

**THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE**

**date** August 15, 1979

**to** Area Directors, JCRCs, Jewish Federations

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

**subject** 1980 OBERAMMERGAU PASSION PLAY

There have been a number of newspaper stories in recent days reporting on the revision of the 1980 Oberammergau Passion Play, allegedly resulting in the removal of anti-Semitic references of the Daisenberger text.

The reports are based on a recent analysis of the latest revised version of that script conducted by Dr. Leonard Swidler and the Rev. Gerard S. Sloyan, both of Temple University, and sponsored by the ADL. (Both Dr. Swidler and Father Sloyan are good friends of the Jewish community and have collaborated for many years in bettering Jewish-Christian relations both with AJC and ADL as well as with the Philadelphia Jewish community.)

A headline in the Philadelphia Inquirer of July 30th reads, "Passion Play 1980 Purged of Historical Anti-Semitism." That is representative of many similar headlines in other newspapers reporting on those findings. Dr. Swidler is quoted in Newsday of July 25th as saying: "In my judgment, all of the serious problems have been solved."

The AJC's Interreligious Affairs Department has just completed a detailed, line-by-line analysis of the "revised" German text of Daisenberger which will be published and distributed during the coming two weeks. Our study finds that a number of significant passages, scenes, and language changes have been made which correspond in detail to the findings of the German-language analysis which an AJC delegation submitted to the Oberammergau Town Council and discussed with them during our four meetings in 1977, 1978, and 1979. The removal of anti-Jewish passages are to be welcomed. Nevertheless, the overriding conclusion of our latest study, entitled Oberammergau 1980 - Progress and Problems, is: "As it stands, the drama retains an anti-Jewish impact despite the well-intentioned efforts of those who have revised it."

Thus, as a brief example, "despite changes in the wording of a number of passages in the 1970 text, the 'revised' 1980 text still asserts that God will pour out his anger on the Jewish people for the Crucifixion:

"O my people, O my people  
 Return thee to thy God,  
 Scorn not with evil mockery  
 The warning call of grace;  
 That not, people of God, on thee  
 In full measure one day be poured  
 The anger of our God most High!..."

On the allegation of collective Jewish responsibility for the death of Christ, the revised text for the 1980 performance has somewhat moderated the impression that the entire Jewish people turned against Jesus. Nevertheless, other imputations of collective Jewish guilt have been retained in the script. These range from subtle implications that the High Priest speaks for the whole of the Jewish people to outright accusation that the raging, bloodthirsty mob represents all Jews. Thus, in Act X, Scene 4, Pilate tells Jesus: "Thine own nation and the chief priest have delivered thee unto me." And in the Condemnation scene, Pilate condemns Jesus at the desire of the High Council and "the people of Jerusalem." Here again, a few authorities are assumed to represent an entire people.

Significantly, a leading Catholic priest in Germany, who is a member of the Ecumenical Study Commission of the German Catholic Bishops Conference, and German Coordinator for the Societies for Christian-Jewish Relations, has completed his own study of the 'revised text' for 1980 and has just shared his study with AJC. The conclusions of Father Wilm Sanders of Hamburg coincide with those of the AJC findings and are summarized in his words:

"The play for 1980 is certainly not the play for all of the future, nor has Oberammergau taken seriously its chance to share in the changed understanding of the relationship between Jews and Judaism to a large part of Christendom as our ecumenical study group formulated in 1970."

"With abbreviations and the change of words alone, there is no positive message and this is, of course, the declared goal of those to whom the continued existence of the Passion Play is of heartfelt concern. You cannot do it with a single sentence in the prologue."

There is a very substantial group of the younger generation of Oberammergau villagers with whom we have met several times since 1977 who share these convictions and who continue to refuse to act in the revised 1980 Passion Play because of its fundamental anti-Jewish structure and themes. Their convictions are increasingly shared by thousands of the German "next generation" who made their views known during their reactions to the recent showing of "Holocaust" on German educational television. The younger Oberammergau actors are planning to produce a significantly improved Rosner text in 1984. They informed AJC of their hope that 1980 will be the last time that the anti-Jewish Daisenberger script will be performed.

AJC believes that the Jewish community has an obligation to support these progressive and democratic elements in Oberammergau and in German society generally, and not to contribute to undermining their struggle to combat the religious sources of anti-Semitism in German society. We are hopeful that our study, Oberammergau 1980 - Progress and Problems, will constitute a vital contribution to that worthy objective.

