

THE RABBI'S IMPRESSIONS

Joseph Krauskopf wrote *A Rabbi's Impressions of the Oberammergau Passion Play*. First presented as a series of Sunday lectures, it was given a supplement and published as a book in 1901. It seems to be the only book available which applies the light of scholarly Biblical and historical analysis to this most famous and highly publicized of the passion plays. Perhaps the only book, too, to associate the Oberammergau Passion Play with the growth of anti-Semitism. "I know nothing that could have rooted deeper among these people the existing prejudice against the Jew, and spread wider the world hatred of him."¹

Whether you are Jewish or Christian or neither, reading this book with the care it deserves will alter your views of this prestigious, almost sacrosanct miracle play and give you second thoughts as to its value in the modern world. Although the editor of the British *Review of Reviews* wrote, "I could not say that I was convinced," an American Protestant minister said, "Would I were nearer to your teaching." "Your standpoint was quite sympathetic, yet different from that which many of my friends had taken," came from the dean of Yale Divinity School. Isaac Funk, of Funk and Wagnalls, wrote, "Permit me to thank you for having written your book." More letters and reviews came to the Rabbi, ranging from cool to enthusiastic.

In 1633, as an expression of gratitude by those Oberammergau villagers who survived an epidemic of bubonic plague (the fearsome Black Death), a collective vow was made to perform a passion play once every ten years. The performance dates

were changed later in the same century to the decimal years: the fifth season of the play was presented in 1680.² The Rabbi saw it in August of the year 1900, at the suggestion of Sybil, his wife.

He was in Europe that summer as a special commissioner of the U. S. Department of Agriculture. His mission was to visit agricultural schools in Europe, to assess the techniques and quality of teaching, and to render a report to the secretary of agriculture. The trip to Oberammergau was apparently planned on the spur of the moment as an incidental weekend excursion. Krauskopf had been asked his opinion of the play, but had avoided expressing opinions based only on the impressions gained by others or on available published accounts.

The Rabbi was delighted with the little village nestled in the Bavarian Alps, which clung to the architecture and pace of the Middle Ages, its houses beautifully decorated with paintings of Biblical scenes. He was accompanied on the trip by another rabbi, whose identity remains obscure.

There being no hotels in Oberammergau at that time, visitors were assigned to the homes of the villagers, most of whom had some part in the play. Krauskopf was impressed by the villagers who, having been born and trained into this long tradition, were so devoted to the roles they portrayed that they had somehow come to resemble these Biblical characters in an idealized way, possessing a spiritual radiance which could not have been feigned for the occasion. He found that Anton Lang, then playing the role of Jesus for the first time, was admirably suited to the part in appearance, bearing and expression. As an afterthought, the Rabbi decided that Lang, with his golden hair and Teutonic features did not typify a Palestinian Jew.

He had a long talk with Andreas Lang, who acted as a chief rabbi in the play. Andreas was "quite astounded to learn that

he had spent the evening with two real rabbis; and, no Jews ever having lived in that town . . . he was probably as much surprised to find us different from what he expected a Jew to be as we were pained the next day at the bitterness with which he enacted the part of the rabbi."³ He told them that two English ladies had refused to remain as lodgers at his home when they learned that it was he who persecuted Christ in the play. He also mentioned that Gregor Lechner, who had formerly enacted the role of Judas, trained in it by his father who had played it before him, had been treated by many visitors as repulsive. "I pondered on this display of bigotry," the Rabbi wrote, "and wondered not that the world, believing the Jew to have really performed the evil things charged against him, should have been and should still be so bitter and cruel against him, seeing its bitterness and prejudice against those who simply enact such parts in a play."⁴

He reported that he felt the keenest enjoyment in having come, in the strange sights, and in the quaint and interesting people. But this mood changed abruptly the moment the play began. "That same moment I distinctly heard the agonizing cries of my unfortunate fathers who, throughout many dark and cruel centuries, were given the choice between believing in Him, who had suffered and died for the salvation of human kind, or suffer and die for not believing in Him; who were subjected to cruelties such as find no equal in the blood-stained tomes of history."⁵

When Anton Lang appeared on the stage as Christ, and the conspiracies developed in which the Jews were made to seem fiendishly inhuman while the Romans were presented as reluctant in the prosecution and compassionate in the execution of Him, the injustice of this historical inversion deeply upset the Rabbi. He realized then that he had come to Oberammergau not for entertainment, but "... for present discomfort and future work." He realized that, somehow, he

must try to counteract the anti-Semitic propaganda which he saw unfolding before him.

