



# THE JACOB RADER MARCUS CENTER OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

*Preserving American Jewish History*

MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

Series C: Interreligious Activities. 1960-1991

Box 41, Folder 9, Oberammergau Passion Play - press clippings, 1980.

## WEST GERMAN PRESS REACTION TO OBERAMMERGAU PASSION PLAY

NEW YORK - A survey of the major newspapers and journals ~~of the~~ published throughout ~~the entire country of~~ the Federal Republic of Germany reveals that the majority of the West German press is critical of the revised 1980 Oberammergau Passion Play and supports the views expressed by the American Jewish Committee.

The survey, prepared by the Interreligious Affairs Department of the American Jewish Committee, <sup>examines articles and editorials in</sup> big-city dailies such as the Süddeutsche Zeitung and Münchner Merkur of Munich, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Die Zeit of Hamburg, (Die Welt, a nationwide paper with regional editions), Rheinischer Merkur / Christ und Welt). Also included were the national newsmagazines, Der Spiegel published by Axel Springer publications; and Der Stern. Small-city newspapers were typified by the Schongauer Nachrichten, issued near Oberammergau. The popular picture magazine, Bunte, and two church publications, Zur Debatte issued by the Bavarian Catholic Academy, and Kirchenzeitung were also surveyed.

Typical of the views expressed by the leading West German publications was that of the Süddeutsche Zeitung, published in Munich and regarded as "The New York Times of Bavaria": In an article written by Hannes Burger, the Munich daily of May 24th writes:

"The 1980 revision has cut many of the controversial passages, as the American Jewish Committee's analysis recognized. But the stubbornness of the Oberammergauers and their unwillingness to cooperate with their critics have allowed only a half-hearted revision. No clarifying passages or scenes have been added; the true motives of the Jewish authorities are still not stated; the Jewish law is still misrepresented, as are the political circumstances; Pilate remains a noble soul amid the Jewish fanatics.

"How can one eliminate hatred from the play," the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* continues, "as long as the agenda of Christians and Jews are ignored, and as long as Oberammergau looks on the play as now one's business but its own, yet wants to keep it the world's leading Passion Play?"

"For years the people of Oberammergau did not understand the charge of anti-Semitism; they thought they were simply performing a dramatization of the Gospels. Worse, they not want to understand, and consistently refused to discuss the matter. Else, they might have learned what the critics were trying to do; not to accuse the villagers of anti-Semitism but to show how this and other Passion Plays embody an old anti-Jewish tradition within Christianity. This tradition began with Matthew, reached its apogee in the Middle Ages and was not disavowed until Vatican Council II."

Mr. Berger's article concludes, "Perhaps the likeliest way to save the Oberammergau tradition would be to develop the Rosner text more satisfactorily and try it out again during the 1984 anniversary season. That might give the spirit of reconciliation a sufficient impetus in Oberammergau and beyond."

The *Münchener Merkur* of May 17th writes: "The new revision has been made to conform with the Second Vatican Council; ~~many~~ suggestions by the American Jewish Committee were also taken into account. Our reviewer has seen the preview and finds that, though the alterations do not help the play, its effect is unchanged."

The Munich tabloid's article, written by Armin Eichholz, adds:

"The naivete with which it adapts itself to Vatican II is touching; by welcoming 'brothers and sisters from the people from which the Savior sprang,' among others - a phrase suspiciously reminiscent of the



saying, 'I like everybody in the building, even Mr. Meyer.' Then it says: 'Far from must be any attempt to umpute the guilt to others' - and that rips right through Daisenberger; for his play is based on the Jews as the primary guilty party in Jesus' death, and no pious vow can alter that. After all, how could he know...and so/ on, down to Auschwitz."

"Too bad for the play. After all, Daisenberger the cleric was no scoundrel when he instructed the actors (in his stage-directions) playing the Jews: '...Show these persons in all their malice, rancor and hypocrisy, so that every spectator will be seized by disgust with so shameful a cast of mind.' For he wanted 'to let the innocence, the sublime dignity of the Savior appear in that much more radiant a light.'"

"Whether the Rosner alternative would not have had other defects remains an open question. As for the present drama, it is sure to get bad reviews on grounds of art, language, and whatever. It would fare better if it were understood that its effect derives precisely from its unconcern about the criteria that prevail in the outside world."

The Schongauer Nachrichten of May 27th, writes:

"Daiseberger's text rests on the anti-Semitic interpretation of the Gospels in centuries past. Daisenberger used the confrontation of Christ and the Jews as a device to lend dramatic tension and a climax to the Passion. A new play with a different text is suggested because the Daisenberger text lacks substance and cannot be altered. The reviews have been largely negative; they call the production disappointing and boring, and speak of 'sugar candy style' and 'pastry shop decor.'"

In a front-page story, this newspaper also reports that Ernst Maria Lang, a Munich architect and cartoonist, has threatened to sue the Oberammergau municipality for plagiarism and possibly stop the performances

thereby. Lang charged at an AJC press conference held in Munich on May 24th that the present production uses stage designs, costume designs, and dramaturgic devices originated by his father, Johann Georg Lang, without due credit. The story concluded that Lang's legal action may compel the Oberammergauers to choose the Rosner script for the 1984 anniversary season, "which is also the aim of the American Jewish Committee which has long concerned itself with the Passion Play."

Bunte Illustrierte, the weekly picture magazine, writes:

"Who bears the guilt for Jesus' death? The world's most famous Passion play again prompts vigorous debate. Again Oberammergau shows a drama which is thought - not only by Jews - to convey the basic religious motivation of anti-Semitism.

"Vatican II has rejected the idea (of Jewish collective guilt in the death of Jesus), but Oberammergau is not yet telling the story accordingly.

"Oberammergau still shows Jesus destroyed by Jewish hatred, not executed by Pilate. The High Priests are portrayed as rapacious demagogues who take pleasure in Jesus' death; Pilate appears as a well meaning weakling pushed around by bloodthirsty Jews.

"For 2,000 years the deicide charge has been the most deadly of anti-Semitic prejudices. Thus it was natural, the Suddeutsche Zeitung has noted, that concerned Jews should see Oberammergau, the world's best-known Passion Play, as a text case."

