

TRANSLATION by George Salomon

Citizen's Initiative for the 1980 Passion Play

Theaterstrasse 8
8103 Oberammergau
February 25, 1978

OPEN LETTER

Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum
American Jewish Committee
165 East 56th Street
New York
New York 10022

Dear Mr. Tanenbaum

We are glad that you desire friendly relations with our community. During the years of the Third Reich, this very community aided many Jews, so friendly relations should be a matter of course.

You will therefore surely understand that we must reject any meddling in the internal affairs of the village. Of course we are willing to listen to criticism; but it must be grounded in fact and must take realities into account. We realize that you cannot judge correctly, since you have never viewed the Daisenberger=Dedler Passion. Over the last 128 years, millions of people have departed from this spectacle with deep emotion. We cannot imagine that your impression would be different.

You believe the Daisenberger=Dedler Passion to be anti-Semitic. Unfortunately, just like Mr. Schwaighofer and Dr. Fischer here in town, you fail to specify details and reasons; but criticism must be based on reasons. As you know, the Daisenberger=Dedler version is being revised for 1980; specifically, it is being shortened somewhat and examined for passages that might convey an impression of anti-Semitism, although such is not really the case. In this connection we do wish to hear Jewish arguments and points of criticism. Since you have a copy of the Daisenberger text, we would be grateful if you could let us have your points of criticism regarding this text by the beginning of May. We can consider criticisms that are submitted to us. It would be in our mutual interest if you were to accept this offer of cooperation, because otherwise we would have to explain to the world press that Jewish quarters declined to help with the version preferred by Oberammergau. You surely will not wish to have it said that your organization is trying to dictate to Oberammergau which play is to be performed. We assume that you are no less democratic than your American fellow-citizens.

Since you have never seen the Daisenberger play, you cannot have understood it correctly. In our Daisenberger play, which is preferred by a large majority of the population, the Jews opposed to Christ act out of inner conviction, out of their faith. It is different in the Rosner version; there they are represented as tools of evil.* You will permit us to ask whether it is good for Jewry when only evil spirits can influence

**The original German is ambiguous here; the phrase can also mean "tools of the Evil One." -- Translator's note.*

the Jews, as in the Rosner play...

Like millions of believing Christians, we are of the opinion that the collective guilt of the Jews is not, indeed cannot be, the issue in our Passion. It is, after all, the greatest distinction of the Jewish people that Christ arose from it. Thus, we do not understand why Jewish organizations oppose Passion plays, when their people gains distinction from them.

You will surely understand our indignation about your boycott threat in the name of the American people and of "the world's citizens," and about you questioning of the democratic character of our country. Hundreds of thousands of your American fellow citizens have been deeply moved by Oberammergau, whereas you represent only one American minority, albeit an influential one, of whose opinions we take notice. But you do not represent America, let alone other countries. Nor can we acquiesce in your doubting our country's democratic character. Our country is one of the most democratic in the world -- though it is true that democracy is put in doubt when a communal council acts contrary to the clear will of a majority of the population, as happened in our village a few weeks before the March 5 election.

We find it interesting that you do not utter a single word to say that a Rosner Passion, if any, would not be boycotted by your organization. According to various statements by some Jewish organizations, Passion plays ought to be done away with as a matter of principle.

We will be glad to cooperate with you, but only on an appropriate basis. The final and decisive word lies with Oberammergau and its citizens.

Sincerely yours,

Citizen's Initiative for the 1980 Passion Play

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3/7/78

March 27, 1978

Gemeinderat von Oberammergau
Citizens' Initiative for the 1980
Passion Play
8103 Oberammergau
West Germany

Gentlemen:

Last week we received your "Open Letter" to us concerning the Oberammergau Passion Play.

We welcomed receiving your expression of views because we sincerely believe that progress towards the solution of the serious problems raised by the Oberammergau Passion Play can only be solved by honest discussion between all the parties affected by this production. Nonetheless, I must, in all candor, share with you at the outset my chagrin over the tone of your letter and a number of the implications contained therein.