When the intermission came at noon, the audience was silent as it slowly filed from the vast auditorium. A deep sorrow seemed to have taken hold of each individual there. As the Rabbi walked along, this sorrow seemed very personal to him; for his people had suffered indescribably because of the persistence of the legend and myth surrounding the death of Jesus, its import "etched into our souls." He had read a facetious item in a German newspaper a few days before, which now came to his mind: While leaving the hall at the noon intermission a patron is heard to say, "The play is not so bad. I wonder how it will end . . ."⁶ The Rabbi mused, sadly, that Jews knew the story, and knew it well. When he considered the historical inaccuracies which he had seen and heard that morning, he too wondered how it would end—for the Jews.

IMPRESSIONS CONTINUED

The Rabbi viewed New Testament literature perhaps a little more critically than most Christians are willing to do. His exegetic approach was based on a comprehensive knowledge of Jewish and Roman history and a scholarly familiarity with the Scriptures, tempered by a strong sense of justice. He was unwilling to accept the historic authenticity of a literature written, for the most part, long after the events described, based on hearsay evidence, by men who had no direct acquaintance with Jesus; such reports of historical events being selected, centuries later, to fit the needs of an emerging theology, some being rejected because they seemed to substantiate the claims of rival factions. He had the highest possible regard for the historic Jesus of Nazareth, but regretted the course of Christian history which had transformed the humble Jewish rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, into the Greco-Roman divinity, Christ.

At one point in the Passion Play, he tells us, he had to use his utmost self-control to keep from springing to his feet and shouting that this reenactment of the trial of Jesus was not historically true, that it could not have happened in that way, that it unjustly defamed the Jews. "While people are free to believe whatever they choose," he wrote, "that freedom does not include the privilege of building up their faith at the expense of another people's honor. While Christians have a perfect right to ascribe to Jesus whatever miracles and supernatural happenings they please, they have no right to do this at the cost of falsification of Jewish history, of mistranslations of Jewish Scriptures, of misinterpretations of Jewish laws and institutions."¹

Two recent books have explored the circumstances surrounding the trial and death of Jesus in a critical, logical way, basing their conclusions on actual history. One, *The Passover Plot*, by Hugh J. Schonfield, was on the New York Times's best-seller list; the other, *The Death of Jesus*, by Joel Carmichael, was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Both authors raise many of the same questions and draw many of the same conclusions as those of the Rabbi.

Knowing that he would have many Christian readers, he suggested that, if faith rests on truth, it need have no fear of inquiry, not even of the most critical. If faith cannot withstand such a test, if it cannot stand unharmed in the face of truth, then it is poorly based. "Faith is mighty, Truth is mightier, but mightiest of all is Faith that rests on Truth."²

He was appalled by the characterization of Judas, who was made to appear the very prototype of the hated Jew. "An appearance so repulsive as to prove at once the historical impossibility of the character," he observed, "since a nature like that of the noble-minded and pure-hearted Jesus could never have attached to himself, in closest intimacy, a character whose very presence dripped poison, whose very voice spoke hypocrisy, whose very eyes sent dagger thrusts . . . a part so enacted as to convey the impression that Judas alone typified the nature and way of the Jew . . ."³—although Jesus and His disciples were also Jews. To deny that Jesus was a Jew would be to deny His Davidic descent through Joseph, so carefully chronicled in the Gospel of Matthew.