Commenting on the reactions of the major German newspapers to the 1980 Oberammergau Passion Play, Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, AJC's national interreligious affairs director, said:

"The American Jewish Committee is heartened by the overwhelming positive response on the part of the leading German newspapers, religious



and general journals, as well as much of German radio and television, to the views expressed in our several AJC studies regarding the structurally anti-Semitic character of the Daisenberger text as well as by the performance itself. While the Oberammergau pageant may well be a commercial success, owing to the attendance largely by tourists from outside Germany, this heightened consciousness <sup>and</sup> ~~of~~ repudiation of anti-Jewish ideas and images in this traditional Passion Play suggests that a major educational achievement has been realized in the struggle ~~against~~ <sup>of anti-Semitism</sup> to uproot the poisonous weeds/in certain traditions of ~~Christian folk~~ medieval Christian folk culture.

"The American Jewish Committee will continue its efforts to raise the sensibilities of enlightened men and women of good will to these teachings of contempt against Jews and Judaism until the Passion Play is fundamentally rethought and reconceptualized. The difference between now and 1960 and 1970 is that there are growing thousands of Christians both within Germany and in many other parts of the world who share our concerns about prejudice and bigotry and join with us in this effort to expunge hatred and misunderstanding that result from these misrepresentations of Jews and Judaism."

add to German press story

in an article by Georg Krieger

The Rheinischer Merkur/Christ und Welt,/wrote on May 23;

"In its medieval form the passion play still formed part of the larger view of history as the history of Christian salvation.

"The origin and meaning of the Cross were seen as being the guilt-ridden implication of all mankind, with Christ's sacrificial death ensuring salvation.

"The historic view of the Biblical tale lost sight of this aspect of the passion. It set its sights on identifying a guilty party and roundly condemned the theocratic leadership of the Jewish ~~State~~ State and the Jewish people as a whole.

"The American Jewish Committee, while acknowledging that Oberammergau has tried hard to adapt the Daisenberger text, leaves no doubt that the superficial historic view and its anti-Jewish tendencies can only be eradicated by dispensing with the current text...

"Oberammergau can only hope to progress in the future by dint of joint efforts on the part of both Jewry and the Church."

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June 19, 1980

Rabbi Marc Tannenbaum  
American Jewish Committee  
165 East 56 St.  
New York, N. Y. 10022

Dear Marc:

Here is a translated article from a German paper on the Passion Play. I recall our discussion of your recent visit to Oberammergau.

I have not forgotten your suggestion that we meet one day to discuss some possibilities. After several more speaking trips abroad I'll give you a call.

Meanwhile, best wishes,

Sincerely,

Leonard R. Sussman  
Executive Director

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enc.

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OBERAMMERGAU'S TEXT FOR 1980

BLOODTHIRSTINESS AND CRIES OF "MURDERERS" ARE NOW SILENCED

Oberammergau -- Pontius Pilate scenes, Herodotus intermezzo and the famous "rage" (Empoerung) have always been the dramatic highlights of the Passion Play and are responsible to a large degree of its worldwide theatrical success. How do they appear in the text of 1980? That is the subject of our final report on the revised text.

In Daisenberger's text Pontius Pilate is the noble, just Roman who wants to have nothing to do with the death of Christ because "he sees no guilt in him." Because of this and their "bloodthirsty hatred," the Jewish complainants are so hopelessly misrepresented that even Jews in our own century must feel offended.

According to our present understanding of history, Pilate was a devious favorite involved in all kinds of dirt who later fell out of favor with the emperor and was subsequently executed. In the corrected text he appears paler and less sanctimonious -- passages such as "your hateful accusations" or "your personal revenge" or "the blind rage of his enemies" etc. have been removed and serve to soften the contrast. In the same vein, the reference in the Daisenberger prologue to a "maddened, blinded people" who cry for "the martyrdom and the death of the Savior" has been replaced by a softer formulation. Also, the demand for "the blood of our enemy" has disappeared and been replaced with the "sentencing of the Galilean." In the previous text, Pontius Pilate even defended

Christ as the 'model of a wise teacher whom you have long revered.'  
This appeal for mercy has also been dropped.

The new version has a passage designed especially to deal with the "reconciliation" with Jewish sensibilities: A few people from the crowd call out "free him -- he is without guilt" before the cries of "crucify him, crucify him" begin. Also, the curse of Pilate "his blood is upon you and your children" has disappeared. The reaction of the "people" to the sentencing -- always a scene of rejoicing in the Daisenberger play has been considerably softened.

The carrying of the cross and the crucifixion are essentially unaltered. Nevertheless, in the Golgatha prologue the "revenge of the godless" has been changed to "merciless" and the "murderers of Christ" has been changed to "enemies." A few peripheral characters and passages have been removed, and in the final scene of the glorification of Christ -- instead of "you savior of sinners who died on Golgatha" it now reads for 1980 "you redeemer of all sinners victorious on Golgatha."

If one takes a balance of the corrections it must be reconized that the assignment and mandate of the Text Committee was very clearly to keep the Daisenberger text and that therefore they could make only cosmetic changes. In making these revisions special attention was given to "defusing" Jewish objections. Therefore, one sees the result of this effort in the form of the shortening and tightening up of the play. And, also, in the attempt to replace unusable and unintelligible idioms without detroying the poetic quality.

Above all, one must never forget that no attempt was made to substantially "reform" the Passion Play. This was neither the assignment nor the intent of the committee.





## ■ BACK PAGE

## Passion play inspires a continuing debate

The villagers of Oberammergau, Bavaria, first performed their passion play in 1634, a year after a plague epidemic had decimated the population.

They used a simple wooden platform on the outskirts of the village as a stage, and the plague had wrought such havoc that most of the remaining population, it is fairly safe to assume, actually took part on stage.

There will probably not have been much distinction between actors and audience. The only reason why they put



Jesus leaving Mary

on the play was that they had taken an oath to do so if they were to survive the epidemic.

Nowadays Oberammergau, population 5,000, is an Alpine village with a worldwide reputation for the passion play it has performed at regular intervals for over 300 years.

