

**History of the Passion Play**  
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Have you made your reservations yet? Time is running out and if you don't purchase your tickets soon, you will have to wait another ten years for another opportunity. What am I referring to? It is the Passion Play in Oberammergau Germany that is presented every ten years, with the next performance in 2020. I was able to check an item off my bucket list, or as I have been told it is now called an adventure list, when I attended the Oberammergau Passion Play in 2010. If you have never heard of Oberammergau Germany or the promise that the town leaders made in 1633 to present a passion play depicting the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ every 10 years forevermore, a promise that they have kept for almost four centuries, then let me take the next thirty minutes or so and introduce you to the town of Oberammergau and the history of their passion play.

Oberammergau Germany is located in the southern part of the State of Bavaria, about an hour south of Munich and about fifteen miles north of the Austrian border. The small town of approximately 5,500 residents is located on the Ammer River and at the foot of the Ammergau Alps. The English translation of Oberammergau is Over Ammergau and is not to be confused with the neighboring town of Unterammergau which means Under Ammergau. The names of the two villages appear in a well-known German tongue twister. The town is well known as the home of a long tradition of woodcarving and the Bavarian State Woodcarving School is located there. The streets of central Oberammergau are home to dozens of woodcarver shops, with pieces ranging from religious subjects, to toys, to humorous portraits. Visitors can watch woodcarvers

at work at various stores and purchase a souvenir to take home with them. Oberammergau is also known for the painted facades of chalets. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, wealthy residents commissioned these colorful outdoor frescoes for their homes. These frescoes range from religious scenes to fairy tales.

In October 1937, the 54<sup>th</sup> Mountain Signal Battalion moved into barracks that had just been built east of Oberammergau and used it as a base for their signal's detachment. In October 1943 during the Second World War, the barracks were taken over by the Messerschmitt Company as a research and development site. Twenty-three miles of tunnels were bored into a neighboring mountain for engine production facilities. In all, Messerschmitt had 500 employees in the design department and about 1,300 more in the factory. The facility operated under the name of "Upper Bavarian Research Institute". The Institute produced the first usable military twin jet aircraft such as the Messerschmitt-262. The Institute worked on other projects such as surface-to-air missile and other aircraft weapons systems. After the war, the Americans occupied the barracks and made it the primary facility of U.S. Army School in Europe and over the next three decades schools in specialties ranging from military police to nuclear weapons handling were located there. The base reverted to German Army control in 1974. NATO School is now based there providing standardized education for members of the Alliance. Annually approximately 12,000 students and conference attendees visit the School and are housed in various hotels in Oberammergau boosting the town's economy.

Of course, the Passion Play has a major economic impact on Oberammergau, even though it is performed only once every ten years. There is a local expression, which when translated to English means The Passion Play will pay for it, in explaining how the town financed construction of a new community swimming pool, community center, and other civic

improvements. Since 1930, the number of visitors has ranged from 420,000 to 530,000. Most tickets are sold as part of a package with one or two-nights' accommodations. When I saw the Passion Play in 2010, it was part of a two-week tour of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. The tickets and accommodations were included in the price of the tour. The number of visitors during the Passion Play season which runs from mid-May to the first of October far exceeds local hotel accommodations and hotels in neighboring towns, some as far as 30 miles away, have to be used. In order not to give any one travel company an advantage over the others, a rotation system is used in assigning hotels and seat locations for the play. My tour group was very fortunate in that we got to stay in a local hotel within walking distance to everything. In fact, some military personnel attending the NATO School were staying at our hotel. Also, we hit the jackpot in that we got third row center seats for the performance. Our tour guide told us that the group he had before us had to stay in a hotel in a neighboring town and they had to be bused back and forth to Oberammergau.

