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Controversial 'Nazi monument' is removed after international media storm: "It was never our intention to hurt people"



The artwork *De Latvian Bijenkorf* will no longer be on display at its current location in Vloethenveld. — © mvrn

ZEDELGEM -The controversial work of art *De Latvian Bijenkorf* is disappearing from the Zedelgem street scene. At least temporarily, because the municipality is looking for a permanent solution and location for the monument, which some say would be a tribute to the Latvian Nazi collaboration. "We don't want to act hastily," says Alderman for Heritage Jurgen Dehaemers.

Arne Franck

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The controversial artwork *De Letse Bijenkorf* disappears from the zedelgem street scene. At least temporarily, because the municipality is looking for a permanent solution and location for the monument, which according to some would be a tribute to the Latvian Nazi collaboration. "We don't want to rush the work," says Alderman of Heritage Jurgen Dehaemers.

In June, the Zedelgem municipality found him in the eye of the storm when the French magazine *Paris Match* had paid tribute to the 12,000 Latvian Nazi collaborators who were imprisoned in the POW camp in Vloethenveld after the war. Opposition party *Vooruit* demanded the removal of "The shame

of Zedelgem", but Heritage Alderman Jurgen Dehaemers (CD&V-Nieuw) stated that the work is not an ode to Nazism, but only to freedom.

Nevertheless, the municipality decided to provide the information board with a new, more nuanced text for the work. Later, the name of the square where the artwork stands, Briviba square, was again changed to the original name 'Peerdenbilk'. According to critics, the name Briviba, the Latvian word for freedom, gave the impression that the monument is dedicated to the release of the Latvian prisoners of war, who thus escaped their punishment.

Group of historians

Last week, at the request of the municipality of Zedelgem, an international group of historians also met around the issue. "The controversy of the past few months, the route taken and the recommendations that are now on the table, have further opened the eyes of the municipality to the complexity of this story," says alderman Dehaemers. "But as the experts have also concluded, it was never our intention to pay tribute to the Nazi regime, to justify war crimes or to deliberately hurt people."

Nevertheless, the experts advise to remove the artwork. "We are inserting a period of reflection in which we will further appeal to the international guidance committee and, together with all parties involved, will seek a supported and well-thought-out permanent solution and location for De Letse Bijenkorf", concludes Dehaemers.

Mp Vicky Reynaert (Vooruit), who rang the bell at the time, is satisfied with the decision, but regrets that it is not clear what will happen to the monument. "For us, it can disappear permanently," she says. "We absolutely must avoid it regaining its original meaning in another location. I hope that the municipality's understanding will continue to grow that the monument is experienced as very offensive to the relatives of the victims of the Nazi horror, the patriotic associations and the Jewish community."

When exactly the monument will be removed has not yet been decided.