The wooden grandstand has been replaced by a Passion Playhouse with a gigantic stage and a covered auditorium seating more people than the population of the village.

More than 1,000 villagers are on stage. The last passion play season, 1970, comprised roughly 100 performances seen by more than half a million people.

More than 70 per cent of the visitors come from abroad. The village has more or less inevitably become entangled in the complexities of the tourist trade.

Holidaymakers do not just come once every 10 years either. Oberammergau is both a winter and a summer holiday resort, and even in the seasons when the play is not performed they come in droves, partly no doubt because of the village's passion play reputation.

As long as the villagers remember the vow that motivated their forefathers there need be nothing wrong in the business side of the passion play season.

But times change, and with growing popularity the production and the problems it entails change too. Since 1970 there has been a virtually non-stop debate about what form the 1980 passion play should take, and the debate

### Christ und Welt Rheinischer Merkur

was conducted in the earnest appropriate to latter-day considerations of cash flow and turnover.

Even so, Cardinal Ratzinger of Munich attended this year's premiere and a mass was held the evening before, testifying to the religious character the passion play is still felt to retain.

The high mass was also attended by high-ranking Protestant and Anglican churchmen.

The cardinal's sermon could only be rated as Church approval of the continued use of the 1860 text, suitably altered in keeping with present-day requirements.

It also was intended to put paid to, or at least to relegate to a level of less immediate urgency, the debate about a contemporary rewrite of the passion play text.

The influx of cars and coaches began early on premiere Sunday morning. Traffic police and aides directed them to their respective parking lots.

The performance began exactly on time, with a midday break as per programme. That evening, when the village was more or less back to normal for a Sunday evening, the organisers breathed a sigh of relief. Everything was working; there were no technical hitches.

The weather was not up to scratch for the premiere. After a clear night the morning temperature was four centigrade, or a little under 40 Fahrenheit.

But it was on with the show regardless as far as the actors on the open-air stage were concerned. Their only protection was their determination to make a success of the play, as it were.

No-one seriously expects amateur theatricals to be absolutely perfect, but what is so fascinating about Oberammergau is the touching piety of the actors, the comprehensible way in which the play is put on and the easy-to-follow text.

Much of the wording is taken straight from the Gospels and has a familiar ring even when it is heard by someone who

does not take the Biblical message seriously. Explanations of the link between the plot and the action on the stage also help the audience to appreciate the connection between the Stations of the Cross and references to them in the Old Testament. Historic reality is seen to be the story of salvation. The audience are unlikely to experience the play, which is still performed, as written by Josef Alois Daisenberger 120 years ago, as a victory of unswerving tradition over progress and innovation.

But they will probably sense the contradiction between the chorus and the music it uses. Simple choreography and plain clothing are decidedly reminiscent of Ancient Greek drama.

The music, on the other hand, is clearly limited in its range of expression to the short span between the late Baroque era, the Romantic epoch, and the Classics.

Rochus Dedler's music was composed in 1810 and is currently played in a 1950 arrangement by Eugen Papst. Few changes have been made to the original; few were possible.

Dedler's music goes its own way, with cheerful, rich and varied melodies and easy rhythms that are a far cry from the appearance, libretto and dramatic function of the choir.

The change of cast, inevitable when the play is only performed every 10 years, makes little difference to the overall impression.

The impressive language and gestures of a Virgin Mary who is, perhaps, older than one might expect are unlikely to influence the decision on whether or



Triumphant in Jerusalem

not to use the Daisenberger text next time round.

Neither will the lack of dignity and human greatness of a somewhat youthful Jesus and the well-nigh fatalistic acceptance of destiny as the impression conveyed by his intonation.

But the 1980 Oberammergau passion play paves the way for more far-reaching changes than might seem apparent. The Daisenberger text has already been revised in keeping with the tenets of the Second Vatican Council.

The rewrite was also due in part to accusations by the American Jewish Committee that the old text implied a collective guilt on the part of the Jewish people in respect of the death of Jesus.

There can be no doubt that Daisenberger, who merely revised an earlier text, made an unwitting concession to the Enlightenment, putting paid to the last vestiges of the medieval mystery play.

In its medieval form the passion play still formed part of the larger view of history as the history of Christian salvation.

The origin and meaning of the Cross were seen as being the guilt-ridden implication of all mankind, with Christ's sacrificial death ensuring salvation.

The historic view of the Biblical tale lost sight of this aspect of the passion. It set its sights on identifying a guilty party and roundly condemned the theocratic leadership of the Jewish State and the Jewish people as a whole.

The American Jewish Committee, while acknowledging that Oberammergau has tried hard to adapt the Daisenberger text, leaves no doubt that the superficial historic view and its anti-Jewish tendencies can only be eradicated by dispensing with the current text.

The Roman Catholic Church has given its implicit blessing to the Oberammergau revised 1980 version, so the Church can hardly be accused of objecting to a new and deeper look at the theological message conveyed.

Oberammergau can only hope to progress in the future by dint of joint efforts on the part of both Jewry and the Church.

Georg Krieger  
(Rheinischer Merkur/Christ und Welt,  
23 May 1980)



The Last Supper

(Photos: Sven Simon)



# Curtain Rises in Bavaria on a Revised

By JOHN VINOCUR

Special to The New York Times

OBERAMMERGAU, West Germany, May 18 — In front were the faded orange walls of the temples and a stone stairway leading to dark doors. Behind them, a slash of sky, a fir tree, and farther still, a green ridge at the edge of the Alps. With a single step, a man moved from the chorus at center stage and spoke words that in three centuries of Oberammergau Passion plays had never been heard before.

"Greetings to all you brothers and sisters of the people  
Who brought forth the Redeemer  
Let no one try to find blame in others,  
Let each of us recognize  
His own guilt in these events."

The lines from the Prologue, a welcome to Jews and an admonition not to blame them for the death of Jesus, were pieces of a difficult reconciliation between the villagers who put on the play every 10 years and the Jews and Roman Catholics who told them it was anti-Semitic, a portrayal of a people, 35 years after Hitler, that could in no way be justified.