The Rabbi observed that the treatment of Judas, both in the Passion Play and in the New Testament, presents a theological and ethical problem for intelligent modern minds. Jesus is aware of the impending treachery of Judas, yet does nothing to prevent it nor to dissuade Judas from its commission, but in fact abets it. Would not Jesus have been on more solid moral ground in pointing out to Judas the enormity of a crime which

would presumably result in the eternal damnation of his soul? "Having the power to prevent the crime and not doing so may be well enough for dramatic purposes, but it is all wrong for the morals of a Saviour, for the theology of a God. If, according to the Divine Plan, the treachery had to be committed, if just in that way Christ's death had to be effected for the salvation of mankind, then the guilt ought to be laid against the theology rather than against Judas," the Rabbi reasoned. "If that was the Divine Plan, did not Judas do what had been ordained to be done? Unless my common sense has deserted me, I cannot come to any conclusion than this: If the treachery of Judas was infamous, the theology which necessitated it was infinitely worse."⁴

The Rabbi reacted against the injustices of the celebrated Oberammergau Passion Play in the only way he could. He delivered several sermons which were separately published and widely distributed as pamphlets, and he published his compelling book. Later, he delivered a series of lectures at the request of Jewish congregations in the Middle West.

In 1970 the Passion Play of Oberammergau was presented again in the country in which modern anti-Semitism originated and, under Hitler, reached its full barbaric fruition. It continues to breed hatred of the Jews, for it dramatizes the most anti-Jewish of the four gospels. Hitler acknowledged its usefulness to his program for the Final Solution of the Jewish Problem when, in 1942, he approved a special subsidy for the Oberammergau Passion Play. He wrote to its producer: "Hardly anywhere else has the Jewish danger been illustrated more poignantly."⁵

It may be too naïve to expect that this miracle play, a vestige of the Middle Ages, will soon be quietly set aside or drastically revised as being inimical to understanding and brotherhood between Christians and Jews. Tradition is too strong, and commercialism too compelling, to favor such a sensible step.

It does seem imperative, however, that those who see the Passion Play should be reminded that it is not historically factual; that it has incited hatred, fanaticism, and brutality in the past; and that it can arouse anti-Semitism in the future. No staged pageant or drama which incites prejudice against any group of human beings can be justified, no matter how sacred its subject, how hallowed its traditions, nor how remunerative its presentation.

Part X

The Rabbi's Philosophy

ON ANTI-SEMITISM

The Rabbi said of anti-Semitism, "A prejudice of eighteen hundred years' standing cannot be obliterated in one day, nor in one year."¹ He had been reared with it as a boy in eastern Europe, where it was practiced in its most virulent forms. He remembered the "towering and gloomy" crosses placed along highways in Europe, which "struck into my soul as far back in my childhood as my memory can carry." He could not remember having been told about anti-Semitism as a child. He believed that it was, somehow, an instinctive fear, a fear communicated without words through the responses and reactions of parents and peers.²

He never completely escaped anti-Semitism in the United States. Though it has never been officially recognized, prejudice has existed and yet exists in America, in the murky recesses of the bigoted minds of many, a heritage of ignorance bequeathed by our medieval ancestors, cherished because it provides targets for hate and frustration. As this book is being written, the civic and business leaders of Jackson, Mississippi, are offering a reward of \$50,000 for the apprehension and conviction of those who bombed a local synagogue and the home of its rabbi.³ Random items often appear in the news media which tell of Jewish cemeteries vandalized, of swastikas smeared on synagogue walls, of arson in Jewish houses of worship.

Anti-Semitism is clearly a misnomer, for even the most rabid anti-Semites seem to feel no antagonism toward Arabs. The misnomer, however, persists.

Anti-Semitism is kept alive in this country because Christi-

anity has not yet outgrown it. Glock and Stark, in a recent study, have concluded that the "contemptuous religious image of Jews predisposes Christians to embrace a purely secular anti-Semitism."⁴ As a Christian layman, I can confirm this and feel shame for it.

