

EI-706

AGATHA VON TRAPP

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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- **AUSTRIA: SALZBURG**
- **THE US: STOWE, VERMONT AND BALTIMORE, MARYLAND**

LEVINE: Okay, today is November 3rd, 1995, and I'm here at the Trapp Family Lodge in Stowe, Vermont. Agatha Von Trapp has come here from Baltimore, where she lives, and she is going to be the first of the siblings that I interview from this family. And I just want to say I'm delighted to have the chance to talk with you, and I look forward to whatever you can remember. Why don't we start? Now, you came the first time to the United States in what year?

VON TRAPP: In 1938.

LEVINE: In 1938, okay, and at that time, you were twenty-four, did you say?

VON TRAPP: Don't ask me how old I was! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Okay, so you have a lot of memories of Austria before--?

VON TRAPP: Well, I mean, I went to school, yeah, I remember everything through the First World War. I was born in 1913, and the war broke out in 1914. And my mother had to leave the house that we had at the Adriatic Sea, and to live with her mother in Austria proper. Her mother had owned a house by a lake, and she built that for her family. And so my mother went to live with her for those four years of war, because the whole coastline was evacuated of every person who was not part of the military, or part of the Navy.

LEVINE: I see. And your father was in the Navy?

VON TRAPP: My father was commander of a submarine in the Navy, yes.

LEVINE: So, this was when your father was away for World War One, and your mother went--?

VON TRAPP: We owned a house at the Adriatic Sea, but we could not stay there, because it was evacuated because of the war. And so she went to live with her mother in Austria, in [unclear], in the mountains, at the mountain lakes. She owned a home there.

LEVINE: I see, so do you remember that period of time?

VON TRAPP: Oh, of course, very well.

LEVINE: You do, uh-huh. What do you remember about your grandmother in particular, when you think about her? What kind of a person was she?

VON TRAPP: Oh, she was a wonderful person! And she was—I mean, [sighs], I mean, she was [unclear], she was a grand lady. And she had a big household, and she kept it in good order. And she was very kind, and she was also strict.

LEVINE: Do you remember any kinds of attitudes or ways that she thought you, as a child, should behave?

VON TRAPP: Oh yeah, she was telling us, “Only look with your eyes, and don’t touch anything.” [Laughs] Because we lived in her house, and she had beautiful furniture there, and she had nice antiques and things. And she wanted us to understand that we should not touch anything, like children like to do.

LEVINE: So, did you know your other grandmother, your father’s mother?

VON TRAPP: No, she died when I was just a baby. She died in 1911, and I was born in 1913, so I wasn't even—why do you ask us about the grandmothers?

LEVINE: I was just interested in—we always ask about childhood, and childhood memories.

VON TRAPP: Even about Ellis Island? How does that connect with Ellis Island?

LEVINE: We usually ask about life in the old country, and that includes family, and you know, the community that you were living in. But, we can move faster towards the Ellis Island part. So, how many children were there at that time, when you were at your grandmother's?

VON TRAPP: In 1914, when my mother moved, there were two: there was my older brother, and myself. And our grandmother opened her house to her daughter and grandchildren, and then after, you know, during these four years, the other children came along. And so there were six children were born in my grandmother's house—no, not six—four children were born in my grandmother's house, during the First World War.

LEVINE: And do you remember when the war was over?

VON TRAPP: Yes, that was in 1918, on November 11th. My father came home, and we were told, "Now, be very, very good, because your father is very sad." And he came home from the war, and we didn't understand much about—we knew about the war. And so we were told that we should be very good. We were anyway very good! [Laughs] But that's what I remember. And so then, when my father came home, we moved out of my grandmother's house into another house that was not far away. It was also on the lake, and there was, in that same summer, there was a big meltdown from the glaciers, and the water rose. And our house was flooded; the basement was flooded and even the kitchen was flooded, so my father knew that we had to find another house. And in those days, after the war, everything was in bad shape, neglected houses, and so on. So, and they really couldn't find anything that was adequate for a big family, and for a staff, and that was in good repair. And finally then, after they searched for a while, the youngest brother of my mother offered a house that he owned in the vicinity of Vienna, Klosteneiburg [PH]. And that was big enough to hold the whole family, plus the staff, and plus it was a house that was so big, it had also adjacent a barn and a house for somebody who takes care of the cattle. We had a few cows there, and we could have chickens. And so it was like a little unit in itself.