The strained feelings are not completely gone, the community quietly resents what it sees as outside interference in its traditions, and the others consider that the changes made in the text are incomplete steps toward bringing the play in line with the Vatican's 1965 declaration on the attitude of the church toward Jews. But the play, in the first of 93 performances this summer portraying Christ's suffering, crucifixion and resurrection, has changed.

## No United Call for Death

It still moves forward with a compelling simplicity: clumsy, awkward, touching, even passionate. But no longer does Pontius Pilate cry out to the Jews, "The curse of blood on you and your children!" And no longer do the Jews at Christ's condemnation call with one voice for his death.

"Free Him!" some of them now shout. "He is innocent!"

The effect is clear. The Passion play, likely to be seen by a half million visitors this year, has drawn closer to the Vatican edict that states, "Nothing which in any way approaches the notion of Jewish collective guilt should be found in any Catholic medium of expression."

The evolution was not simple. Ten years ago, the version being performed here by a cast recruited from Oberammergau's 4,700 residents was regarded by many of its critics as a barely advanced version of what might have been performed in 1634, when the village started the plays as an act of penance and thanks for being spared from an epidemic. The current text, written in 1860 by a priest, Alois Daisenberger, had barely been changed over the years and was found by Hitler to be a "convincing portrayal of the menace of Jewry."

## \$6 Million This Year

In 1970, however, the Vatican withheld its sanction of the play and after attacks on it, notably by American Jewish organ-

izations, thousands of reservations were canceled. More than other arguments, the possibility that the play would no longer be a safe source of income — the village is expected to earn about \$6 million from it this year — led to second thoughts.

In 1975, an 18th century version of the play by Ferdinand Rosner, a Benedictine monk, was reworked and two years later, a trial version was staged. The American Jewish Congress sent representatives who found it free of anti-Semitism, as did Josef Cardinal Ratzinger of Munich. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the respected Munich newspaper, said the Rosner version was vastly superior artistically to the Daisenberger text.

But the village did not agree. The town council that adopted the new version was quickly voted out of office by a 3-to-1 margin. The first act of its successor was to restore the old text.

A confrontation again seemed likely. With the possibility of American Jewish groups' urging a boycott of Oberammergau, a series of changes were negotiated with the assistance of the Cardinal's office in Munich. About a quarter of the play was cut out, reducing its running time from eight to six hours, but Jesus still chases the money-changers from the temple and Judas greedily shovels his 30 pieces of silver into a bag at his waist.

## 'It's All There in the Bible'

The townspeople have not been enthusiastic about the changes. A reporter asking villagers about them mostly gets shrugs and evasions in reply. "Look," said Hans Maier, a woodcarver who serves as the play's director, "we don't want to hurt anyone. But it's all there in the Bible. We're just using what it says."

As far as Cardinal Ratzinger is concerned, the issue is essentially resolved. In a sermon in the parish church he called on everyone, but above all "our Jewish friends," to stop making accusations about anti-Semitism, which "is foreign to the historic origin and the spiritual content of the play."

After the terrible events of the Nazi period, the Cardinal said, "We must hear and read the text of the Passion play with greater sensitivity." The changes in the play were necessary, he said, to strengthen its message of penance and reconciliation.

This reconciliation was acknowledged, in part, by two executives of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith who were invited to the performance by the Mayor of Oberammergau, Ernst Zwink, whose son played Jesus in today's performance. The organization has produced a booklet in which it discusses detecting errors in Passion plays, notably the one here, that "fly in the face of religious and historical truths."

## Objections of B'nai B'rith

Theodore Freedman, director of the B'nai B'rith national program division, said that great efforts had been made at Oberammergau. "The people here have made an honest beginning," he said. "I would be very disappointed, though, to



The New York Times / May 19 1980

feel that this means there won't be further changes."

Both Mr. Freedman and Nat Kameny, an associate, said they felt the play still did not underscore clearly enough the Jewishness of Jesus and his disciples. Pontius Pilate, they said, has a tendency to remain an innocent and benevolent bystander in the Oberammergau version, and Judas is still being portrayed with accents that had something of stereotyped anti-Semitism.

Mr. Freedman denied that the play's Jewish critics were being oversensitive,

## Passion Play

as some of the villagers seemed to insinuate "Looking at America," he said, "the survey made in 1962 showed us that about one-third of the population held hostile views of Jews because of the religious teaching they received. Another poll just a bit ago wasn't much better. So a play like this, seen by a half million people, can reinforce negative ideas about Jews. That's hardly oversensitive."

### Target of Souvenir Trade

Of the 500,000 visitors, who pay \$20 to \$30 for a place in the 5,000-seat auditorium, about 90,000 are expected to be Americans. They, according to the West German press, are the target of the souvenir trade.

Beyond the clash over the text, West German commentators and Cardinal Ratzinger have attacked the commercialism surrounding the Passion play — the shops that sell carved angels and crucifixes, and the packaged tours that require at least one meal in town to gain entrance to the theater.

Oberammergau defends itself by saying the money is used to make improvements on village buildings. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, in a particularly cynical article about the village, noted in reply that in years past the classic line in Oberammergau was that "Christ suffered for a new swimming pool."



PASSION PLAY 5-4-80  
...BUT MANY  
JEWS STILL  
ARE WARY  
TRAVERZ  
NY Times

IN RECENT YEARS the Passion Play has come in for criticism because the text, written in 1860 by the priest Alois Daisenberger, inferred that Jews were collectively responsible for Christ's death. The protests came from Israel, the American Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee and the Anti Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. Frequently, the organizations refer to a quotation by Adolf Hitler to the effect that the Passion Play was "a convincing portrayal of the menace of Jewry."

Although plans had been made that for 1980 another script, written in 1750 by the Benedictine monk Ferdinand Rosner, would be substituted Mayor Ernst Zwink was returned to office with 73% of the vote because he supported the 1860 Daisenberger text—and when Mayor Zwink fulfilled his election promise to use the 1860 script, German Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger stepped into the picture.

Along guidelines stated by the Declaration of the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (signed in 1965 by 2,500 Catholic bishops including Poland's Cardinal Wojtyla, now Pope John Paul II), the Munich Archbishop made changes in the 1860 script in an attempt to eliminate implied anti-Semitism.

