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# Vallejo artist residency explores ironic Holocaust connection

Wojak sponsors a residency winner for fifth year



Noah Breuer (left), along with Vallejo's own master printer Thomas Wojak, show a piece they've produced depicting one of Breuer's family's circus-related, circa 1925 handkerchiefs, made to look like it's hanging from a sheet of the Nazi-era yellow Stars of David he learned were printed in the same factory after it was confiscated by the Nazis. (Rachel Raskin-Zrihen — Times-Herald)

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Art professor Noah Breuer, 37, was surprised to learn his passion for textile art may have been inherited from his ancestors. However, Breuer was even more shocked to learn that a generations-old family textile printing business was confiscated by the Nazis who used it to create the infamous yellow stars the Jews of Europe were forced to wear.

The Berkeley native is the fifth artist residency awarded to master printer and art professor Thomas Wojak and his Georgia Street printmaking shop, The W.O.R.K.S. The 47-year-old business has been in Vallejo since 2002.

“This is the fifth year I have sponsored a residency winner through the California Society of Printmakers ([caprintmakers.org](http://caprintmakers.org)),” Wojak said. “Each year, three master printers host a winning artist to work with them on a project proposed through a juried process. Exploring Noah’s family past through new (printmaking) work has been a fascinating project.”

“This year, I am working with an artist researching a family history that is very intriguing,” he said. “Noah Breuer, a professor at Auburn University has spent the last month or so developing prints based on the archives he has collected from visiting (a European) textile museum.”

Wojak said he selected Breuer out of about a dozen applicants.

Breuer, a textile artist, learned that his ancestors founded a textile printing business in Bohemia in 1898 that became an industry giant before being confiscated by the Nazis, he said.

“My current project examines the visual legacy of ‘Carl Breuer and Sons’ (CB&S) my Jewish family’s former textile printing business in Bohemia,” he said. “In 1897 my great-great-grandfather Carl began the business. ... In 1942, the company, along with all other Jewish-owned property in German-occupied areas, was seized and sold to Nazi-approved owners. My family members were killed and the product of their work was lost.”

The factory, and, possibly the same equipment that for decades turned out fanciful handkerchiefs, elegant tablecloths, sheets, curtains and the like, was pressed into service to print out millions of the yellow Stars of David, outlined in black, with the word Juden inside.

They were turned out uniformly in huge sheets of badges, with cutout markings, that the Jewish populations of occupied Europe were not only forced to wear on pain of death, but also to buy, Breuer said.

Breuer said he learned about this factory and arranged to visit, learning that an archive of fabric samples and designs exists at the nearby Czech Textile Museum.

“I have acquired a rich digital collection of primary source material in the form of scans and photographs,” he said. “My research has opened a window to the material world of my lost European family and allowed me to create a physical connection to the past which only art can provide.”

Breuer said his grandparents escaped Vienna in 1938, eventually winding up in Los Angeles, while his great-grandfather Felix stayed behind, believing his standing in the community, his money and his military service in World War I, would protect him. The letters from him, while containing mundane family news, also became increasingly desperate in search of a way to escape the Nazi occupation. Felix was killed in Auschwitz in 1945, Breuer said.

Breuer said he grew up knowing the story’s basics, but had never even seen photos of the factory’s products.

The fact that he majored in printmaking in school was a coincidence, he said, adding that he’d planned to go into graphic design.

“In 2014, I became aware of a collection of original (materials) in a Czech Republic textile museum, whose mandate is collecting printed textiles of the region — a center of this industry in the area,” Breuer said. “I went there in 2016 with my fiancée, and found a guide/interpreter through a Jewish agency in Prague. I had high hopes and low expectations, but they brought out six big, flat boxes with my surname on them. That was a weird experience. And they were full of interesting stuff.”

Beuer has been working with Wojak in recreating some of his family's textile art, "re-contextualizing" it, in the hope of "resurrecting some of these images from scratch, within a new context, to tell the story, and, in a metaphorical sense, resurrect the business."

In the past month, the two have been working on two images — a circus-related handkerchief superimposed on the yellow stars, and one that depicts his grandparents' 1938, Nazi-stamped passports, superimposed over one of Felix's handwritten letters.



Thomas Wojak and Noah Breuer examine a piece they produced involving the younger man's grandparents' passports, with their Nazi stamps, superimposed over a hand-written letter from his great-grandfather who miscalculated the Nazi's genocidal intentions and stayed behind. He did not survive. (Rachel Raskin-Zrihen — Times-Herald)

"I knew much of my family was killed in the Holocaust, but to learn that the badge was produced in the same factory — possibly on the same equipment that sustained the family — for the systematic genocide of the same people..." he said.

Wojak said he enjoys working with accomplished artists/professors, with whom he shares a "language," and found this latest endeavor especially enlightening.

“I would say working with Noah, providing my printmaking expertise and aesthetic input, we arrived at prints that not only portrayed the imagery of the textile printing plant, but humanized and contextualized the family connections during this horrific period of Nazi oppression,” he said.

Breuer is also involved with a second residency, working in an Emeryville glass shop, and said he hopes to eventually produce a show with works in glass, paper and fabric. His dream is to show his work in Europe, he said.


For information on Breuer, visit [NoahBreuer.com](http://NoahBreuer.com). For information on Wojak and The W.O.R.K.S., visit [thomaswojak.com](http://thomaswojak.com).

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## Rachel Raskin-Zrihen

In her 20 years with the Times-Herald, Rachel Raskin-Zrihen has covered education, the City of American Canyon, business, downtown Vallejo, public safety and general assignment. She has and occasionally still does, write a column – humor or otherwise. She lives locally, and is the married mother of two grown sons.

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