

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

date February 9, 1978
to Bert Gold
from Marc H. Tanenbaum
subject Meetings in Oberammergau, February 3-5, 1978

In response to requests contained in recent letters from Dr. Alois Fink, editor of the Rosner version of the Oberammergau Passion Play, and Hans Schwaighofer, the director, an AJC delegation consisting of Miles Jaffe, William Trosten, and myself went to Oberammergau for a series of meetings that began on Friday, February 3, and that concluded on Sunday, February 5.

In their confidential letters and notes to us, both Fink and Schwaighofer expressed a growing concern over efforts on the part of "ultra-conservative" forces in Oberammergau to prevent the adoption of the more pro-Jewish Rosner version of the Passion Play in order to return to the earlier anti-Semitic Daisenberger script. Apparently, following the generally positive reactions to the August 1977 preview of the Rosner version that was expressed by the audiences and in the German and overseas press, Fink, Schwaighofer, Helmut Fischer and their colleagues took for granted that the Oberammergau Town Council and villagers supported the adoption of the Rosner text as the basis for the 1980 production.

In their euphoria, they seemingly had not realized that the pro-Daisenberger forces (which included not only traditionalists but unregenerate Nazis and anti-Semites) refused to give up the ghost and set about systematically organizing the villagers to defeat the Rosner version.

Ernst Zwink, the Burgomeister, was apparently the chief organizer of the pro-Daisenberger forces. He and his associates had recently conducted a "public opinion survey" of the villagers and announced that 60 versus 40 percent of the townspeople favored returning to Daisenberger. Both Fink and Schwaighofer disputed the validity of the survey, and reported that Zwink refused to show them the polling data.

While the Oberammergau Town Council had earlier voted 11 to 6 in favor of the Rosner text, Fink and Schwaighofer had now become quite concerned that the pro-Daisenberger forces led by Zwink were gaining strength and if left uncontested might well defeat the Rosner script during the March 5th election.

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They invited our AJC delegation to make a special trip at this time as a means of dramatizing to the Zwink-pro-Daisenberger forces that "the outside world" was watching what was going on in Oberammergau, and that there would be consequences in response to their actions. The pro-Rosner leaders were strongly supported by Lufthansa Airlines, especially in the person of Karl Koepcke, public relations director and a good friend of Bill Trosten's. From our August visit, we were also aware that some officials in the West German Government and in the Bavarian Tourist Ministry also informed Oberammergau authorities that they favored the Rosner version.

While in August we met mainly with the pro-Rosner group and had a remarkably constructive dialogue (see my last Oberammergau memo, August 25, 1977), we decided now to meet with "the opposition." On Friday afternoon, we had lunch with Burgomeister Zwink at the Alois Lang Inn in Oberammergau. Interestingly, he brought his own English interpreter, even though Koepcke and Trosten are fluent as translators.

Our meeting with Zwink lasted four-and-a-half hours. It should be recorded that Miles Jaffe and Bill Trosten were absolutely superb in their presentation of the issues - cool, disciplined, rational, persuasive. It was a marvelous piece of AJC teamwork at its best.

We informed Zwink that we were not accusing either Oberammergau nor himself of being anti-Semitic; that we did not believe in the corporate guilt of the entire German people; we were not anti-Christian. In fact, we showed him a large collection of Anglo-Jewish press clippings which documented our efforts to interpret the August 1977 Rosner preview affirmatively in the United States and elsewhere.

But we made it clear to Zwink in forceful and unmistakable terms that we regarded the Daisenberger text as "structurally anti-Semitic" and that no cosmetic changes could redeem it of its fundamental anti-Jewish nature. Koepcke pressed the point, in support of our views, that the Daisenberger text would damage Bavaria, German, and Christianity in decisive ways.

When the meeting was over, all of us had the clear impression that we had shaken Zwink pretty strangely.

Later, on Friday and Saturday, we met at great length with Fink, Schwaighofer, and Fischer to discuss strategy. On Sunday morning, we met again to draft a letter to Mayor Zwink as a memorandum setting forth our position. Miles drafted an excellent text (copy of which is attached) and Trosten and Fink translated it into German. While we were working on the texts, Helmut Fischer - who, in addition to

playing Jesus in the 1970 production is also deputy mayor - came in to tell us that Zwink had just called "a special meeting" of the Town Council for next Wednesday, February 8th. Fink, Schwaighofer, and Fischer thought that that might be a positive development, and a direct response to our 4½-hour conversation with Zwink.

Fischer reported that he had been asking for such a meeting of the Town Council for several weeks in order to hold a vote on the Passion Play text, but Zwink kept avoiding summoning the Town Council.

On late Wednesday, February 8th, Schwaighofer telephoned Bill Trosten (in Montreal). The Town Council had met and voted 9 to 6 - in favor of Rosner! Unless some other manipulation develops, the chances appear that the 1980 production will be based on the Rosner script.

Footnote: because Miles, Bill, and I took the time and trouble to travel overseas in order to bolster the Rosner side, the feelings of appreciation for our efforts on the part of the pro-Rosner group became increasingly strong and manifest. On Saturday afternoon, while Miles and I were visiting with Schwaighofer and his wife in their home, I said to Schwaighofer - "Our struggle now must be concentrated on defeating the Daisenberger text and winning a victory for the Rosner script. But once that happens, we will want to talk with you further about making needed additional changes in Rosner which still has some anti-Jewish problems." Schwaighofer responded spontaneously, "We will make whatever changes you request that are within reason and our competence. We will cooperate as fully with you as you have with us!" We drank a schnapps, or several, to that!

MHT:RPR

Enclosure

cc: M. Yarmon
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