In the edited version, several scenes involving conniving merchants have been cut, as have all unflattering references. Such a reference, for instance, would be the use of the words "the people" in a scene where an unruly mob demands the death of Jesus. Now "the crowd" is used instead.

In addition for the first time in the play's nearly 350-year history, there will be a narrator (Mayor Zwink himself) who will come on stage before the play begins to offer a word of welcome to the Jews in the audience. His speech will begin with these words: "Greetings also to you brothers and sisters of the people from whom the Savior came. We here in no way wish to look for guilt in others."

Despite the changes, however, several Jewish organizations are still unhappy or unsure of their feelings at this point. The Anti Defamation League is holding off comment until a committee of its representatives gets to see a special preview of the play May 18. But Philip Baum of the American Jewish Congress said last week that the changes are "only a half way move that don't go far enough."

And the American Jewish Committee has just put out an 18-page guide designed to help viewers of the play understand the feelings of some Jews toward their treatment in the script. For example, the guide states that although the most recent modifications in the play are "well meaning" and "welcome," they "do not reach the heart of the matter."

Says the guide "The text has only been cut, not re-thought, objectionable passages have become fewer and briefer, but the objectionable themes are still there, and the way in which the story unfolds has not been basically altered."

Nino Lo Bello

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## Traditional Play Stirs Debate Of Passion in Alpine Village

PASSION, From A19

bauer, a spokesman for the town's tourist office.

Hoping to diffuse this star cult, the play council chose two casts to alternate in this year's performances.

This should make for some interesting comparisons. Of the two Marys, one is Irmi Dengg, 41, a shopkeeper whose gentle manner and deep devotion make her a natural for the part, while the other is Martha Wildemann, 22, who still wowed by her role, has been less captured by it. Of the two Christs, one is tradesman Gregor Brietsamter, 48, who has played the part before, while the other is Rudi Zwink, 21, the mayor's son and a dental student, who regards Jesus as the ultimate antiestablishment figure.

Meanwhile, not everyone is happy about the way things have turned out.

A few feminists in town complain that women have no official say in staging the play, and the American Jewish Committee still is not satisfied with the script.

"The controversy has died for the moment," said reformer Schwalgerhofer. "But that does not mean the idea of reform has been abandoned."

A half-million visitors are expected to net \$12 million for the town and its shopkeepers this summer—money that the council has already earmarked for a new guest house and a bypass road. It seems Oberammergau, which has grown by 600 to a population of 5,100 in the past decade, has a traffic problem.

The play will be performed 100 times between May 25 and September 27. Each performance lasts six hours with an intermission for lunch.

W.P.F. 10 *Passion Play* 5.23.80

Despite efforts to purge the centuries-old Oberammergau Passion Play of anti-Semitic overtones, Jewish leaders are dissatisfied with the result. So both the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith have produced viewers' guides for tourists traveling to the Bavarian Alpine village to see the play.

The 20-page AJC booklet emphasizes that the play "is a work of fiction, incorporating some episodes from the Gospels, ignoring others and freely inventing scenes and characters with no basis in Christian Scripture. It was written at a time when Christianity was dominated by a profoundly anti-

Jewish ideology, and thus the characters and dramatic developments were deliberately drawn to make the Jewish people and their leaders appear as villainous and as evil as possible.

The more concise ADL leaflet, prepared by Roman Catholic scholar Leonard Swidler of Temple University, cites official church statements on anti-Semitism and Jewish-Christian relations as they apply to such dramas.



# Religious Play Stirs

4-21-80

Passion Play

By Bradley Graham

19

Washington Post Foreign Service

OBERAMMERGAU, West Germany

—Once every 10 years, the devoted folk in this Alpine village stage a passion play that attracts world attention and scores another victory for living traditions.

During the nine years in between, the villagers act like most others. They gossip a lot, and quarrel.

However, one fierce row recently left the town bitterly divided and proved to be no ordinary rural spat.

Sparked by charges that the traditional play was anti-Semitic, a debate raged here that took on the dimensions of an international scandal, drawing in Catholic and Jewish officials and nearly turning a few plowshares into swords.

For the moment, the feuding appears to have dissolved with the melting snows, helped along by the sure commercial sense that an angry town is bad for tourist business. But when the curtain goes up next month on the play's 1980 version, more than just the Lord's passion will be reflected in it.

Snuggled in a remote valley of the Bavarian Alps, where blotches of white are still visible atop a circle of craggy peaks, Oberammergau is a picture of pastoral tranquility. The town seems almost to be a painted scene with quaint chalet-style houses and religious murals on some buildings.

There is also a veneer of wealth evident in such things as the \$8 million town pool, complete with wave-making machine, paid for by the 1970 play performances.

The play, which depicts the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, was first staged in 1634 to fulfill a vow to present it every decade in thanks for the ending of the black plague. With a cast of 600 and another 800 assisting with costumes and staging—all amateurs and local citizens—the play has been presented regularly for more than three centuries except on three occasions when war intervened.

But increasingly since the end of World War II and the Third Reich, the play has been criticized abroad as well as inside West Germany for its

# Passionate Debate in W. German Town

apparent anti-Semitic tenor and message

Ten years ago, even the Vatican, committed to a more ecumenical policy, withheld its official sanction. In the United States, about 70,000 tickets and hotel reservations were canceled because the American Jewish Committee and the B'nai Brith's Antidiscrimination League called for a boycott.

This caused some residents, determined to reconcile pious devotion with profitable tourism, to give thought to making the play less obnoxious.

In a village where one is regarded as an outsider unless all four grandparents are buried in the local churchyard, traditions understandably die hard. Besides, once raised on a diet of Catholic fundamentalism, the craftsmen and holders here never have considered their play offensive and defiantly reject the notion that they have anything against Jews.

"Nobody here really thought the play was anti-Semitic," said Hans

Maier, a woodcarver and the play's director. "We had been presenting it long before Hitler."

Elch Schmid, a hotel owner and town council member added, "Anything in Christianity is anti-Semitic if you want it to be."