However, since pardon and forgiveness of sin are central spiritual and moral virtues of Biblical and Rabbinic Judaism -- in which Jesus, the Disciples, and the early Christian Church were nurtured -- I will put aside any personal feelings of affront and address myself to the several issues that your letter raises.

We have not sought to "meddle" in the internal affairs of Oberammergau. In our discussions in your village as well as in our comments to the interested press, we have emphasized repeatedly that we respect the fact that your Passion Play is an artistic creation of the village of Oberammergau. As a pioneer human rights and civil liberties organization in the United States, we have consistently fought since our beginning any efforts by anyone at "censorship" of "freedom of expression."

But, as anyone conversant with the history of democratic liberties knows, freedom of expression involves duties as well as rights. The basic documents of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights and the various UN Covenants outlawing racial and religious discrimination oppose any public expressions in whatever medium that "incites hatred, violence, or bigotry" against any racial, religious, or ethnic community in the international

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community. The Federal Republic of West Germany is a signator of these United Nations Declarations and Covenants and -- as is the case with the United States and all other nations who solemnly signed these universal documents -- all its citizens are obligated not to violate these fundamental principles of respect for the religious faiths and traditions of any other people.

While we reiterate our firmly-held conviction that your Passion Play must indeed be respected as a creation of your village, it is an inescapable fact -- one of those "facts" and "realities" that you quite rightly urge us to take into account -- that the Oberammergau Passion Play is not just an "internal matter" of consequence solely to the villagers of Oberammergau. As you indicate in your "open letter" with apparent pride and gratification, "over the last 128 years, millions of people have departed from this spectacle with deep emotion." According to your own press announcements, in 1970 alone some 500,000 people from 113 countries have viewed the Oberammergau Passion Play.

By your own admission, therefore, the Oberammergau Passion Play has become an international event. Its moral, spiritual, and social consequences thus have become a matter of international consequence, far transcending the borders of the village of Oberammergau. In its highest sense, Oberammergau succeeded in promoting your Passion Play as an "international" artistic achievement, that seeks to invite larger and larger audiences from all parts of the world. It therefore seems to us that your own success precludes your regarding the critical response of people from outside your village as "meddlers."

Beyond that, its international character has made the Oberammergau Passion Play a universal symbol and barometer of the attitudes not only of your villagers but as well of Bavaria and "the New Germany" to anti-Semitism, to the Jewish people, to living Judaism, and to democracy itself.

You imply that we doubt the "democratic character" of your country. We do not. However, both we and you would be foolish if we did not note that such doubts do exist in the West. A determined refusal on the part of your group in Oberammergau to take into serious account the information we have presented to you cannot but help nurture such doubts.

We cannot understand your reference to a "boycott threat." The American Jewish Committee has never made such threat. Historically, this organization, and its various offices in Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East, do not engage in boycotts and do not support them. We have, however, sought to point out to you that Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical Christian as well as Jewish groups in this country and elsewhere would see the Daisenberger text in 1980 as deeply offensive to modern views concerning Jewish-Christian relations that are based on the most serious Biblical

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and historical scholarship as well as on universal conceptions of human rights. The negative reactions of the highest authorities of the Roman Catholic hierarchy and Protestant denominational leadership in this country as well as in Germany and elsewhere to the problem of the Daisenberger text confirms our statements to you. Therefore, the issue is not whether we would or would not participate in a boycott. The issue is what the worldwide reaction would be to performance of the Daisenberger text in 1980. We are convinced that it could be strongly condemnatory, particularly in view of the expectation that the Rosner text would be used.

