

**THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE**

**date** August 25, 1977

**to** AJC Area Directors, JCRCs, Federations, National Jewish Organizations

**from** Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, National Interreligious Affairs Director

**subject** REPORT ON THE 1980 OBERAMMERGAU PASSION PLAY

As you have undoubtedly noted in the press last week, a revised version of the Oberammergau Passion Play has been prepared for possible presentation in 1980 in that Bavarian village. The several press reports issued by the AP, UPI, Reuters, New York Times, Time Magazine, among other news sources in this country and abroad have been contradictory about its anti-Jewish content and have therefore led to some confusion.

The purpose of this memorandum is to seek to clarify the present nature of the revised Oberammergau Passion Play, and to report to you on the unique role that the American Jewish Committee has been invited to play in the current revision process.

The confusion has been manifested in the following manner:

The New York Times reported in its Aug. 16th edition a UPI dispatch headlined "Sins of Mankind Kill Christ in New Oberammergau Play." That story appears to have left the impression that the new version has been completely purged of anti-Jewish references and portrayals. It also suggests that the new version actually will be the one to be produced in 1980.

A subsequent AP dispatch in the New York Times of Aug. 19, however, bears the headline, "New Passion Play Draws Protest," and indicates that "angry townspeople sought today to block a new version of the town's world-famous Passion Play." They contend that "the new script is stilted, insincere and (contains) 'consummate anti-Semitism' worse than the original." The AP report also states that the "Oberammergau town council says it will decide later this year whether to use the revised script" or revert to the 1970 version.

What in reality is the present situation?

In mid-July, AJC's Executive Vice-President, Bertram H. Gold, received an invitation from Lufthansa German Airlines to send a delegation to preview a five-and-a-half hour presentation of the newly-revised version of the play.

After some consideration, it was decided to accept the invitation and an AJC delegation saw the play on Aug. 15 in the Oberammergau village. The AJC delegation consisted of Miles Jaffe, national chairman of the Interreligious Affairs Commission; Zachariah Shuster, our European consultant; William Trosten, director of our Resource Development Department (who reads and speaks German fluently); and myself.

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Our Interreligious Affairs Department, as you may know, has been engaged in efforts to purge the Oberammergau Passion Play (and other Passion Plays in this country, in Europe, and in Latin America,) of anti-Semitic content over the past several decades. In 1970, we published a comparative content analysis entitled, Oberammergau 1960 and 1970 - A Study in Religious Anti-Semitism that received widespread attention and became a significant factor leading to the decision for the preparation of the revised text.

Following our preview of the 1980 production - which began at 4 p.m. and concluded at 11:30 p.m. (with a two-hour dinner break), our AJC delegation was invited to meet with the central personalities responsible for the writing and the production of the 1980 Oberammergau play. These included the editor of the new version, Alois Fink, who is director of the Cultural Division of the Bavarian Radio and TV network; Hans Schwaighofer, director of the 1980 production; Helmut Fischer, who played the role of Jesus in 1970; the composer of the new musical score; several Oberammergau town officials, and representatives of the West German Government, the Bavarian Tourist Ministry, and Lufthansa. (Schwaighofer played the role of Judas in the 1950 and 1960 plays. The village named him to direct the 1970 version, but he resigned after the town council overruled his attempt to reform the play.)

The "dialogue" - which the Oberammergau officials characterized as "their first serious discussion with responsible Jewish representatives" - lasted until four o'clock in the morning! During this extraordinary frank and scholarly exchange, we set forth our concerns that this pageant - as we noted in our 1970 study - has traditionally been "a vehicle of anti-Jewish prejudice and an obstacle to Christian-Jewish friendship and cooperation." We also recalled that the text used every decade over the past 100 years, based on a script written in 1850 by the local parish priest, Rev. Josef Daisenberger, was acclaimed by Adolf Hitler at the height of the Second World War in these words:

"It is vital that the Passion Play be continued at Oberammergau; for never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed." (Secret Conversations, 1941-1944; New York, Farrar, Straus and Young, 1953, p. 457.) Under the Nazi Government, the Oberammergau Passion Play was classified as "a racially important cultural document," and on the occasion of the pageant's tercentennial, in 1934, a Nazified special performance represented Jesus and his disciples as Aryan heroes.

We also noted that the significance of the Passion Play as an instrument for influencing attitudes toward Jews and Judaism is to be seen in the fact that since the end of World War II, some one-and-a-half million people have come to performances; that in 1970 alone, 530,000 people came from 113 different countries to view the 102 performances.

In light of that history, we told the Oberammergau officials that we welcomed the forthright initiatives take by Mr. Schwaighofer, Mr. Fink, and those associated with them to abandon the offensive Daisenberger script, and to replace it with a modernized version of the text written in 1750 by the Benedictine priest, the Rev. Ferdinand Rosner, even though the latter version still contains a number of problems described below.

By agreement among members of the AJC delegation, we acknowledged that the new Rosner-Fink text contains a number of positive features that are encouraging:

First, the Rosner script is written as a medieval morality play cast in metaphysical terms of the eternal conflict between the forces of good and evil, symbolized by the conflict between Lucifer, the Prince of Hell, and Jesus. In that perspective, the role of the Sanhedrin and "the Jews" tends to be less central than in earlier Passion Plays.

Second, the Rosner text opens with a group of "Protective Spirits" who address the Christian audiences with this admonition:

"Don't say the Jews over there are betraying their own; all of us have done the same often enough."

Third, the several scenes involving the Sanhedrin and the Chief Priests show a relatively large group of "Rabbis" or "Jews" who seek to understand Jesus, therefore presenting "the Jews" in a much more differentiated way than in the past plays.

At the same time, we indicated, there remain a number of problems both in the revised text and in the actual production which we urged them to face and seek to resolve. These include, briefly stated, the following:

First, despite the morality play setting, there is a real danger that the Sanhedrin and "the Jews" will be perceived as "instruments of Lucifer" and are conspiring with Satanic elements against Jesus and Christians.

Second, there are four scenes of debate within the Sanhedrin about the blasphemy of Jesus which tends to underscore a far more prominent role of "the Jews" in contributing to the death of Jesus than in fact exists in the Synoptic Gospels. Several of the Sanhedrin scenes conclude with "all the Jews" on the stage crying out in a chorus, "It is decided; he must die, lest we and our reign perish!" We urged that these scenes be reconsidered, and that these provocative chorus lines be eliminated.

Third, Pontius Pilate is presented as a weakling who is manipulated by the Sanhedrin and a howling "Jewish mob" to make the decision to crucify Jesus. That portrayal, we noted, is contrary to our historic knowledge that Pilate was cruel and sadistic, and that he alone had the authority to decide on the crucifixion.

We discussed these and related issues in a serious and constructive spirit. At the conclusion of our dialogue, the Oberammergau officials formally requested of the American Jewish Committee that

- 1) We prepare for them a line-by-line analysis of the Rosner-Fink text, providing in writing the specific recommendations for editing and emendations that we felt were necessary;
- 2) We remain available as resource to help them bring about the maximum possible improvement through the removal of anti-Jewish references and negative dramatic imagery.

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The AJC delegation agreed to do so, indicating our awareness that there is no guarantee that the Rosner-Fink text will finally prevail, and our recognition that even with improvements this is still a Passion Play in which Jews can never emerge ultimately untainted.

Nevertheless, we have concluded that the Jewish interest would be better served through encouraging the use of the Rosner-Fink text and by making whatever possible contributions we can to the most positive portrayals of Jews and Judaism in the 1980 production.

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