LEVINE: And did you live there for a long time?

VON TRAPP: We lived there from 1921 until 1925. And in 1925 my father moved to Salzburg. And then we bought a house. He bought a house, and then we lived in the vicinity, outside of Salzburg.

LEVINE: How about your mother? I mean, when you think back at that time, can you think of the kinds of things that she was trying to instill in you, as a child?

VON TRAPP: She was so kind, she was such a wonderful, kind personality. She didn't try to instill anything, because she was what she was, and we just, we just loved her. And you know, she was [unclear] parents; you don't have to do anything.

LEVINE: It was her example that you were following?

VON TRAPP: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, that's very nice.

VON TRAPP: And she was very—her outstanding quality was kindness. She was very smart, and she was very, she was musical. She played the piano, she played the violin. So did my grandmother. My grandmother played the piano very well.

LEVINE: Oh, so was the family very involved with music right from the beginning?

VON TRAPP: Yes! I mean, that was part of our life. It was nothing consciously—everybody in those days who had children would send them for some musical education. Either they learned the piano, they played the violin, or they played some instrument. And singing in the family was just part of our entertainment. People did that because it was nice, and they enjoyed doing it.

LEVINE: Did you have a particular instrument that you played?

VON TRAPP: [Sighs] I wanted to play the piano, but the teacher didn't understand what I could do and what I couldn't do, and so there was a disaster.

LEVINE: But you sang?

VON TRAPP: Well, we sang. Whatever we heard, we learned, and we sang. We learned little songs from, you know, folk songs, and anything anybody that sang, we learned the songs.

LEVINE: And you learned it by ear?

VON TRAPP: Mm-hm, yeah.

LEVINE: Let's see. So, you were living in Salz—outside of Salzburg?

VON TRAPP: Yeah, that was our last move, you know, because my father did not want to stay in the house where my mother died. There was an epidemic of scarlet fever, and we all got the scarlet fever. And so when my mother took care of the baby, who also had it, she got it, and she was sick for nine months, and then she died. So my father did not want to stay in Klosteneiburg [PH], and so he looked for something where he had friends from the Navy. And in Salzburg there were two officers who were friends, his friends, and so he wanted to move there. And he found a villa that he redid for the family, and so we moved there.

LEVINE: So you must have already been in school?

VON TRAPP: Oh yes. Well, during the war, when we grew up, there was no school in the place where we lived. It was on the other side of the lake, and we couldn't go to school every day over the lake. And so we had live-in teachers. And then from the first year of high school, then we went to school.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. So you had already been in high school before you moved outside of Salzburg?

VON TRAPP: Yes, I was going into the third grade, third high school grade, third grade of high school.

LEVINE: Well gee, I don't usually talk with people who had teachers or tutors at home. What was that like for you?

VON TRAPP: Oh, it was great! I mean, we had a very nice person, and she was very smart. She was a good teacher. We learned a lot from her. And we made the test into the school. The difficulty for us was coming from the one to one teaching, into a big class where you didn't know the routine, where you didn't know what's going on, and nobody told you. And they call you up and say, "Come up, tell me this and that," and you're totally, shall I say, confounded. I couldn't speak [unclear]. But that was because the change was so abrupt. We were not used to so many people around us.

LEVINE: Did you get used to it after a while?

VON TRAPP: To a certain extent, but it was hard all through school for me.

LEVINE: And was it true with the younger children? Did they also have teachers at home at first?

VON TRAPP: Well, the younger children—no, the younger children could go to school, because they were younger.

LEVINE: And because you were in a different place?

VON TRAPP: Yes.

LEVINE: I see. So when Maria came from the convent, she was coming as a teacher though, wasn't she?

VON TRAPP: Well, she was coming to help my sister to catch up with her school work, because my sister had been sick, and couldn't go to school. And that—because we lived so far outside of Salzburg, she had to live in. There was no way that she could go back and forth all the time.

