

Oberammergau

NEWS COMMITTEE

FROM THE

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SAN FRANCISCO, Oct. 25...Despite a serious effort by Oberammergau town officials to cleanse the 350-year-old Passion Play of its anti-Jewish polemic and prejudice, the drama remains "structurally anti-Semitic." It continues to malign Jewish law, to depict the Judaism of Jesus' time as corrupt and punitive, and to dramatize those Gospel sources which cast the most negative light on Jewish motives and actions.

These conclusions emerge from the latest line-by-line analysis of the revised 1980 Oberammergau Passion Play published by the Inter-religious Affairs Department of the American Jewish Committee. The findings of the study, entitled "Oberammergau 1980-Progress and Problems," were made public here today at a meeting of the AJC's Interreligious Affairs Commission, whose national chairman is Robert S. Jacobs of Chicago. The Commission is meeting in connection with the AJC's National Executive Council sessions, continuing through Sunday at the Fairmont Hotel here.

In presenting the study's findings to Commission members from throughout the country, Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, AJC's national interreligious affairs director, who met with Oberammergau officials on four successive occasions since 1977, declared:

~~"Our systematic study of the 1980 text finds that a number of significant~~ passages, scenes, and languages changes have been made which correspond in detail to the findings of the German-language analysis which AJC delegations submitted to the Oberammergau Town Council and discussed with them during our four meetings in 1977, 1978, and 1979. The removal of these anti-Jewish passages are to be welcomed. Nevertheless, the overriding conclusion of our
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latest study is: 'As it stands, the drama retains an anti-Jewish impact despite the well-intentioned efforts of those who have revised it.'

Conducted by Judith H. Banki, AJC assistant interreligious director, the study analyzes in detail major problem themes or areas in the 1980 text, and comes to these general conclusions:

"Faced with the formidable task of removing the anti-Semitism from a structurally anti-Semitic drama, those who revised the script for the 1980 performance of the Oberammergau Passion Play have tried to accomplish this end largely through judicious cutting. They have made a serious effort to cleanse the play of accusations of collective Jewish guilt and rejection, and of anti-Jewish polemic and prejudice. They have deleted the explicit allegations in the 1960 and 1970 text that God has rejected the Jewish people and ended His covenant with them. They have removed many of the most blatant expressions of sadism, vengefulness and greed on the part of the traders (in the Temple), the priests and 'the people.' They have added an introductory exhortation cautioning each spectator to 'recognize himself as guilty in what happened...'

"Unfortunately," the AJC study continues, "these well-meaning modifications are undermined by the drama itself, for the way in which the story unfolds and develops has not been basically altered. ... Thus, the Jewish religious leaders of the time are all lumped together as hateful enemies of Jesus who cynically manipulate the populace into a screaming mob, and who hound Jesus to the cross and derive joyful satisfaction from his condemnation and suffering. The merchants, though their importance has been diminished (in this text), still play their non-Biblical role.

"Pilate is still portrayed as a sympathetic weakling, forced into condemning Jesus by the cruel Jews against his will. Jewish law is still depicted falsely as harsh and punitive. The Jewish people still call down the blood curse upon themselves and their children. In short, revision of the Oberammergau drama has taken the form of substantial cutting, but not of essential rethinking. The traditional anti-Jewish polemic which shaped the original text has not been examined, nor have the insights of current Biblical and extra-Biblical scholarship been incorporated into the dynamics of the play.

"To provide a historical background based on contemporary Biblical scholarship would require far more profound structural changes in the

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Oberammergau Passion Play than are found in the present revised text, despite its significant improvement over earlier versions. It would require a basically different orientation to the major characters in the drama and the way they interact....Whether or not the present format of the Passion Play can be adapted to accommodate these realities is an open question," the study concludes.

Rabbi Tanenbaum reported that "significantly, a leading Catholic priest-scholar in Germany, Father Wilm Sanders of Hamburg, 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 1980 revised text, and his conclusions coincide with those of the American Jewish Committee study. These 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 opportunity 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 in a single sentence in the prologue."

Mr. Jacobs observed that "there is a very substantial group of the younger generation of Oberammergau villagers with whom AJC has met several times since 1977 who share our 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 German young people, 'the next generation,' who made their views known during their reactions to the recent showing of 'Holocaust' on German educational television. It is likely that in 1984, the 35th anniversary of the Oberammergau Passion Play, there will be a special performance. And it is the hope of the reformers that the younger Oberammergau actors will take that occasion to produce a significantly improved Rosner text. They informed the AJC of their hope that 1980 will be the last time that the anti-Jewish Daisenberger script will be performed."

Mr. Jacobs added, "AJC believes that the Jewish community, and all people of good will who oppose prejudice, have 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 by giving
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our imprimatur to an essentially anti-Jewish play. We are hopeful that our study will constitute a vital contribution to that worthy objective."

Rabbi Tanenbaum announced that the AJC study was being published in German by the Bavarian Catholic Academy in Munich and would be distributed to the German and international press as well as to tourists who will be attending the 1980 performance.

"Through the wide dissemination of our Oberammergau study," he said, "it is our hope to raise the consciousness of the many people who will view the play and thereby hopefully immunize them against the bacillus of anti-Semitism which still lurks in this unfortunate production."

The AJC delegation to Oberammergau consisted of: Miles Jaffe, then national chairman of the Interreligious Affairs Commission; Richard Weiss, chairman of the AJC Chapter in Los Angeles and a leader in interreligious affairs; William Trosten, director of AJC Development who is fluent in German and who spent years in Bavaria with the American Military Government; Zachariah Shuster, of Paris, consultant in interreligious affairs in Europe; and Rabbi Tanenbaum.

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