There had been attempts before the 1960 and 1970 presentations to mollify foreign public opinion, by doctoring the current script, written in the 19th century, by Alois Daisenberger, a monk at nearby Ettal Monastery. But the effects had been largely cosmetic and failed to alter the play's stident tone or the thrust of its message—collective Jewish guilt for the death of Jesus.

A group of worried burghers, led by Hans Schwaighofer, the head of Oberammergau's woodcarving school, dug out from the archives an older, 18th century script written by another Ettal monk, Ferdinand Rosner. Though archaic in form and language—it is written in 9,000 tetrameter

verses—it is free of any tinge of anti-Semitism and met the approval of both Catholic and Jewish officials.

The town council also liked and approved of the older script. But a village majority did not. They found its language stilted, its action overly dramatic and its grand style unbecomingly simple tastes of this tiny village.

Besides, they feared that the new version would scare off more, old tourists instead of drawing new ones.

So, in 1978, the town voted out the council and elected one that would give them back their play. Faced again with the prospect of a US Jewish boycott, some Oberammergauers joined with Catholic clergymen to edit the more objectionable material out of the old text.

Gone is Pontius Pilate's line, "The curse be on you and your children." The scene of the Pharisees in the temple, formerly portrayed as a snarling

mob, has been toned down to depict a mild crowd.

For the first time, this line was added to the prologue: "Far be from us all efforts to seek guilt among others. Welcome to you, also, brothers and sisters of the race from which Jesus came."

The play has long been a way of life for Oberammergau. Children start appearing in it at age 6, and many look forward to the day they are selected for a leading role.

To search out the best talent, training plays are held during the decade between performances. Being chosen for a main part ranks as the highest honor in town—perhaps a little too high, since some actors have managed to parlay their roles into political and commercial gains.

"A lot of American people who come here stay at the Hotel Alte Post, because they know its owner played Jesus twice," said Paul Landel.

See PASSION, A20, Col. 3



# The American



## Jewish Committee

Institute of Human Relations • 165 East 56 Street, New York, N Y 10022 • 212/751-4000 • Cable Wishcom, N Y

June 19, 1980

The Chicago Catholic  
P.O. Box 11181  
Chicago, Illinois 60611

Personal Attention: Mr. A. E. Wall

Gentlemen:

The report by Father James Kill on his viewing of the Oberammergau Passion Play (June 6, 1980) was moving and compassionate. If only all those who view the Play had the same feelings as Father Kill! And yet, there is more to be said.

Having studied the text of the Play in advance and having viewed one of the early performances in May on behalf of the American Jewish Committee, I must tell you that to many, the Passion Play remains a source of continued anti-Semitism.

The text of the Play pits Jesus against the Jews as a whole, failing to distinguish in any meaningful way among different groups in the Jewish population, and also minimizing, almost eliminating, reference to the pervasive Roman role in the events of Holy Week. But more disturbing, when one views the production and staging of the Play which should be a message of love and hope for the world as Father Kill so movingly points out - one realizes that it is based on ridicule, stereotypes and caricatures of Jews, and that the beauty of the message has been sullied!

In fixing guilt for the Crucifixion on the Jews as a whole and in presenting Jews as despised people, the Passion Play goes beyond the Gospels, contradicts the teachings of Vatican Council II and rouses base emotions which do no honor to the very message of love and hope of the Passion.

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■ BERTRAM H GOLD Executive Vice President



The Chicago Catholic  
June 19, 1980  
Page 2

The American Jewish Committee, with all persons of good will, deplores the continued anti-Jewish aspects of the Oberammergau Passion Play. We believe that great events can be presented for their own worth, not at the expense of others.

Sincerely yours



Robert S. Jacobs  
National Chairman  
Interreligious Affairs Commission  
American Jewish Committee



## Roundup

### Another Oberammergau

A 20-page booklet, "What Viewers Should Know About the Oberammergau Passion Play, 1980," has been released by the American Jewish Committee. The play, which was first performed in 1634 and is repeated every 10 years by townsfolk of Oberammergau in upper Bavaria, West Germany, opened on May 25 for the summer.

The AJC says that three of its members who viewed the opening performance charge that "despite cosmetic changes in the script, the Oberammergau Passion Play is still an anti-Semitic spectacle." The AJC prepared the booklet because of its "profound concern for continued Jewish-Christian understanding and cooperation," according to Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, national director of interreligious affairs of the AJC.

The book, prepared by Judith Herskopf Banki, assistant to Rabbi Tanenbaum, emphasizes that the Oberammergau play "is a work of fiction, incorporating some episodes from the Gospels, ignoring others and freely inventing scenes and characters with no basis in Christian Scripture."

Tanenbaum said that the AJC was making copies of the booklet available to sponsors of trips to the Passion Play in order to help sensitize viewers towards any anti-Semitic impact that might result at the 1980 production. Single copies of the book are available free of charge by writing to The American Jewish Committee, 165 E. 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.



*Oakland, Calif*  
21 The Catholic Voice, June 16, 1980

### 'Play is anti-Semitic' New York (NC)

Representatives of the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith said the 1980 Oberammergau Passion Play is anti-Semitic despite efforts of the West German town's officials, churchmen and producers to eliminate anti-Jewish references in the script.

Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, AJC national director for inter-religious affairs, said after seeing the play that despite the cuts it presented an emotion-laden portrayal of Jews as collectively responsible for the death of Jesus.

Cardinal Josef Ratzinger of Munich has said, "We must hear and read the text of the Passion Play with greater sensitivity," after the terrible events of the Nazi period.

The Defense Department has ordered a stop to the promotion of

## world/vatican

military-sponsored tours to the Oberammergau passion play in Germany because of Jewish concerns that the revised play is still anti-Semitic.

### Vatican operates in red

London (NC) The Vatican had a deficit in 1979 of about \$25.5 million, about 25 percent higher than anticipated, according to an article in the Sunday Times of London.

"Unless there are radical improvements either in its income or in its financial management, in fact, the Vatican will be in a book-keeping sense—bankrupt in about five years," said the article, written by Tana de Zulueta and Francesco D'Andrea.

(In Rome, Vatican press spokesman, Father Romeo Panciroli, told NC News that the Times' figures might be approximately correct, but final figures for last year were not yet available. He said the article was right in reporting an increase over the predicted deficit, but he could not verify the amount.)

