

CULTURE

HOW HITLER'S FAVORITE PASSION PLAY LOST ITS ANTI-SEMITISM

A religious spectacle performed once a decade since 1634 in a Bavarian village
finally erases its history of hatred.

By A.J. Goldmann



Passion Play Oberammergau 2022 / Birgit Gudjonsdottir
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IT WOULD BE HARD to choose the most Jewish moment in this year's production of Oberammergau's Passion Play, the grand spectacle that recounts the story of Jesus Christ's trial, suffering, and resurrection. Begun in 1634 and performed roughly every 10 years, the play is produced by the inhabitants of this Bavarian village located in the foothills of the Alps. Maybe it was the scene where Jesus holds a Torah scroll aloft and leads the congregation in the "Sh'ma Yisrael," the Jewish declaration of faith in a single God, or perhaps it was the Last Supper, where Jesus and his apostles recite the traditional prayers over the wine and bread in convincing Hebrew. For me, it would have to be the way that Mary, the Madonna, is greeted in one scene: "How fortunate we are to have our rabbi's mother with us!"

An audience member might be forgiven for thinking she's watching a sitcom written by the Coen brothers rather than a play that, for centuries, numbered among modern European history's most virulently anti-Semitic texts. Hitler, who attended in the 1930s, said: "It is vital that the Passion Play be continued at Oberammergau; for never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed as in this presentation of what happened in the times of the Romans." Recognizing the play's enormous propagandistic value, the Nazi leader even considered underwriting a Germany-wide tour "so that the whole country could be inflamed against the Jews," reported the Jewish Telegraphic Agency at the time.

The Oberammergau Passionsspiele traces its origin to a purported miracle: The village was spared from a plague after locals vowed to reenact the Passion of Christ in perpetuity. Depending on your point of view, its survival after World War II and into the third decade of the 21st century can seem miraculous or puzzling. In the postwar period, Germany was forced to reexamine many of its national heroes and traditions that had been tainted by anti-Semitism, including Richard Wagner and the Bayreuther Festspiele, the opera festival founded by the composer. In 2022, it does not seem hyperbolic to say that the single most important factor in the play's endurance has been the concerted effort to eradicate its noxious depiction of Jews.

As a theatrical genre, the medieval Passion Play could not be more anachronistic. The event has remained very much a curio (which is, of course, one of Oberammergau's main selling points), a step back in time to a quaint past where peasants in a picturesque Alpine village came together to express their simple and pure belief through a performance involving nearly 2,000 participants as well as horses, goats, sheep, doves, and camels. In 1934, American Express's sales pitch for travelers to Oberammergau promised a "place on earth where piety and faith will live, it seems, forever."

FOR MOST OF OBERAMMERGAU'S postwar period, change came slowly. The town resisted calls from prominent American and European intellectuals to tone down the play's classic anti-Semitism. The Jewish people continued to be portrayed as a bloodthirsty mob, and the high priesthood as a sinister cabal with more power over Jesus's life than the occupying Romans. In the late 1960s, after the Second Vatican Council repudiated the ancient charge of Jewish collective guilt for the death of Christ, the Catholic Church urged Oberammergau to make changes to the play. But the 1970 Passionsspiele refused to make any significant alteration to the late-19th-century script then in use. It remained largely unchanged from the version that the American Reform Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf saw in 1900 and wrote about in a pamphlet a year later. Shaken by what he had witnessed, he summed up that while "people are free to believe whatever they choose, that freedom does not include the privilege of building up their faith at the expense of another people's honor."

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After the Vatican withheld its *missio canonica*, the official authorization for preaching, in 1970, the play's organizers made overtures to the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee, inviting them to participate in discussing amendments to the play. But while nips and tucks were made here and there (including removing the horned-shaped hats worn by the high priests), it wasn't until 1986, when a new director, Christian Stückl, then only in his mid-20s, was elected by the town council with a one-vote majority that the Oberammergau Passionsspiele began to modernize.

When I first visited this Alpine Jerusalem for the first time a dozen years ago to see the 2010 production, I walked away from the five-hour-long spectacle moved by its fluid succession of drama and music (a full orchestra and chorus performs the oratorio-like score). What the story of the Passion lacks in suspense, it makes up for with grandly staged crowd scenes that alternated with more intimate ones that turned these biblical figures into flesh-and-blood characters. Roughly 40 percent of Oberammergau's 5,500 inhabitants take part in the show, onstage or behind it; I marveled at the Passionsspiele as a heroic communal undertaking (it is arguably the most spectacular amateur theater production on the planet) rather than a religious experience.

