auschwitz knows he is walking along that same platform where half a century ago Dr Mengele was directing victims to the gas chambers. He is looking at the same electrified fence that had imprisoned countless slave labourers.

And he is walking through the same gate and beneath the very same sign that cynically offered hope, but in reality promised only destruction. Or at least he was until Friday.

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