

Oberammergau

August 15, 1979

Professor Leonard Swidler, Editor
Journal of Ecumenical Studies
Temple University
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19122

Dear Leonard:

Thank you for your letter of August 7th. I appreciate your sending me a copy of your report on the 1980 Oberammergau Passion Play and the enclosed news stories.

Judy did give me a report of your statement at the ADL luncheon.

Let me try to reply, albeit briefly, to the several points you raise:

1) Judy's line-by-line analysis of the "revised" 1980 text was in fact a "team enterprise." The other members of the team who worked with her systematically on the drafting of her report were George Salomon and William Trosten, both born in Germany who speak and read German which was their mother tongue. (In fact, Trosten is a Muncher, and speaks the Munich dialect.) They worked together over every line of the text. I supervised the entire production. It was "hardly a doubtful scholarly practice." In fact, Professor Henrich, president of the Bavarian Catholic Academy, was so positive about the original German versions of our Oberammergau studies that he had copies distributed to each of the 400 academic and theological personalities who attended the November 14, 1978 day-long symposium that we co-sponsored with him on "The Passion of Jesus." (For a report, see the enclosed article on "Oberammergau Update.")

2) Our study was based on the printed revised 1980 text given to us by members of the Oberammergau Town Council.

3) Re your comment about how "the hostility of Jesus' enemies... would automatically lead the audience to hostility toward Jews as such, to Anti-Semitism," I find that rather amazing, to say the least,

Leonard. Given the context and the historical setting of the drama, it would seem inevitable that these portrayals will be understood as referring to the Jewish people. Indeed, the entire dynamic of the Passion Spiel as a morality play is fundamentally centered on the dramaturgic device of Christians (Christ) representing the Children of Light struggling against the Jews as the Children of Darkness (from medieval times in league with Satan.) That is the essential point of our study - the Passion Play of Daisenberger is structurally anti-Jewish and linguistic emendations, however well-intended, do not alter that crucial reality.

Our study will be published shortly and I will rush a copy to you in order that you can read for yourself the analysis we have written. I would be interested in your forthright response to it.

4) As to the growth of interreligious programs between Jews and Christians in Germany, I agree with everything you say about the potential for the future. We have a number of major programs functioning on a variety of academic, seminary, and university levels and the results thus far are most encouraging. When we next meet, I will be glad to share some of my impressions with you, and would be interested in your own.

My one concern which I must share with you in all friendship is that I believe that the line taken by the ADL on the Passion Play in its present form has done a disservice to the progressive and democratic elements in Oberammergau and in Germany generally. The headline of the Philadelphia Inquirer story, repeated in other forms, in many parts of the country states, "Passion Play 1980 Purged of Historical Anti-Semitism." That is a message to the Mayor Swinks and his allies that they are relieved of any further responsibility to face the anti-Jewish themes and constructs in the 1980 Play. They now have the ADL's "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval." We spoke yesterday with several of the younger Catholic leaders in Oberammergau and they are deeply upset by this development. One says that he feels betrayed in his struggle to uproot anti-Semitism in the Play and in the village.

I can assure that the AJC does not plan to abandon them, nor to let them down in their principled and worthy struggle for truth and decency. Adolph Hitler termed the Daisenberger text "an important racial and cultural document of the German people which must be kept alive." We do not plan to give Hitler or contemporary Nazis any more victories.

But we do need to talk more.

Cordially,

Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum
National Director
Interreligious Affairs

MHT:FM
Encl.

Oberammergau



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TEMPLE UNIVERSITY
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19122

August 23, 1979

Marc Tanenbaum

A.J.C.
165 E. 56th St.
New York, NY 10022

Dear Marc:

Thank you very much for your letter of August 15. I look forward to receiving your line-by-line analysis of the 1980 text. I still think that the key to eliminating Antisemitism in any passion play is to make certain that Jesus and his followers look as Jewish as do his opponents. This corresponds to the historical data as we know them, and, with that sort of image projected, the dramatic struggle will come across as an inner-Jewish tension. From that no Antisemitism can flow.

I believe that the Oberammergau people have moved significantly in that direction, but also that more can and should be done in that direction. My nineteen-page report, I believe, outlines those desiderata. You will recall that my letter to Mayor Zwink, of which I sent you a copy in my last letter to you, pushes that point again very strenuously. I think that the most effective way to increase the improvement of the Oberammergau Passion Play is to approach the responsible people in Oberammergau in warranted praise and urgings of further collaboration on the desiderata.

If there is any way at all that we can creatively collaborate on this project so as to work at joint rather than cross purposes, I am more than eager to do so.

I will be out of the country for a week and then immersed in the beginning of the semester, so that I will not be free until nearly the middle of September. But, perhaps we could make arrangements to talk at length sometime shortly thereafter. I will be back in the country as of September 4th, so please do not hesitate to call me if you wish.

Looking forward to hearing from you, I remain,

Sincerely,

Len
Leonard Swidler, Editor
Prof. of Catholic Thought and
Interreligious Dialogue