### 'We must be ecumenical'

St. Louis (NC) "You cannot really be Roman Catholic today without being ecumenical," Cardinal Basil Hume of Westminster, England, told an interfaith gathering at the St. Louis Priory. He said Pope John Paul II is "very ecumenical."

The British prelate said he had no inside information but that he believes Pope John Paul II is inclined to pursue unification with the Church of England. "I know quite definitely that he is beginning to push," the cardinal said.

He predicted that with publication sometime in 1981 of the joint works of an 11-year old organization of Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops, the pope and the Anglican archbishop of Canterbury will form a new commission which may take steps toward reunification.

### Pope to visit Brazil

Vatican City (NC)

Pope John Paul II will go to Brazil June 30. The Vatican Press Office confirmed the starting date of the Brazil trip. It did not announce the itinerary for Brazil and said only that the trip will last "about 10 days."



## THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

**date** June 18, 1980  
**to** Judith Banki  
**from** Andrew Baker  
**subject** Oberammergau



After a fair amount of digging, I discovered that there is a Midwest Region of the American Society of Travel Agents. They publish an occasional newsletter and hold monthly meetings. I talked with their president and a couple of Jewish members of their board about circulating our booklet among them. Their next mailing will not go out until September, but they are meeting today in Chicago. I have arranged for the attached letter along with copies of "What Viewers Should Know..." to be distributed to the twenty-five board members expected to attend. I am also leaving additional copies of the letter for the region's general membership who are invited to a dinner following the board meeting. (One hundred or more are expected.)

I am not sure what will come of this, but I do not think it will hurt. (I have also tried to calm some of the travel agency officials with the promise not to make any additional such request for another ten years.)

Best regards.

cc: Marc Tanenbaum  
James Rudin  
Harold Applebaum  
Susie Schub  
Roger Nathan

# The American



## Jewish Committee

CHICAGO CHAPTER • 55 East Jackson Blvd., Suite 1870 • Chicago, Ill 60604 • (312) 663-5500

June 17, 1980

Midwest Region, American Society of Travel Agents

As you are no doubt aware the Oberammergau Passion Play is the most famous such play in the world. This year nearly one half million people will view it; tickets are already sold out.

The American Jewish Committee had been concerned that the 350 year old play reflected an anti-Jewish bias. Several years ago we began work with the Bavarian Catholic Academy and with the villagers of Oberammergau to seek revisions in the play. The 1980 version reflects these changes. Nevertheless, as welcome as such changes are, we do not believe them to have gone far enough.

We have prepared a booklet for viewers of the play, entitled, "What Viewers Should Know About the Oberammergau Passion Play, 1980;" it analyzes the drama and provides both background information and the commentary of Christian scholars. We will be happy to make these booklets available free of charge through your agencies to anyone traveling to Oberammergau this summer. Our concern is not to discourage anyone from viewing the passion play; rather, it is to encourage mutual respect and understanding.

If you would like additional copies of this booklet, please contact us at the above address. We stand ready to help you.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Andrew Baker  
Chicago Director, Interreligious Affairs

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MIDWEST REGIONAL DIRECTOR Eugene Du Bow—MIDWEST REGIONAL STAFF Rabbi Andrew Baker • Adrienne Goodman • Sheryl Leonard • David Roth



## Passion Play Still Hostile To Jews

NEW YORK, (JTA) - The 1980 Oberammergau Passion Play began in that Bavarian, West German village as the American Jewish Committee warned potential visitors that the play still can be viewed as hostile to Jews. A half million people are expected to see the play this summer which villagers have performed at the beginning of every decade since 1680.

In a 20-page booklet the AJCommittee has prepared for potential visitors to Oberammergau, they were warned that despite "a serious effort to cleanse the play of anti-Jewish polemic and prejudice," the pageant remains "rooted in a tradition of hostility and contempt toward Jews and Judaism which prevailed for centuries and shaped the attitudes of generations of Christians."

The booklet, entitled "What Viewers Should Know about the Oberammergau" and prepared by Judith Herscovf Banki, the AJCommittee's assistant national director of interreligious affairs, was published under a grant from the Nathan Appleman Institute for the Advancement of Christian-Jewish Understanding. It was released at the AJCommittee's 74th annual meeting.

### Text Cut, But Not Rethought

The Oberammergau Passion Play is a work of fiction, incorporating some episodes from the Gospels, ignoring others and freely inventing scenes and characters with no basis in Christian Scripture, Banki said. She said the play was written with a deliberate effort "to make the Jewish people and their leaders appear as villainous and evil as possible."

At the time the play was written, Jews were charged with collective guilt for the death of Jesus and regarded as rejected by God for refusing to accept Jesus, Mrs. Banki pointed out. She said today this anti-Jewish theology has been "repudiated by major Christian churches and replaced by policies of respect and understanding." But she said this has not been reflected in the 1980 Oberammergau script.

"The text has only been cut, not rethought," Banki said. "The traditional anti-Jewish polemic which shaped the earlier text has not been questioned, nor have the insights of modern biblical and extrabiblical scholarship been incorporated into the dynamics of the play."

More than just the Lord's  
Passion will be reflected  
in the play

## W. German town to unveil its Passion play — edited

By Bradley Graham,  
Washington Post

OBERAMMERGAU, West Germany — Once every 10 years, the devoted folk in this Alpine village stage a Passion play that attracts world attention and scores another victory for living traditions.

During the nine years in between, the villagers act like most others. They gossip a lot, and quarrel.

However, one fierce row recently left the town bitterly divided and proved to be no ordinary rural spat. Sparked by charges that the traditional play was anti-Semitic, a debate raged here that took on the dimensions of an international scandal, drawing in Catholic and Jewish officials and nearly turning a few plowshares into swords.

For the moment, the feuding appears to have dissolved. But when the curtain goes up May 25 on the play's 1980 version, more than just the Lord's Passion will be reflected in it.

Snuggled in a remote valley of the Bavarian Alps, Oberammergau is a picture of pastoral tranquility. There are quaint, chalet-style houses and religious murals on some buildings.