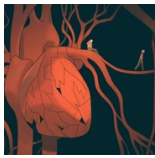


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For me this was more of an aesthetic pilgrimage. Of course, Oberammergau continues to attract the devout (visitors from American Bible Belt make up a significant audience bloc), and the production's sensitivity to scripture and attempts at historical accuracy are at least partly calibrated to appeal to the faithful. But Stückl himself told me that he has always considered the Passionsspiele to be "only theater," not a religious ritual. "Very often those who claimed it should be a church service were just trying to prevent anything new from being done," he explained when I ran into him at intermission. The changes he has pushed through incrementally over the past three and a half decades have been both ideological and dramaturgical. Cleaning up the play's historical anti-Semitism and foregrounding the Jewish milieu of Jesus and his followers has allowed the director to create three-dimensional characters who grapple with human problems, including oppression, betrayal, and suffering.

REVISITING THE PASSIONSSPIELE this summer, this historical grounding of Jesus as a Jewish leader in his time was even more moving to me in some ways than the sound of Hebrew prayer echoing off the stage of the Passionstheater. The numerous scenes in which his religious and political tenets are vigorously discussed also deepen the play's power by bringing the "greatest story ever told" down from impossibly lofty heights. We see a Jesus who wants to reform Judaism from within rather than found a new religion, all against the backdrop of a repressive Roman occupation.

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The dramatic core of the current production is, in many respects, the Jesus-Judas relationship, depicted as emotionally intimate and fraught. As Jesus's grassroots support grows in Jerusalem, Judas is frustrated with what he considers Jesus's reluctance to take a stronger political role. This Judas doesn't so much betray his friend as try to force a meeting between Jesus and the Sanhedrin, the Jewish authorities. In the 2022 production, Judas receives the infamous 30 pieces of silver only after Jesus has been taken into custody. Judas barges in on the High Council and accuses them of deception.

"Caiaphas," Judas wails, "you misled me. You betrayed and deceived me." Storming out of the High Council, Judas flings the coins back in the priests' face.

Every story needs a bad guy, though; if this Judas is not the villainous traitor that he has been represented as throughout history, Stückl emphasizes the bloodthirstiness of Caiaphas, the high priest, instead. Although Pilate comes across as an unsavory thug in this production, rather than as the noble protector up against a rabble of unruly subjects, I did find it troubling that Caiaphas goes to great lengths in demanding Jesus's death.

I wasn't the only one, it turned out. Shortly after my trip to Oberammergau, I spoke with Rabbi Noam Marans, the American Jewish Committee's director of interreligious and intergroup relations.

"I don't think it is necessary for Caiaphas to appear vengeful towards Jesus. I think it's enough for Caiaphas to be portrayed as protective of the Jewish people of his time under pressure from Pilate," said Marans, who leads the advisory group that was assembled in late 2019 with the purpose of weeding out the lingering anti-Jewish elements from the play.

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That group, which includes Jewish and Christian religious leaders and academics, was invited to give feedback on the script as well as the production's design. Marans called Stückl an "unprecedented partner" who is "committed to doing whatever he can" within a problematic genre to address a host of issues with relevance to German-Jewish and Christian-Jewish relations. Yet, as the depiction of Caiaphas illustrates, Stückl's dramaturgical needs are sometimes at odds with the advisory group's recommendations.

That process is ongoing. Stückl, whose authority in Oberammergau is, for the time being, unchallenged, is a seasoned director willing to make changes up until opening night and sometimes even after. Several of the actors I spoke with told me that though the roles they play come laden with centuries of tradition, Stückl also gives them a lot of interpretive license. Frederik Mayet, one of the two actors playing Jesus, told me that he adds his own twist on the “Judas kiss.” On the days he performs, it is Mayet who kisses the actor playing Judas in the betrayal scene, which, like the current text of the play, generally includes very few stage directions.

The production I saw this summer both looked and felt fresher than it had a dozen years ago. Beyond Stückl’s reformist tendencies—he has also made it possible for non-Christians to appear in the play; one of this year’s Judases is a Muslim—he understands the need to renew the Passionsspiele if it is to survive as more than a relic from Germany’s distant past. Scrubbing away the long-accrued veneer of anti-Semitism and historicizing Jesus have helped usher the play into the 21st century. As the Passionsspiele’s 400th anniversary approaches, I wonder how much innovation and passion will be required to sustain this monumental enterprise for another century.

A.J. Goldmann is an arts journalist and critic based in Germany who contributes to *The New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

