

Dialogue and Hope at Oberammergau

John F. Kelley

Six persons came together for lunch and conversation at a little hotel in Oberammergau, the Village in the Bavarian mountains which is famous for its Passion Play. The participants included Herr Hans Maier, Director of the Oberammergau Passionsspiele; Herr Klement Fend, new Bürgermeister of the Village; Pater Josef Forstmayr, Spiritual Counsellor and Priest of the Village; Rev. Dr. Hans Wagner (replacing Rev. Christoph Kosmala, Lutheran Pastor of the Lutheran Church who was hospitalized); Mrs. Victoria M. Neumueller, Director of the Public Relations Office; and myself, Fr. John Kelley, a critic of the Play.

I was representing the Israel Study Group of the American National Conference of Christians and Jews. More specifically I was spokesman for the twenty two Christian theologians who had given their names to the letter of protest sent to the Mayor and to the Director of the Play on March 23rd.

In the early morning of August 22nd Mrs. Neumueller drove me 86 kilometers to Oberammergau. from Munich / She had earlier arranged for me to meet the Director and a variety of other persons involved in the Play before the presentation began at 9 am. I was shown backstage by Mr. Maier and encountered a variety of thespian heroes, heroines, and villains of the Play. Together we prayed on stage for the quality of this performance which would last almost six hours.

A few statistics may be in order: the Theatre was built for the Play as given in/It was designed to seat 5200 persons but because of the issues of security, the police have had a number of places removed and the present capacity is 4752. With 100 scheduled performances and some additional

showings for local persons, at capacity the Play will be shown to about a half million viewers this year (not one million as asserted on the cover of James Bentley's book, Oberammergau and the Passion Play, 1984.) Cost per ticket is 90 Deutsch Marks, i.e., about thirty dollars. The Play itself runs in two parts -- from a prompt start at 9 am to 12 noon; then after a break for lunch, the second part runs from 3 pm to 5:30. The house was filled but there were a few empty seats here and there.

The Village has still about 5000 inhabitants, of whom more than 4000 are Roman Catholics. About 800 are Protestants, their church being the Lutheran Church of the Village. During the actual season of the Play, three Lutheran ministers serve there in predominantly English services. The statistics from the 1980 attendance indicate that more than 70% of the viewers are English speaking. The villagers if one may judge from the wall paintings, the wood carvings and their musical skills.

What are the problems of the Play? One of them is the difficult aspect of Adolph Hitler's relationship to the Play. It seems to be true that Hitler came to view the Play in 1930 before he came into power, although he was on the rise to political prominence at that time. He came again in 1934 after he had seized power and subsequently voiced approval of the presentation as given at that time. His own motivation seems to have been to gain acceptance by the Bavarian people who were much opposed to him. In 1940 the Play could not be staged due to the complications of war, but in his table conversation he is credited with having said that the Play needed to be restored and maintained as a most forceful presentation of the evil of Judaism. This conversation is dated July 5, 1942 (according to Bentley). None of these items were part of our luncheon conversation but some of the facts were known to everyone at the table.

To open the luncheon I asked whether we might not offer grace and this was done in a meaningful way by Fr. Forstmayr. It is impossible to recall all the details of our exchanges. I shall try to recall only the high points.

character

The conservative/of the people of this area had been observed in a conciliatory article on the Play written by Dr. Hans Lamm, president of the Jewish community of Munich, "Und wieder: Traditionsreiches Oberammergau....Neuer Bürgermeister und neuer Geist." This article was distributed in June in Munich and in Dusseldorf through the Jewish newspapers. Lamm describes the Bavarian people as highly conservative, traditional in most ways. The members of our conversation certainly showed themselves conservative in most respects.

Father Forstmayr himself was quiet and thoughtful: he observed that a passion play is a work of faith and that those outside the faith may never embrace it. (I later witnessed this aspect of the faith dimension in questions raised by a secular gentleman from Holland; he wanted the Jesus of the Play to be quite other than he is in the gospels.)

I introduced myself, giving a bit of background on the Israel Study Group and my own role in the Diocese of Brooklyn and in the New York City area in Christian-Jewish relations. They asked useful questions. They wondered if I had read the statements by German hierarchy who are friends of the Play. I had read them all. They were a bit taken aback by that and asked about my service in the Diocese and my relationship with the Bishop. (Bishop Francis J. Mugavero chairs the Committee of American Catholic Bishops on Catholic-Jewish Relations, and he receives my annual Report. I told them that I report to Father Martin Geraghty who is charged with accountability for Catholic-Jewish relations in the Brooklyn Diocese.)

The study which the Israel Study Group had undertaken in March 1983 was outlined for them and our actions summarized. I avoided any use of the term "anti-Semitism" (the protest letter had used "dramatic anti-Judaism"). Anti-Semitism seems to be too emotional a term for this conversation.

At this point I threw the discussion wide open by asking them why the Jews seemed to take offense at the Play.