There is also a veneer of wealth evident in such things as the \$6 million town pool, complete with wave-making machine, paid for by the 1970 play performances.

The play, which depicts the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus, was first staged in 1634 to fulfill a vow to present it every decade in thanks for the ending of the black plague. With a cast of 600 and another 800 assisting with costumes and staging — all amateurs and local citizens — the play has been presented regularly for more than three centuries except on three occasions when war intervened.

But, increasingly since the end of World War II, the play has been criticized for its apparent anti-Semitic tenor. Ten years ago, the Vatican withheld its official sanction. In the United States, about 70,000 tickets and hotel reservations were canceled after the American Jewish Committee and the B'nai B'rith's Anti-defamation League called for a boycott.

But in a village where one is regarded as an outsider unless all four grandparents are buried in the local churchyard, traditions die hard. The craftsmen and herders here never have considered their play offensive and defiantly reject the notion that they have anything against Jews.

"Nobody here really thought the play was anti-Semitic," said Hans Maier, a woodcarver and the play's director. "We had been presenting it long before Hitler."

There had been attempts before the 1960 and 1970 presentations to mollify foreign public opinion by doctoring the current script, written in the 19th century by Alois Dausen-

berger, a monk at nearby Ettal Monastery. But the effects had been largely cosmetic and failed to alter the play's strident tone or the thrust of its message — collective Jewish guilt for the death of Jesus.

A few years ago, a group of worried burghers, led by Hans Schwaighofer, the head of Oberammergau's woodcarving school, dug out an 18th century script written by another Ettal monk, Ferdinand Rosner. Though archaic in form and language — it is written in 9,000 tetrameter verses — it is free of any tinge of anti-Semitism and met the approval of both Catholic and Jewish officials.

The town council also liked and approved of the older script. But a village majority did not. They found its language stilted, its action overly dramatic and its grand style unbefitting the tastes of the town. Besides, they feared that the new version would scare off more old tourists than it would draw new ones.

So, in 1978, the town voted out the council and elected one that would give them back their play. Faced again with the prospect of a U.S. Jewish boycott, some Oberammergauers joined with Catholic clergymen to edit the more objectionable material but of the old text.

Gone is Pontius Pilate's line, "The curse be on you and your children." The scene of the Pharisees in the Temple, formerly portrayed as a snarling mob, has been toned down to depict a mild crowd.

For the first time, this line was added to the prologue: "Far be from us all efforts to seek guilt among others. Welcome to you, also, brothers and sisters of the race from which Jesus came."

The play has long been a way of life for residents of the community. Children begin appearing in it at age 6, and many look forward to the day they are selected for a leading role.

To search out the best talent, training plays are held during the decade between performances. Being chosen for a main part ranks as the highest honor in town — perhaps a little too high, as some actors have managed to parlay their roles into political and commercial gains.

Hoping to diffuse this star cult, the play council chose two casts to alternate in this year's performances.

This should make for some interesting comparisons. Of the two Christs, one is tradesman Gregor Brietsamter, 48, who has played the part before, while the other is Rudi Zwink, 21, the mayor's son and a dental student, who regards Jesus as the ultimate anti-establishment figure.

A half-million visitors are expected to net \$12 million for the town and its shopkeepers this summer — money that the council has already earmarked for a new guest house and a bypass road.

The play will be performed 100 times between May 25 and Sept. 27. Each performance lasts six hours with an intermission for lunch.

5/19/80  
sent to  
Jabbi Tanenbaum



Jewish Groups Charge

## Passion Play Anti-Semitic

St. L. Review  
6-13-80

NEW YORK (NC) — Representatives of the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (ADL) said the 1980 Oberammergau Passion Play is anti-Semitic despite efforts of the West German town's officials, churchmen and

producers to eliminate anti-Jewish references in the script.

Delegations from both agencies saw the play in its opening days in late May. They plan further efforts to revise the play when it is again produced in 1984, the 350th anniversary of its inauguration.

Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, AJC national director for inter-religious affairs, said after seeing the play that despite the cuts it presented an emotion-laden portrayal of Jews as collectively responsible for the death of Jesus.

The rabbi said the play makes Oberammergau "the international capital" of religious anti-Semitism.

Cardinal Josef Ratzinger of Munich has said, "We must hear and read the text of the Passion Play with greater sensitivity," after the terrible events of the Nazi period.

But he has called on people to stop making accusations of anti-Semitism which, he said, "is foreign to the historic origin and the spiritual content of the play."

Nat Kameny, chairman of the ADL program committee, who was invited with a delegation by Mayor Ernst Zwink of Oberammergau to a press preview, said that the play contained "no surprises."

He said he felt that the Oberammergau townspeople "have moved several centuries — and still have several centuries to go" in excluding anti-Jewish statements from the text.

The AJC, which has had four meetings with the play's writers, producers and consultants in the last four years, conceded that although many "horrendous" hostile images of Jews had been removed and an "admirable" prologue added, the play is still "structurally anti-Semitic," according to Rabbi Tanenbaum.

"The fact that two million people will have been exposed to its emotion-laden anti-Jewish message since World War II," Rabbi Tanenbaum observed, "suggests that Oberammergau has become the international capital of some of the worst forms of demonic anti-Semitism in the world today."



## stants Switch ons, Study Finds

they gain members through switching, appear to lose even more who leave religion entirely, he said.

### Passion Play Anti-Semitic, Jews Declare

NEW YORK (AP)—A group of American Jewish Committee officials, just back from viewing Germany's Oberammergau passion play, said the 1980 version of the dramatized death of Jesus was a "nightmare of anti-Semitism."

The officials agreed that attempts had been made since the 346-year-old pageant's last performance in 1970 to excise some blatantly anti-Jewish passages. But they said the changes were not sufficient.

About 80,000 Americans see the play yearly, but Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, an AJC spokesman, said his organization is not seeking a boycott, but is circulating a pamphlet pointing out the historical and biblical errors it sees in the production.

The Pentagon has ordered U.S. military officials to stop promoting tours to the passion play and similar sectarian events" (Both the AJC and the Anti-Defamation League have claimed credit for prompting the letter.)