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MARC H. TANENBAUM  
and JUDITH H. BANKI

## Oberammergau Update

**P**assion plays constitute a troubling problem for Jews and Christians who seek to uproot anti-Jewish images in Christian tradition. Focusing on Jesus' agony on the cross and the events leading up to it, these pageants carry a highly emotional impact which frequently produces bitterness and resentment toward those depicted as "enemies" of Jesus—the Jewish people.

Of all the pageants dramatizing the Crucifixion, the most famous is

a third—530,000 from 113 countries—viewed the 1970 production.

Adolf Hitler, one of the play's strongest admirers, declared at the height of World War II: "It is vital that the Passion Play be continued at Oberammergau, for never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed." The Nazis classified it as a "racially important cultural document." On the occasion of the pageant's tercentennial in 1934, a year after Hitler came to power, Je-

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the Oberammergau Passion Play performed every ten years by townsfolk of that village in Upper Bavaria, West Germany. It was first performed in 1634, in fulfillment of a vow made during a plague the year before. Over the centuries, it has been performed in at least five different versions. In modern times, the play and the picturesque mountain setting in which it is presented have become a major tourist attraction. About 1,500,000 people have seen it since World War II, more than

sus and his disciples were represented as Aryan heroes.

The performances in 1950 and 1960 returned to the prewar text, written originally by a priest, Joseph Alois Daisenberger, for the 1860 season. Though free from Nazi-type racism, the Daisenberger text abounds in anti-Jewish religious prejudices and distortions about Jews in general.

For nearly a century the Daisenberger text did not appear to trouble Christian consciences. But following the adoption by Vatican Council II in

1965 of the so-called "Jewish Declaration"—which repudiated the notion of collective Jewish guilt for the Crucifixion—Christian as well as Jewish voices began to be raised against it.

In 1970 a revised version of the Daisenberger text was presented. The municipal authorities of Oberammergau, who exercised control over the production, claimed that the new text was free of anti-Jewish elements. Many people did not agree.

AJC's concern with the anti-Semitic character of Oberammergau goes back to the 1950s. An AJC content analysis of the 1960 and 1970 scripts, *Oberammergau 1960 and 1970: A Study in Religious Anti-Semitism*, documented its distortions and misrepresentations on a line-by-line basis, and found that, despite excisions and revisions, "the play reflects an ingrained negative attitude toward Judaism and Jewry." In correspondence with Oberammergau officials thereafter, AJC argued that the Daisenberger text was "structurally anti-Semitic" and should be abandoned.

A number of Oberammergau town officials agreed, and decided to replace the Daisenberger text in February 1978 with an earlier passion play (the Rosner script, a medieval morality play) in which the role of the Sanhedrin and the Jews is less central to the drama. But that decision was reversed a month later when ultra-conservative factions committed to the Daisenberger text were voted into office.

In August of last year, an AJC delegation met with key religious, academic and cultural leaders in Germany to urge a serious, systematic examination by German scholars of the Catholic Church's present understanding of Jews and Judaism, and ways in which passion plays do or do not advance that understanding. Responding enthusiastically, Professor Franz Henrich, director of the prestigious Bavarian Catholic Academy, arranged a day-long symposium titled, "The Pas-

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*Marc H. Tanenbaum is AJC's national interreligious affairs director. Judith H. Banki is assistant interreligious affairs director.*

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## OBERAMMERGAU PASSION PLAY REVISIONS ARE DISPUTED (620)

By Jo-ann Price

NEW YORK (NC) — Scholars representing two Jewish human rights agencies — the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the American Jewish Committee — appear to be at odds over whether script changes for the 1980 Oberammergau Passion Play have gone far enough in eliminating anti-Semitism from the text.

According to Leonard Swidler, professor of Catholic thought and interreligious dialogue at Temple University, Philadelphia, "All of the essential problems" and "trouble spots" have been eliminated in recent revisions of the 1860 Weis-Daisenberger text, which will be used next year.

He declared that all of the essential problems, as well as many lesser ones, have been taken care of and even a few positive steps have been ventured; only a few secondary problems have not yet been completely resolved.