LEVINE: Okay, thank you. [Tape off/on] So when Maria came to teach your sister, then she actually wasn't—I mean, the other children were going to school at that time?

VON TRAPP: Yeah, we were all going to school, and my sister just couldn't go because she was sick.

LEVINE: I see, I see. Do you recall that period? I mean, was it a big change for you, and for the children?

VON TRAPP: No, we liked her, because also she noticed that we could sing. And as we sang, and as we played the instruments, and she came from a group of young people, high school people, students, and they had formed a choir. And they were in the summer time during the vacations they went from village to village and sang for the villagers, and tried to find new songs, the old songs, the real old songs, that had not been written down. And they wrote them down for their choir, and they set them to music for their choir. And they had really a beautiful—and it was boys and girls together, and it was really a beautiful choir. And so when my stepmother came, and she saw that we were singing, of course, it was like a second chance, sort of [laughs]. And she started singing with us, and then she acquainted us with this choir, and we learned a lot of songs from them.

LEVINE: And was your father involved in the singing?

- VON TRAPP: No, he didn't sing. He had a hearing loss during the war, and he couldn't—I mean, he sang for us, things, you know, that he knew. But he did not learn new songs.
- LEVINE: And he didn't sing with you?
- VON TRAPP: Not with us, no.
- LEVINE: Let's see. Well, do you remember the build up of the Nazis? What particular memories do you hold of that time?
- VON TRAPP: Well, we could only—there wasn't much that we could—we lived outside of the city, and we had a butler, and he revealed himself as a Nazi Party member. But he was loyal to us, and he just told us; he warned us. He said, "If you—be careful what you talk at the table, because I have to report everything that I hear you say." And so we knew that he was—he told us that he was a party member. And then when it was time to leave, he warned us. He said, "You better leave now." And so then we left.
- LEVINE: Was it on your birthday that--?
- VON TRAPP: Yes, it was on the evening [laughs]. Let's see. It was on the evening before my birthday, and we were sitting in the library with my father. And we listened to the radio, just, you know, the music. And all of a sudden, the Chancellor started to talk, and said, "The Germans are at the borders, and I ordered not to give any resistance, because it would only be a big bloodbath, and we don't have a military to resist them." And so he said, "I had to open the borders to let them come in."
- LEVINE: Do you remember yours, and the family's, reaction at that time, when that happened?
- VON TRAPP: I don't remember. I don't remember—nobody cried or anything. I mean, it was just—it was just like we were stunned, perhaps, you know.
- LEVINE: And then apparently there were several--?
- VON TRAPP: In the night, they came into the country. And we were sort of near the border, and they went into Salzburg. And the next morning we went into Salzburg on our bicycles, and we looked at everything. And here the Nazi flags were hanging, and the tanks were going over the bridge. And people were standing, you know, in rows next to the streets, on both sides of the streets. It was just—it was an occupation! But they didn't shoot anything; there was no shooting. But then after, soon afterwards, the people started disappearing out of their houses, and

people were saying that in the night the S.S., the secret police, they came and they took this person and this person, and they disappeared and never came back. And things like that happened [unclear].

LEVINE: And did things change in school during that time?

VON TRAPP: Oh yeah. They told the children that they have to tell on their parents. They wanted to know who comes into the house, and who goes out, and what the parents are reading, and what the parents say, probably, about the invasion, and all these things.

LEVINE: So the children were expected to come in and tell that?

VON TRAPP: There were—I guess they were interrogated. At that time I wasn't in school anymore, only the little ones, the younger ones. They were in school, and they had to say Heil Hitler.

LEVINE: And then apparently there were three offers that the family had--?

VON TRAPP: Yeah. You're talking about the music?

LEVINE: Yeah.

VON TRAPP: This is correct. They offered my father to be the commander of a submarine again, and he refused. And then my brother was offered a position in a hospital as a head doctor, and he hadn't even his internship yet. And he wasn't going to serve under Hitler anyway, so he refused. And then they asked us to sing for Hitler's birthday on the Munich radio, and we refused that. And then of course we knew we were on the list [laughs]!

LEVINE: So it was a unanimous family decision that you would leave?

VON TRAPP: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: So, once that decision was made?