A trip to Oberammergau would not be complete without a visit to the Roman Catholic Church of Sts. Peter and Paul. The church built in the German Baroque style was constructed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century on the site of a medieval church. It was erected by the villagers themselves, who at the end of the work refused to build a bell tower because they had not been paid. Over time, the church got a belfry. As I entered the church for an English mass the morning of the Passion Play, I was not expecting the magnificently decorated interior of the church. The frescoes throughout the church depicts the lives of the Apostles Peter and Paul. In the central dome is a fresco depicting the agony of Sts. Peter and Paul. The central image of the high altar shows the Virgin Mary as a heavenly helper of those who ask for intercession. During the Easter period and during the Passion Play the image is replaced with a figure of the risen Christ. The right-side

altar depicts Christ on the cross and is considered to be the cross that the town leaders made a vow to in 1633 to perform the Passion Play.

So why did the town leaders make a vow to God in 1633 to perform the Passion Play every ten years for ever more. To answer that question, we must go back to the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the Holy Roman Empire at that time. The Holy Roman Empire, covering central Europe, was headed spiritually by a pope and secularly by an emperor. In response to the growing Protestant movement, Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, signed the Peace of Augsburg Treaty in September 1555. It officially ended the religious struggle between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church which was the main church to come forth from the Protestant Reformation. The Peace Treaty established the principle “whose realm, his religion”, which allowed the princes of states within the Holy Roman Empire to adopt either Lutheranism or Catholicism within the domains they controlled, ultimately reaffirming their sovereignty over those domains. Residents who did not wish to conform to the prince’s choice was given a grace period in which they were free to emigrate to different regions in which their desired religion had been accepted. This effectively calmed simmering tensions between peoples of the two faiths within the Holy Roman Empire for more than 60 years, although there were occasional flare ups.

In 1618 when Ferdinand II became emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, one of his first actions was to force citizens of the empire to adhere to Roman Catholicism, even though religious freedom had been granted as part of the Peace of Augsburg Treaty. After Ferdinand II’s decree, the Bohemian nobility in present-day Austria and the Czech Republic rejected Ferdinand II and showed their displeasure by throwing his representatives out of a window of Prague Castle. This was the beginning of an open revolt in the Bohemian states, who had the backing of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, thus starting the Thirty Years’ War.



An entire paper could be written on the Thirty Years' War, which lasted from 1618 to 1648. However in summary, the war which started as a battle among the Catholic and Protestant states that formed the Holy Roman Empire evolved from a religious battle to a battle about which group would ultimately govern Europe. The war ended in 1648 when a series of treaties called the Peace of Westphalia was signed by the various parties in the conflict. The Peace of Westphalia laid the groundwork for the formation of the modern nation-state, establishing fixed boundaries for the countries involved in the fighting and effectively decreeing that residents of a state were subject to the laws of that state and not to those of any other institution, secular or religious. This radically altered the balance of power in Europe and resulted in reduced influence over political affairs for the Catholic Church, as well as other religious groups.

The Thirty Years' War remains one of the longest and most brutal wars in human history, with more than eight million casualties resulting from military battles as well as from the famine and disease caused by the conflict. The principal battlefield for the war was the towns and principalities of Germany, which suffered severely. During the Thirty Years' War many of the contending armies were mercenaries, many of whom could not collect their pay. This threw them on the countryside for their supplies. The armies of both sides plundered as they marched, leaving cities, towns, villages, and farms ravaged. As the armies marched from town to town, they also carried the plague with them.

In the early part of 1631, the Bubonic plague broke out in Bavaria. Bubonic plague is mainly spread by infected fleas from small animals such as rats. The bubonic bacteria enters the skin through a flea bite and travels via the lymphatic vessels to a lymph node, causing it to swell. Today several antibiotics are effective for treatment. Without treatment, the plague can result in the death of up to 90% of those infected. Death, if it occurs, is typically within ten days. With

treatment the risk of death is around 10%. Of course, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century there were no known cures for bubonic plague.