Many right-wing extremist groups in this country rely upon anti-Semitism as a major plank in their programs; others, through their interlocking associations, tacitly approve it. Some make it their sole objective. One such group contends that the Nazis did not exterminate Jews, that this was only a monstrous lie concocted by the Jews to arouse sympathy for the Zionist movement.⁵ That there is an audience properly prepared by ignorance or indifference, is shown by a survey conducted by the University of California in 1961, when 436 members of Christian congregations were interviewed. Only thirty-six percent were aware that six million Jews had been killed by the Nazis, and half of these believed that the figure was exaggerated.⁶

One right-wing group still charges that Jews are engaged in an international conspiracy to gain control of the world.⁷ This is a revival of the thoroughly discredited, wholly fabricated *Protocols of the Elders*, originated in Bismarck's Germany, used in czarist Russia, widely publicized by the London *Times* in 1918, admitted by that newspaper on August 16, 1921, to be fraudulent, yet continued in this country for six more years by Henry Ford's *Dearborn (Michigan) Independent*.⁸ Only in 1927 did Ford apologize to the Jews of the United States for the tremendous harm done them by his attacks. The apology came only after libel suits were filed against him.⁹

Because ingrained prejudices are resistant to reason, and because there are always parasites who hope to gain financially or in power by the expedient of stirring age-old, easily inflamed hatreds, anti-Semitism is never completely dormant. Those who have been most actively anti-Semitic have invari-

ably been those who least had the best interests of mankind at heart: the Nazi regime with its Aryan superman complex, and Russia under the last two czars are examples. Individual anti-Semites and anti-Semitic groups likewise possess misanthropic objectives.

The Rabbi recognized anti-Semitism as a disease, "the Jew-hating disease," shaped by the course of history, transmitted from generation to generation, kept alive by superstition, ignorance, and sometimes envy. Recently, Rabbi Julius Mark diagnosed this moral and social illness:

Persons hate because they are inwardly insecure and therefore prone to the "disease" of anti-Semitism. And the root of the disease lies in the unresolved emotional conflicts which undermine an individual's security in childhood, and remain festering elements which break out in adulthood. But a serious problem remains. It is the problem of getting ourselves cured.¹⁰

Joseph Krauskopf was not content to let the malady run its course and seek its own cure. "I have no desire to win anyone away from Christianity," he said; "but I have the strongest desire to wean Christians from injustice. I have no wish to make others' feet travel my people's road, but it is my resolve to keep others' hands off my people's throat."¹¹ He believed that at least some anti-Semitism was caused by the failure of Christians and Jews to understand and, in understanding, to appreciate each others' religion. To promote this interchange of knowledge, his *Sunday Lectures* were often aimed at enlightening not only his Jewish congregation, but also the many Christians who attended Sunday services at Temple Keneseth Israel, or who read these sermons in pamphlets or in the newspapers.

Anti-Semitism in Germany was of special concern to the

Rabbi, partly because of his German birth and boyhood, and because he believed that Germany was culturally and socially progressive in many areas. Referring to a series of persecutions against German Jews, he focussed on the factors which, to the indelible discredit of our era in history, produced the Nazi holocaust, the mass extermination of Jews:

Persecutions against the Jews of Germany will continue as long as a scum populace continues to froth on the surface of German politics and industries and societies, as long as the present social discontent shall endure, as long as Jewish industry and thrift, economy and prosperity will continue to arouse the envy and anger of the indolent beer-saloon population of the fatherland. . . . Being an educated people, they are restive under their misery, and as it does the discontented mind good to have some one to blame for its discontent, it pleases Germans to make the Jew their scapegoat.¹²

With more accuracy than he could have foreseen, the Rabbi pinpointed the conditions and agencies which would bring about the destruction of most of Europe's Jews only four decades later: the German populace restive under the vengeful Versailles Treaty and a catastrophic economic depression; the blaming of Jews by Hitler for all of Germany's ills; the meetings of Nazi party members in Munich's "beer-saloons"; the full cooperation of industry and veterans' societies with the Nazi party; and the political success of the "scum populace" which came into complete control of Germany.