The initial reaction was one of anger and skepticism. Anger that outsiders should be involved in criticism of a Play which they had not seen. Skepticism that there was no evidence that the 1984 Text had been in the hands of many of the critics. I listened easily and passively to the complaints, waiting them out. At one point I found it appropriate to apologize to Hans Maier for the incorrect use of names of Director and Mayor in our letter in March.

Here I sensed that some important values were being threatened. Much of their defensiveness started from Rev. Wagner who as an American was angered by the audacity of the American critics. Although Rev. Wagner in a sense was the last to arrive at our conversation -- he is normally the pastor of the Protestant church at Dachau, site of the concentration camp north of Munich -- he was the most vocal and the most angered, apparently, by the criticisms that had been made.

Less contentious in style than Wagner's reaction was that of Hans Maier, Spiel-leiter of the Play. His voice is very important in the quality of what is done there, for he both director and producer and has been associated with the Play for most of his life, as indeed have most of the Villagers. He listened respectfully but I am not sure that he sees the contradictions. He claims to hold the Christian scriptures as the norm for scrutiny of the Play. He is directing a presentation in which the Rabbi is the enemy of Jesus. There is of course no rabbi in the gospel account.

Mayor Fend was the third person to offer a complaint. Klement Fend is twenty nineyears old. His election in the spring had ousted the incumbent Frank Hoffman. Fend took office on May 2 and is thus by right a member of the 25 person Committee which coordinates the production. He expressed himself simply and seemed to listen well, but he complained that he had read hatred in the letter of Rabbi A. James Rudin to the New York Times (May 26). I assured him that, while there were some errors in Jim Rudin's letter -- I had read it carefully, several times -- I had found no hatred in the letter. Dismay indeed, and determination to respond, but no hatred, from my perspective.

Special resentment was expressed against the eight members of an American Jewish group which had come to witness the Play, had spoken to no one of the local Committee of twenty five, and then on May 25 had held in Munich a press conference criticizing the Play and releasing a statement to the press on that same day. Other statements at the table indicated that we were getting honest even-if-angry expressions of their feelings.

Their reaction was positive to the Anti-Defamation League persons who with Rabbi Ronald B. Sobel had come and after witnessing the Play had asked for interviews with the leadership of the Village. After extended exchange with the Village leadership, as well as with Bishop Karl Flugel of Regensburg, Bishop Franz Schwarzenbach of Munich, professors Franz Mussner and Josef Georg Ziegler as well, they were received by Archbishop Friedrich Wetter.

Several agreements had been made at that time on procedures and exchange of communications bearing on the Play. Persons at the table also expressed the hope that there would be some unity in the Jewish voices in the dialogue; this sentiment is also expressed in the press release for the Play (May 25).

Of the German persons mentioned in these discussions with the Anti-Defamation League I was successful in meeting only with Hans Maier and Klement Fend. I did make other contacts of importance: on August 23rd I contacted Weihbischof Franz Schwarzenbach who is charged with ecumenical affairs in the Munich archdiocese. The Bishop seemed to be aware of our work and in a brief conversation in German over the phone he seemed pleased at the effort.

A different strength of my contacts was that I spent some hours with Mrs. Neumueller in visiting Fr. Stephan Schaller, Benedictine theologian from Kloster Ettal which is located three miles from Oberammergau. Dr. Schaller is recognized by his writings as one of the best informed of the advisers on the Play. He was in agreement with me that the use of the Rabbi symbol was inappropriate and counterproductive. In our discussions we did not sense any great difference of opinions.

Returning to matters discussed at the luncheon, I summarized for them the readings which I have been able to overview during my study. Unfortunately they were poorly informed on critics of the Play and the meaning the criticism might have for Christian-Jewish relations. I am aware of about sixty items of bibliography over the years and more than twenty of these are on the current production. I have read all that I could lay my hands on, whether in English or in German. Of these last writings, at least twenty persons are involved, of whom fifteen would be Christian and five Jewish. None of them is favorable to the Play. (Dr. Lamm and Robert DiVeroli may represent exceptions to my generalization.) My report distressed the persons at the luncheon table.

They knew of course of the work of Dr. Leonard Swidler and Father Gerard S. Sloyan, Catholic scholars who have long been critical of the Play. They needed to be told that Dr. Eva Fleischner is a Catholic and Dr. William H. Harter is a Presbyterian. These last two had accompanied American Jewish Committee personnel in attendance at an early showing of the current production. Persons at the table did not know who Dr. Eugene Fisher is nor did they know of the work of Fr. John Pawlikowski.

They seemed touched by the information shared. While no resolutions were made at this meeting -- we indulged in a bit of wholesome laughter -- it seemed clear to me that we had succeeded in coming to a better understanding of the issues.

I explained to them my most recent action: I had authored an article on the symbolism of the Play, focusing on the term "Rabbi." They listened to my description of what I had done, and a copy of the article was in Mrs. Neumueller's hands. She promised them each a copy of the text. They listened and asked intelligent questions but it was clear that they have a strong sentiment for the past and for the tradition which has kept the Play alive until 1934.

Incidentally Victoria Neumueller acted principally as the convenor and the translator -- she was very helpful in both roles.