Oberammergau was fortunate in that it was not the site of a battle during the Thirty Years' War nor had it been looted by armies marching through it. When the plague hit Bavaria, watchmen were posted to keep anyone who had been outside of the City from entering in and thus possibly bringing the plague with them. This approach worked until the parish feast in 1632. A man named Kaspar Schisler, who had been working outside of Oberammergau for a period of time, sneaked into the town to see his family. In a matter of days, the man was dead followed by other members of his family. By 1633 the plague had claimed one or more members of nearly every family in Oberammergau. In response, the leaders of the town came together and made a vow to God that if He would spare them from any more deaths related to the plague, then the town would produce a Passion Play once every ten years forevermore. After the vow was made, there were no more bubonic plague deaths in Oberammergau. All of the town members that were still suffering from the disease recovered. The people of Oberammergau have kept their promise ever since.

The following year on Pentecost Sunday 1634, the people of Oberammergau performed the "Game of the Suffering, Death, and Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ" for the first time. The play was performed on a stage they set up in the cemetery over the fresh graves of the plague victims. The pastor of the church writes in his chronicle: "Probably even before the year 1600 the suffering story of the Lord was often presented to Oberammergau, during Lent, as an act of religious edification. It seems to me at least that the vow of the congregation of 1633 did not introduce a new use formerly unknown to the congregation, but rather clung to an age-old

custom by the definite promise of regular practice for all time.” For the years 1600-1650, there were about 40 Passion Play venues in the Bavarian-Austrian area.

In 1662, the oldest surviving Oberammergau Passion text was written for the 1664 Passion Play by the local schoolmaster. In 1880 it was discovered that this text was taken mainly from two older plays written in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The pastor of the church wrote about the 1664 play that “The Passion went off happily. It should be seated for the onlookers who are standing there.” This indicated that the number of spectators had increased and that accommodations should be made for them. Also in 1674, the town decides that the play should be produced in years ending in zero. In 1680, the Passion Play is performed for the first time at the beginning of a decade. The oldest surviving municipal bill from 1690 names expenditures for the Play including pay for the director, painters, musicians, powder, and a drink for the comedians. The clothing for the players was borrowed. In 1730 two performances of the play are given.

In 1750 a new Passion Play was written and the allegories of Lucifer, Envy, Greed, and Sin are included in the plot and Jesus is at the center of a dramatic struggle between God and the Powers of Hell. Even though almost 11,000 spectators came for the two performance, the new staging caused high costs for the community and the play continued to operate at a deficit.

In 1770, the prince of Bavaria, Maximilian III, prohibited all Passion Plays with the justification that “the greatest mystery of our holy religion does not belong to the theater”. Oberammergau sent representatives to Munich to try to obtain an exemption; however, the request was denied. In 1780, there was a new prince who was more tolerant about Passion Plays. Oberammergau again asked for an exemption to the ban stating that the play was cleansed of all abusive improprieties, limiting hell’s performances to musical interludes, eliminating overly realistic scenes like the despair of Judas and calling the play “The Old and New Testament” in

order to avoid mentioning the passion theme. Oberammergau was given the sole privilege to perform passion plays. In 1790, Passion Plays in Bavaria were still banned; however, Oberammergau, had the sole privilege to produce a Passion Play. For the first time tickets were sold for the five performances with 11,000 visitors in attendance. In 1800 Oberammergau again received the privilege to perform the Passion. It is now called "The Story of the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ." However because of the Napoleonic Wars in the area only five performances were given with only 3,000 spectators. In order to reduce the municipal debt, the Play continued in 1801 with four additional performances until on September 11, 1801, the Munich government revoked the exemption for Oberammergau to produce a Passion Play.

In 1810 the play was still banned; however, after a substantial rewrite, the play was allowed to be produced in 1811 with five performances. The biggest innovation was the transition from verse to prose. This allowed a free, realistic language and a direct adoption of Biblical word. The allegories disappeared from the play along with many mythological and legendary elements and greater importance was given to the play conforming to the Gospels. This brings the play more into line to what it is today. The play was again produced in 1815 with eleven performances with addition changes being made. The play began with an impressive mass scene with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The enthusiastic "Hosanna" set a strong contrast with the "cross with him" in the second part of the performance which is still a part of the play today.

