

Letter Describing Hardship in a Bavarian Village (December 1919)

Abstract

This letter from the Bavarian village of Oberammergau, dated December 13, 1919, and reprinted in the *New York Times*, revealed both the number of young lives lost by a single town in the First World War—74 young men killed in battle, out of a total population of less than 5,000—and the ongoing food shortages and hardships, including the “terrible sickness” of the previous year, most likely a reference to the Spanish Flu pandemic. Moreover, the sympathetic treatment that this letter received, by virtue of its framing text and its publication on the newspaper’s front page, suggested that the anti-German hysteria of 1917-18 in the United States had not only receded within a year of the war’s end, but had been replaced by implicit appeals to aid Germany in its postwar recovery. Finally, the article and its headline pointed to the world renown of Oberammergau’s four-centuries-old Passion Play and to the level of celebrity achieved by Anton Lang, the man who played Christ in the play’s 1900 and 1910 productions. Lang’s wife Mathilde wrote that economic adversity had prompted the village to postpone the Passion Play for a year or more, its first postponement since the seventeenth century. Instead of 1920, the spectacle was finally performed again in 1922, with Lang once more in the role of Christ. A later article in the *New York Times* (November 13, 1921) noted that a total of 530 men in Oberammergau had served in the military, and that, in addition to the 74 deaths, a number of men had undergone amputations from the wounds they had sustained. This made it even more of a challenge for the village to fill its 700-person cast for the 1922 production.

Source

[...]

December 13, 1919.

Dear _____: Your letter has brought great joy into our house; surely this has been a rare thing since long, for life has become so 'different, ever since we heard last from each other. We cannot afford to write many letters abroad, though one would love to, but I must tell you, that the terrible sickness of last year, when we all of the household had been ill, past by and now we are all well again. We have gone through terrible trying years, not only sorrow and death stepped into our houses, but we also learned to know what hunger is like. None of us, will ever forget the turnip winter, we almost lived with the animals.

My dear husband was much too delicate to be active in war service and also my brothers have returned safely. But we have lost 74 men from our village-some of our best youth. The year of our Passion play is coming nearer, but alas, we shall not be able to have it in 1920. Peace has come, but no food with it. How could we feed [out]siders, when there is scarcely enough for ourselves? Besides, we have no more engines, railroads, no coal. I suppose you are unable to imagine Germany’s poverty. The tools we are to work with, are taken from us. It seems all so hopeless. Still we dream of 1921, of. a better time then. We do so long it to become true. The idea makes life happier again. We work terribly hard and feel worn out, but life is too costly— we must go on. Our six children are well. Baby Gottfried is 8 months old and the war-child Tilde is 5 years. Karl, Tony and Maria are away at schools, only the three little ones are at home. My husband thanks you for the money. He had written you after receiving it. We do hope, that you are well. May Christmas be a very happy one, but New Year be blessed to you both. With greetings to you and all those we know as friends.

Very sincerely yours,

ANTON AND MATHILDE LANG.

[...]

Source: "Anton Lang Still Lives. Passion Play Actor Writes Friends Here of Wartime Hardships." *New York Times*, January 18, 1920, Section 2, p. 1. Available online at:
<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1920/01/18/112645521.html?pageNumber=35>

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