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OBERAMMERGAU UPDATE

by Marc H. Tanenbaum
and Judith H. Banki

The crucifixion drama is...regarded, not without reason, as having played a prominent part in Jewish disabilities through the centuries as well as providing a major cause of negative attitudes toward Jews today.

(Bernhard Olson, Faith and Prejudice)

Passion plays constitute a troubling problem for Jews and for 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 the "enemies" of Jesus -- the Jewish people.

Of all the pageants dramatizing the Crucifixion, the most famous is 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 epidemic 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 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, Jesus and his disciples were represented as Aryan heroes.

The performances in 1950 and 1960 returned to the pre-war 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 exercise 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 Passion of Jesus as a Spiritual Drama," sponsored and underwritten by the Academy, in Munich in November.

The 400 participants from Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Italy, with particularly heavy representation from Oberammergau, included academic scholars, theologians, Christian educators, government officials, civic leaders, and numerous representatives of major German newspapers, radio and television stations.

Professor Henrich stated at the beginning that Mayor Ernst Zwink of Oberammergau had written to him, characterizing the symposium as "a conspiracy on the part of the American Jewish Committee and certain Oberammergau people" to undermine the Passion Play, and asking that the meeting not be held. To which, Professor Henrich responded: "The Oberammergau Passion Play cannot be considered the affair only of a village," and stressed the "Christian duty" of applying historical research and biblical theology to the Passion narrative.

Then, one after another, Christian speakers challenged the traditional formula of the Oberammergau Passion Play on the grounds of scholarship and justice.

Dr. Bo Reicke, professor of New Testament at the University of Basel, Switzerland, and Dr. Franz Mussner, professor of Biblical Theology at the University of Regensburg, both declared: "In depicting the Passion of Jesus, the Jews must now be portrayed with more honesty, with greater respect for their religious traditions and with greater recognitions of their rich traditions of scholarship. We still have a lot of revision to do in telling the Passion accounts. The Catholic Church has taken heed of the decisions of Vactican Council II in revising its Christian education, teachings and liturgy. There is a whole assortment of passion plays throughout the world, at the head of which is the Oberammergau Passion Play, which have acted as though relations between Christians and Jews have not changed. After Auschwitz, it is a scandal to continue in that manner."

In a surprise appearance, Italian film director Franco Zeffirelli, who produced the widely-acclaimed NBC-TV productions, "Jesus of Nazareth," appealed "as a Christian and a son of Abraham," to the producers of the Oberammergau play "not to repeat the errors of the past."

At the invitation of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft (the producers, actors and others involved in the Rosner version) the AJC delegation went to Oberammergau to take part in a dialogue with 200 villagers. A lecture on "The History of Anti-Semitism and Jewish-Christian Relations Today," "Christians and Jews: The Troubled Brotherhood," a thought-provoking filmstrip by Sister Suzanne Noffke, O.P., Alba House Communications, Canfield, Ohio, was supplemented by a lively question and answer period. For many of the villagers, this was a first-time exposure to the history of anti-Semitism in the Christian West and the Holocaust as viewed through Jewish perspectives.

They also gained additional knowledge of Jews, Judaism and Israel. As a result, AJC was invited to organize a week-long seminar of lecture by Jewish scholars at Oberammergau in 1979 to make a systematic presentation on Jewish history, anti-Semitism, the Holocaust and Israel.

At last the debate over the Oberammergau Passion Play is no longer solely between American Jews and Oberammergau villagers. The Munich Academy symposium has shifted the perspective. Now German Catholic academicians, theologians and church officials are demanding that justice be done. A new sensitivity based on knowledge is clearly and honestly beginning to develop in Oberammergau itself.

Marc H. Tanenbaum is national interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee
Judith H. Banki is assistant interreligious affairs director.

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