In 1820, the Passion Play was performed for the last time in the cemetery at the parish church. In 1830, King Ludwig I approved the play on the condition that the stage would no longer be built in the cemetery. Thus the stage was moved to the northern edge of the village with a seating capacity of 5,000. The play that year had 300 performers. Starting in 1840

attendance to the play started an upward swing with 35,000 visitors that year and 45,000 in 1850. The oldest preserved photograph of the Passion Play is of the actor who played Christ in 1850. By 1880, the visitors increased to 100,000 due to the expansion of the railroad line from Munich to a nearby town.

On September 25, 1871, King Ludwig II visited the Passion Play in a separate performance. Only four companions sat with him in the otherwise empty auditorium. He was so enthusiastic that he donated a large sculpture, the Crucifixion Group, to the community. The sculpture arrived in Oberammergau on August 15, 1875 and was dedicated on October 15, 1875. For three years, King Ludwig II came to the Crucifixion Group on October 15<sup>th</sup> for silent prayer before he was driven out by the ever-growing number of curious people.

The play continued in popularity and a gigantic 4,200 seat auditorium with an open-air stage was built in 1900. Guests arrived from all over the world. The offering box at the church included coins from Egypt, India, and Hong Kong, and dollars from the US, Mexico, Brazil, Bolivia, and Peru. In the book, *Famous Village – Famous Visitors*, the following passage was written: “The turn of the century is a period of social and political upheaval, everything seems to be in jeopardy. Oberammergau becomes a symbol of the fight against the demise of the old order. And this development is reflected in the guest list of the Passion Play in 1900 and 1910. On the eve of the First World War, almost all representatives of the European aristocracy are assembled in Oberammergau.” By 1910 the play had 56 shows and 223,548 visitors. Visitors included US President William Howard Taft and Pope Pius XI.

In view of the high number of fallen troops of the First World War, the citizens of Oberammergau decided in the spring of 1918 not to proceed with the preparations of the Passion Play but to wait and see. Many musician and actors that had participated in prior productions

were severely injured or killed in action. Finally the play of 1920 was cancelled. On March 21, 1921, the citizens of Oberammergau voted in a poll for a Passion Play in 1922. The 1922 play attracted 311,127 visitors with approximately 100,000 of them from abroad. The Atlantic-Film-Company made an offer to the community to record the Passion Play. The proceeds of the Passion Play of 1922 amounted to approximately 21.5 million Marks. The offer of the Atlantic-Film-Company was 14 billion Marks which the community refused. Famous visitors to the 1922 play included Herbert Hoover and Pope Pius XII. In 1930 the stage was rebuilt and the auditorium was expanded to 5,200 seats. Notable visitors included American industrialist Henry Ford, the UK Prime Minister, and the Queen of Greece.

To commemorate the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Passion Play the citizens of Oberammergau decided to arrange a production of the Passion Play in 1934. The influence of the National Socialists did not stop at the Passion Play. The town had new rulers with the mayor comparing the plague of the year 1634 with “the plague Marxism, which the leader Adolf Hitler had stopped and thereby prevented the extermination of culture and Christianity.” On August 13, 1934 Hitler attended the play with a great entourage of Nazi bosses. He called Pilate a prototype of the “racially and intellectually superior Roman who acts like a rock in the midst of the Jewish blows and tails.” The play was made an advertising medium for the foreign policy of the German Reich. Entrance fees were cut in half and the play was declared a “national popular election”. The rulers demanded that the posters advertising the play had imprinted at the bottom the words “Germany Calls You!” In 1940 there was no performance due to the Second World War.