As you indicate, we do believe that the Daisenberger-Dedler Passion does foster anti-Semitic attitudes. We find it difficult to understand how you can say that we "fail to specify details and reasons" for this criticism. Months prior to the 1970 production, we sent to leaders of Oberammergau a detailed line-by-line analysis of the 1960 Daisenberger text compared with the amended 1970 text. That scholarly document provides chapter and verse of the reasons for our criticism of the Daisenberger text. Indeed, in 1970 you published a volume of defense of the Daisenberger text that was in fact an effort to respond to the historical, theological, and Biblical issues that we pointed to in our study.

Since you invite us to provide "Jewish arguments of criticism" of the 1970 Daisenberger text, we are glad to comply with your request and we enclose additional copies of our study. We trust you will review our documentation carefully, and will note in particular our conclusion on page 18 of the study:

"The relatively trifling changes made to 'update' the (1970) Oberammergau Passion Play do not alter this basic truth: The play reflects an ingrained negative attitude toward Judaism and Jewry, perpetuated by certain traditions of Christianity."

We also call to your attention the critique on page 17 of our study which indicates that "taken all in all, the 1970 revision of the Passion Play text falls far short of removing all gratuitous anti-Jewish elements," which include these specific concerns:

"The 1970 text, like its predecessors, still draws Jesus' antagonists as fiendish, almost subhuman creatures.

"It misrepresents Jewish religion in Jesus' time as harsh, corrupt and worthless.

"It presents all Jews as enemies of Jesus, asserts that they knowingly accepted the guilt in his death for themselves and their descendants, and maintain that they have been permanently rejected by God for this reason.

"It falsifies the character and historic role of Pilate, and shifts the role of the crucifier from the Romans to the Jews.

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"It fails to make clear the background of oppressive Roman rule against which the drama of Jesus' ministry was enacted, and without which the actions of Jesus' Jewish antagonists cannot be understood."

In sum, our study of the texts and these specific criticisms of the changes proposed for the 1970 version, convinces us that the central theme of the Daisenberger text is the collective guilt of all Jews in the death of Jesus. We wish it were possible to eliminate that hostile theme from that text. We, and the Christian authorities who have studied the problem, believe that the removal of that and related themes from the Daisenberger text would be impossible without destroying the text itself.

We again point out to you that our understanding of the Daisenber text is not solely a Jewish understanding. We call to your attention to the Vatican Declaration on Non-Christian Relations, Nostra Aetate, as well as to the official proclamation of the American Catholic hierarchy, A Statement on Passion Plays, and those of Catholic and Protestant scholars which are quoted verbatim in our enclosed study on pages 20 to 22. These criticisms of Christian authorities and scholars, as well as comments in the general press and the religious press reflect agreement with our views. For your information, we enclose copies of some of the articles which have recently appeared in the American press and which refer to the latest declarations made on Feb. 17, 1978, by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the National Council of Churches. It is clear that there is a general disapproval and rejections of the Daisenberger text which cannot be waved away as a parochial concern of the Jewish people.

Our disagreement with you can be summarized by reference to one sentence in your letter. You state that you "do not understand why Jewish organizations oppose Passion Plays, when their people gain distinction from them." We have gained hatred, persecution, bloodshed and death for hundreds of years -- and finally genocide -- from the theme of collective Jewish guilt for the death of Jesus and the so-called "blood curse" arising from that canard of guilt. Dachau and Auschwitz are the traumatic reminders of that dehumanization of the Jewish people.

Since Vatican Council II, the majority of the Christian world has recognized this fact. We ask: when will your group in Oberammergau finally recognize these facts?

We have seen your trial production of the Rosner text as an honest effort to give artistic and emotional expression to Christian views of human sin, the possibility of human redemption and Jesus' teachings of love and faith. We and most Christians who have studied the history of religious differences between Christianity and Judaism agree that the central theme of the Daisenberger text contradicts all of those teachings while the central theme of the Rosner text does not. It is the right of Oberammergau to nonetheless choose to perform Daisenberger. It would also be the right of both other Christians and Jews to draw their own conclusions about such a decision.