What concessions need to be made to the Oberammergau tradition? My concessions were simple enough: I liked the music, the orchestra and the choral, though I had to confess that these areas are not my expertise. On several minor points the words of the songs might need to be changed. I was very favorably impressed by their artful stage settings.

In view of the negative criticismⁱ of earlier performances, it will be important to these persons of the Village that critics recognize the changes which have already been made. They have eliminated many harsh terms and much of the inappropriate language. They have eliminated some questionable scenes. And although they are threatened by this, they have shortened the Play by about two hours.//We need to point out for them that their version of the passion play is acclaimed by much of the world as the model, the exemplar, the ^{prototype} / for dozens of other passion plays in the world. They mentioned to me that there are perhaps a dozen other passion plays in the German language at various places in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. They did not seem to be aware that their play is the model for at least six passion play centers in the United States.

They would like to be accepted as not guilty of anti-Semitism, but they would also like to not have to change their Play. It was clear, to me at least, that they could not have all the assurances of the past.

There was no formal conclusion to our exchange. The clock indicated that the Second Part of the Oberammergau Passionsspiel was approaching and we had to adjourn. I promised them I would make this report and that to the extent that it was possible I would communicate it to the Jewish community in the United States. They expressed the hope that my report would reach the Jewish people in our country.

It seemed to me that we had accomplished much of our purpose, the beginning of conversations which recognize sensitive areas for consideration, reflection, and decisions for actions.

John J. Kelley, S.M.

350th Anniversary Year

Oberammergau Plays with Problems

BY SR. CELIA DEUTSCH NDS

1984 MARKS THE 350th ANNIVERSARY of the world-famous Oberammergau Passion Play, which originated in 1634 in fulfillment of a vow made during an outbreak of the plague. And this month the citizens of that small West German Village staged the opening performance of the anniversary year.

The significance of this Passion Play now extends far beyond the confines of Oberammergau. Travel agencies are advertising tours in Catholic papers throughout the U.S., including *The Tablet*. It is expected that more than half a million people will attend between May and October, and that 60% of these will be Americans. For some, it will be an opportunity to observe the continuation of a centuries-long tradition. For others it will be simply one more event packed into the busy schedule of a European tour. And for still others, it will be a pilgrimage—a journey in faith in order to understand more effectively the death of Jesus.

Hitler's Tribute

But despite the cultural and devotional significance of the Oberammergau play, many people are concerned that the text contains anti-Jewish statements and allusions. In fact, Adolf Hitler considered that anti-Jewish component so important that he stated: "It is vital that the Passion Play be continued at Oberammergau; for never has the menace of Jewry been, so convincingly portrayed."

The people of Oberammergau, the director and producers of the play are not lacking in good will. They have listened to the protests of Jews and Christians and introduced changes in the play in 1970, 1980 and 1984. But while these changes are significant, they are neither consistent nor extensive and many anti-Jewish elements remain.

For example, the text of the play makes a false contrast between Jewish religious tradition and Jesus' law of love. This obscures the fact that first-century Judaism also emphasized love of God and love of neighbor. Moreover, the play still describes the crucifixion as the responsibility of the Jewish community, while history tells us that crucifixion was a Roman form of punishment and that, under Roman occupation, Jewish leadership had no power to authorize capital punishment. Pontius Pilate is still portrayed as a rather compassionate man, whereas historical documents indicate that the Romans themselves considered him a vicious administrator and eventually

recalled him to Rome. Furthermore, in the play all Jesus' enemies are Jews with Hebrew names, whereas his friends and disciples have "Christian" names. This not only obscures the Jewishness of Jesus and his followers, but identifies in a symbolic way "Jew" with "enemy."

The cumulative effect of these elements, among many others, is to imply that those Jews who did not accept Jesus as Messiah were morally blind and that they embodied the forces of evil.

Such anti-Jewish components misrepresent the Judaism of Jesus' time and obscure the complexity of the events surrounding Jesus' death. Theological and sociological studies show that such misrepresentation is dangerous indeed. They demonstrate that there is a direct correlation between misunderstanding the events surrounding Jesus' death and anti-Semitic attitudes towards Jewish people today. Those same studies have demonstrated, furthermore, that the charge that the Jews killed Jesus helped to create the climate which made the Holocaust possible.

Opposes Misrepresentation

The Catholic hierarchy opposes such misrepresentation. In the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate*, the Council fathers insisted that "what happened to Christ in His Passion cannot be attributed to all Jews without distinction then alive, nor to the Jews of today." And in their 1975 "Guidelines" the American bishops stated that "nothing which in any way approaches the notion of Jewish guilt should be found in any Catholic medium of expression or communication" and that accuracy in portraying the Passion "pertains as much to the purity of the Catholic faith as it does to the defense of Judaism."

Those going to Oberammergau this summer will have the opportunity to experience the continuation of an important tradition. We hope that travel agents and pilgrimage leaders will provide accurate information about the Passion Play, its history and present problems so that those attending the play can distinguish between the actual events surrounding Jesus' deaths and the way in which the Passion Play dramatizes those events.

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