The plays that were produced from 1950-1980, with a special performance in 1984 to celebrate the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the play, were increasingly criticized for the stereotypical and negative representation of Jews as anti-Semitic. While minor revisions were made during the

years, the play basically kept the same format as previous productions. The director of the 1950 production stated: "We have a clear conscience. We must fulfill a vow, and our play contains nothing offensive." Despite the criticism, the play continued to attract a large number of visitors. The 1950 production was originally scheduled for 33 performances and was expanded to 87 with approximately 480,000 visitors including Dwight D. Eisenhower. For the first time in 1980, the eighteen main roles were filled with two equal performers. Up to and including the 1984 production, married women and women over the age of 35 were excluded from participating in the Passion Play. In March 1990, this regulation was repealed by the Higher Regional Court of Munich after three Oberammergau women led a year-long legal battle against the community.

A major change in the direction of the Passion Play was made in 1986 when then 24-year old Christian Stuckl was elected to direct the 1990 play. Stuckl began to make changes to the play including avoidance and elimination of anti-Judaism in the play's text. Stuckl again directed the play in 2000 which saw the largest textual reform since 1860. The Passion Play now showed a domestic Jewish conflict. Advocates and adversaries are now found within the High Council, in the common people, and in the narrow circle of the faithful. The trial of Jesus is expanded in the play presenting differing opinions among the Jewish Council as to the fate of Jesus. The figure of Jesus was given greater individuality and more space. Not to limit Jesus to his suffering, but rather to portray him as a strong fighter for his Jewish faith. In a great community effort, nearly 2,000 new costumes and 28 new scenes were created by the stage designer. Once again, the participation rights are extended. Until the 1990 Passion Play only Christian Oberammergauers were allowed to participate. For the 2000 play this regulation is repealed and for the first time Muslim Oberammergauers took part in the play. The play had 1,600 adults and 550 children actors. To participate in the play either as an actor, a musician, or

a stage hand, the person must have been born in Oberammergau or have lived there for 20 years. It takes over 2,000 people to put on the play which is almost half of the population of the town. In 2000 there were 110 performances with approximately 520,000 visitors.

So if you decide to attend the Passion Play in 2020 what can you expect? The play is directed for the fourth time by Christian Stuckl and will be performed from May 16<sup>th</sup> to October 4<sup>th</sup> with 103 performances. There are no performances on Mondays or Wednesdays. On October 20, 2018 the cast of the 2020 Passion Play was announced with once again all of the major roles being filled by two performers. The play comprises spoken dramatic text, musical and choral accompaniment, and living images, which are scenes from the Old Testament depicted for the audience by motionless actors accompanied by verbal description. These scenes are the basis of the interrelationship between the Old and New Testaments of the play. The play contains thirteen living images such as the Loss of Paradise, Moses leading the Israelites through the Red Sea, Daniel in the Lion's Den, and Moses expelled by the Pharaoh. Each living image precedes the section of the play that is considered to be prefigured by the living image. For example the living image of Moses being expelled by the Pharaoh precedes act IX of the play, Jesus Condemned by Pilate. The play consists of eleven acts with the first act being Jesus Enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and the last act being The Resurrection. The play lasts approximately 5.5 hours starting at 2:30 in the afternoon with a dinner break at 5:00. After a three hour dinner break, the play starts again at 8:00 and lasts until approximately 11:00. The play is entirely in German and you are provide a translation. However as I quickly found out, if you try to read the transaction you miss the action on the stage. Most people are familiar enough with the gospels to know what is happening on stage. The one spot I got lost was the Trail of Jesus and the arguments presented back and forth among the High Council. The actors will be accompanied



by a hundred member choir and 55 instrumentalists sitting in the orchestra pit comprised of the classic woodwind player, nine brass players, and string players. The music performances and presentation of the Living Images cover about one third of the overall Passion Play performance.

From my experience, I can guarantee that you will be emotionally moved by going to a performance of the Passion Play. It was a once in a life-time experience for me and I would definably recommend it to anyone. You will not be sorry.