VON TRAPP: Everything went fast, yeah. All we could do was pack our—pack a bag that we could carry, and a book sack with items that we needed on the trip. And we knew we had a contract for America, to sing in the United States, fourteen concerts. And the only way that we could get there was to get out of the country, and stay somewhere. And so we went to Italy, northern Italy. That was—it used to be a German-speaking area, because before the First World War it was—it belonged to Austria. And then it was given to Italy.

- LEVINE: So you were able to speak--?
- VON TRAPP: So there was no problem there. But then, they couldn't—the Nazis couldn't touch us anymore; we were in other territory.
- LEVINE: Just to back track a little, do you remember anything you packed to take with you when you knew you were leaving?
- VON TRAPP: Well, just our clothes, you know, and maybe something to write letters with. We could hardly take anything along.
- LEVINE: Do you remember the journey, the journey from leaving your house outside of Salzburg?
- VON TRAPP: Yeah, we went to the train station. Across from our house there was a train station, and we got into the train, and went to Italy. And we just sat in the compartment, and waited 'til we got there [laughs].
- LEVINE: And how long were you there, in Italy?
- VON TRAPP: Well, only the summer, during the summer. We must have left, and I'm not sure when we left, but we must have left in the beginning of the summer, like in June or so. And then we stayed there until it was time to come to the United States to give the concerts. And usually the concerts, here the concert season starts the beginning of October. And so, Charlie Wagner was our manager, who engaged us, and he had prepared that we could stay in the Wellington Hotel in New York when we arrived.
- LEVINE: Now he was traveling with you?
- VON TRAPP: No, no, he only came to Salzburg when we sang a concert in the Academy of Music, in the Mozarteum [PH]. And he came to our house, and he engaged us for fourteen concerts in the United States. And that was the year before.
- LEVINE: I see. So you didn't really encounter difficulties getting out of the country, or anything?
- VON TRAPP: No, but at the same time, it was the last minute that we could get out, because then they closed the borders. Many people left in that time before they closed the borders, especially the Jewish people, you know, the doctors and lawyers and teachers, professors, or whatever. Anybody who was Jewish and who was able to find a place somewhere else left.

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LEVINE: I understand that at that time the Nazis were encouraging people to leave.

VON TRAPP: I don't know.

LEVINE: Okay, so this was 1938, and you came for the fall—

VON TRAPP: Fall of 1938, yes.

LEVINE: --to sing in the United States.

VON TRAPP: Mm-hm, yeah.

LEVINE: And then, after those fourteen concerts, then what did the family do?

VON TRAPP: Then we had to go back. So we stayed over Christmas time [sighs]. What was this now? And Johannes, our youngest boy, was born in January, and we rented a house in Germantown, Pennsylvania, over the Christmas holidays when there weren't any concerts to sing. And then he was born, and then we had to go back. We sang our fourteen concerts before Christmas, and then we had to go back.

LEVINE: Well, how did everyone feel about that, going back?

VON TRAPP: Well, we didn't like it, but we had to do it. There was no other—

LEVINE: There wasn't the idea that you might just simply stay in the United States?

VON TRAPP: No, no we couldn't stay. Our visa was gone; our working permit was expired. So we had to go back. And we went back, and we split up in three different places, because some people could—all the girls and one of my brothers went back into Austria and stayed with relatives. And my oldest brother and our conductor, Franz Wisner, they went to [pause] to a French-speaking—to France. There's a border country between France and Germany that was always, [unclear]. So they stayed there, with French, at that time. And my father and my stepmother and Johannes, the little baby, they went back to Northern Tyrol. My father couldn't go in anymore, nor did my stepmother dare to go back. And so they went back to this little Tyrolean village, and stayed there. And then we decided we're all going to meet again in October, or late September or something, in Amsterdam. And then we knew we could get another contract, or we had another contract, for the United States. But we had to be all in the same place. And so we met in Amsterdam.

LEVINE: Now the first time when you went through, did you go through Ellis Island the first time?

VON TRAPP: No.

LEVINE: No, because you were just—had a visa to just do the singing.