Swidler's detailed findings, made with Father Gerard S. Sloyan, English editor of the New American Bible, at the request of the Anti-Defamation League were disputed by Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum of the AJC. He asserted that "while we welcome the changes made, they still remain cosmetic:

"The problem remains," Rabbi Tanenbaum stated, "that the basic construct of the text portrays the Jews collectively guilty for the death of Christ. It also portrays the Jews as being ferocious in their determination to bring about the death of Christ.

"It shows Pontius Pilate as a compassionate weakling who makes a decision for the crucifixion only because he is forced to do so by the Jewish leaders and the Jewish mob.

Swidler, who made his report in New York to ADL leaders, said the changes in next year's text included most of the specific recommendations he and Father Sloyan had made to persons responsible at Oberammergau as well as to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger of Munich, in a 20-page commentary last year.

Several hundred townspeople have dramatic roles in the production which is staged every 10 years from May through October.

Rabbi Tanenbaum, who is the AJC interreligious affairs director, said his organization has supported a script written originally by Ferdinand Rosner, an 18th century Benedictine monk. He said in this script, the role of the Sanhedrin and the Jews is less central to the drama than in the script to be used next year. Pro-Rosner townspeople, he noted, plan to stage their own production in 1984.

"We have had a different approach than the AJC to the question," commented Theodore Freedman, director of the national program division of the ADL. "We felt we should seek to change the text, but the selection of the text was a local Oberammergau decision. To get into a controversy which text would be used was to defeat the main purpose of the study."

Swidler said that the final written script was made available in June. Rabbi Tanenbaum said his organization will release a line-by-line analysis in September. Its finding will differ "substantially" from the conclusions reached by Swidler.

Anti-Jewish reference to the "Old Covenant" has been struck. Offensive references to "the synagogue" as a symbol of Judaism have been cut. Textual negative references to "the Jews" and "people" as referring to Jews have been dropped. Dramatic repetitive lines based on St. Matthew have been eliminated, as has a long anti-Semitic poem based on the Book of Esther.

Swidler said the authors sought actively to make extra changes, for instance, by cutting out two scenes depicting temple merchants conniving in the betrayal of Jesus, and substituting synonyms for the proper name of God. They were keenly interested in eliminating any anti-Semitic words and promoting positive Catholic-Jewish relationships.

While further changes are desired, such as depicting Pilate as "the treacherous tyrant he was" these are on the whole of less importance than the "major changes" already made, he concluded.

OBERAMMERGAU PASSION PLAY REVISIONS  
EVOKE A CONFLICTING JEWISH RESPONSE

By Religious News Service (8-14-79)

NEW YORK (RNS) -- Executives of two prominent Jewish agencies are in disagreement over whether recent revisions to the Oberammergau Passion Play have lessened its anti-Semitic content.

Nat Kameny, chairman of the national program committee of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) of B'nai B'rith, recently expressed the view that the latest changes "have significantly reduced the anti-Semitic potential" from the 1930 Passion Play.

But Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, national director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee, asserts that "the basic problems remain. The basic structure of the play is that the Jews killed Christ."

At a recent luncheon of the ADL program committee, a report of the latest changes in the Oberammergau script was presented by Dr. Leonard Swidler, professor of Catholic thought and interreligious dialogue at Temple University and editor of the Journal of Ecumenical Studies.

Dr. Swidler said he was "satisfied that the great bulk of the problems had been adequately solved." He reported that scenes stereotyping Jews as "conniving merchants" have been excised, and that the production will begin with a special greeting to Jewish viewers as "brothers and sisters of the people from whom the Savior came."

But Rabbi Tanenbaum said that although he welcomes the changes that have been made, much more still needs to be done. "Pontius Pilate continues to be portrayed as a compassionate weakling," and "the ancient canard for the collective Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus remains," he told Religious News Service.

"I was startled, if not amazed, by the general impression that the ADL report has led to," the American Jewish Committee official said. "It's being interpreted as an imprimatur of the revised version at Oberammergau."

Rabbi Tanenbaum said the Committee will soon be issuing its own line-by-line analysis of the revised text indicating where anti-Semitic elements remain. He said that a similar analysis has recently been submitted to the West German Catholic bishops by a priest in Hamburg who has been involved in interreligious dialogues.

At the ADL luncheon, Mr. Kameny praised Oberammergau officials and villagers "for their willingness to listen to Jewish criticisms of the traditional pageant and to make changes in accordance with the spirit, principles and guidelines of Vatican II."

But Rabbi Tanenbaum said, "I think the water has been muddied, and we are going to have to try to clarify this in the coming weeks."