VON TRAPP: Yeah, and this was just—the first time, the war wasn't that—it wasn't in progress, although Hitler took Austria. But he hadn't done anything else. And so the next time when we—the second time when we came, it was already the invasion of Poland, of Czechoslovakia, and so there were many refugees who wanted to come into the United States, and stay there. And so when we arrived in New York, of course the reporters came, sent by the manager, and interviewed us. And somebody asked my stepmother, "Wouldn't you like to stay in the United States?" And she said, "Oh yes, sure, we would love to stay!" [Laughs] And one of the customs officers heard it, and he was suspicious. He thought that we were going to sneak into the United States and remain there without permission, and illegally. So he whisked us off to Ellis Island. That was the reason why we went there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, so what happened? What was your experience?

VON TRAPP: So we had to go there. They took a little—they had a small vessel of some kind. We had to go from our boat to—

LEVINE: It was like a ferry, probably, that took you to Ellis Island?

VON TRAPP: I don't know what it was. It was a boat; it was not very big. And they took us over to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: And do you remember this?

VON TRAPP: Yes, of course! I remember everything [laughs]!

LEVINE: Tell me everything you can remember about Ellis Island.

VON TRAPP: Well, we got there, and they take us. We had to sign our names, you know, how you do it, even like in a hotel. But we signed the names, and they gave us rooms. Actually, there was—it must have been towards the evening, because they gave us rooms to sleep in, and the ladies were sleeping in one room, with the baby, and then the men had to sleep with as many men as there were there in another place. And they were giving us permission to turn out the light, because we had the baby. But in the men's room, in the men's dormitory, they were not allowed to turn off the lights, because they were afraid people were

going to try to leave. Although it was almost impossible to leave this island! It was surrounded by a big fence, and it was in the middle of nowhere, water all around. So how could you escape, really? But they did it anyway. And then the next day, we got food; we got breakfast.

LEVINE: How was your treatment? How were people--?

VON TRAPP: Well, they were very matter of fact, and like in a prison, they counted every person. Every time we moved from one place to the other, they said, "One, two, three, four." They counted us, so make sure that everybody's there. And my father didn't like that especially, [laughs] that treatment.

END OF SIDE A
BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: So the women and the baby, you had a room all to yourselves?

VON TRAPP: Yeah, we filled a dormitory, because we were so many.

LEVINE: [Laughs] I see, uh-huh. I see. And do you remember anything about the food?

VON TRAPP: It wasn't so that I remember it was bad. I think it was adequate, let's say. And there was a whole group of Chinese boys, sort of teenagers, and they had been there already for three years. And they could not go back to China, and they could not get into the United States, so they were held in Ellis Island. And we saw, you know, there was a dining room, and we were on one table; we saw them on the other table, and they had got rice, and they got, they put salt on the rice. And somebody told us that they had been there for three years. And some people get sent back, but they cannot go back into their own country. Then they come back to this country; they cannot go into the United States. And so they go back and forth on the ocean, maybe two, three, ten times!

LEVINE: So were there many people there? Roughly how many people were there when you were there?

VON TRAPP: There were several groups, and they had an enormous hall, a big hall. It was like the hall in a train station. And it's all up to the top, and that's where that window is that I made the sketch of, yeah.

LEVINE: Yes, the pictures [unclear].

VON TRAPP: And there were little groups, and they were all sitting together here and there, and so on. And they were just sitting there, and we saw, it was some kind of an Eastern group, and they were doing each other's hair, things like that. Perfectly quiet, no noise or anything. So I remember saying to my stepmother, "Why don't we sing, and why don't we do our rehearsals here?" She was humiliated, and she thought our whole career is down the drain now, because we are sitting in a jail.

LEVINE: It wasn't like in the early days of immigration at Ellis Island, where there were thousands of people? It wasn't at that time?

VON TRAPP: At that time, I can only tell you—the hall, it was a very big hall, and there were several groups, like us, you know, we were a group. We were a lot of people. And they were all stuck together as a group, sort of in a little bunch, and they just waited for the next meal, or whatever, you know, being processed out, or whatever. And so we started singing, and immediately the whole atmosphere lifted up, and people got a little bit happier. And so then, somehow my parents got in touch with the manager that we're sitting at Ellis Island, and then he sent photographers for the publicity. And he told us, "Never mind, this is very good publicity. Don't worry about it!" [Laughs]

LEVINE: Oh, dear!

VON TRAPP: Yeah, so we stopped worrying, and it took—and then my brother, my oldest brother, was allowed to go on land. And Maria and I were talking, I don't remember why. He was allowed to go, but he was Austrian citizen, and we were all Italian citizens. That was because of the arrangement after the First World War. And so he went to Philadelphia, and got in touch with the Archbishop of Philadelphia, who had heard us sing the year before. And he told him that we needed somebody to vouch for us so that we can come on land. So he did, and then after four days we were allowed to go, to leave there.

LEVINE: So you were held for four days until it was the Archbishop who vouched for you?

VON TRAPP: Yeah, we had to stay—see, they don't believe anything that you say, because they automatically think you're lying, you know, just to get out. And even if you tell the truth, they don't—how can they know? And these customs officers, they have the power to keep you there or to let you go, and it's their—I mean, they didn't treat us badly at all, but it was just, we were just, had to stay there.

LEVINE: Yeah, it was an imprisonment.

VON TRAPP: Yeah.

LEVINE: So then when you were released, then where did you go?

VON TRAPP: Then we went back to the—then we went to the Hotel Wellington where our rooms were arranged for us, and then we went on tour. Then the manager hired a bus for us, and then we started the concert tour. We had forty concerts were arranged for us, and so we sang those. And during that time, even during the time that we were still in Europe, Hitler invaded Poland and Czechoslovakia, as I told you. And so because of this condition, because it was war, the people who came, even if they did not have a visitor visa or anything, who were in the United States, were not—they did not have to go back to their own country. They were allowed to stay.

LEVINE: So then, did you stay longer because of--?

VON TRAPP: Then after these forty concerts, a very nice lawyer who was musical, and who had heard us in Philadelphia in a concert, he offered us a home that belonged to him that he didn't use, and we could stay there in the off-season, when we didn't have any concerts. So for three years in the summer we lived in Marion, Pennsylvania, in this little house that he have us to stay in. But from then on, after the second year with Charlie Wagner, then we changed management, and the Columbia Management took us on. And they arranged concerts from then on, more than a hundred concerts every year. And that's until 1956.

LEVINE: I see. Well now, but you did go back after those first--?

VON TRAPP: Yeah, after the first year, in 1938. '39 actually.

LEVINE: And where did you stay in '39?

VON TRAPP: Yeah, I just told you, we went into different places. The girls went to the relatives, and my oldest brother, I think it was Lorraine, anyway, the French area, and my father went back to Italy with my stepmother and the baby.

LEVINE: And when you came over that next time to the United States, did you have any brush with Ellis Island?

VON TRAPP: No. Yes, but wait a minute. The second time was when we went to Ellis Island, not the first time.

LEVINE: Oh, it wasn't the first time.

VON TRAPP: Yeah, I think I told you that.

LEVINE: So it was 1939 then.

VON TRAPP: In 1939, yes.

LEVINE: Okay. So then you were really doing touring around the United States you said?

VON TRAPP: Until 1956.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh. And what was your feeling about how your life was different in the United States than it had been up until that time?

VON TRAPP: [Laughs] I mean, it was a whole different life because we were traveling all the time. Everything was new and different. It was interesting, and people were very kind to us. And they liked our concerts, and they invited us to their homes. They gave us parties, and we could see that the Americans were very hospitable.

LEVINE: So why was it that you stopped in 1956?

VON TRAPP: Because we were worn out! [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] I see, I see. And when did you, when did the family settle in Stowe?

VON TRAPP: We bought the place in 1942, yeah, but there was a house there that we could not live in. But we liked the situation up on the mountain, and we liked the whole area. We wanted to be in Vermont, and so we bought it. And we thought, you can always build a house, but you cannot make a view, you know, and all that. So we started to build a house. I mean, the house fell down in a blizzard, and so we had to clean out, clean away all the debris from the house. And then a friend designed who was an architect designed a new house for us. And then we started building. It was in the middle of the war, and you had to have permission for every brick and every piece of wood that you used. And you could only build on something, and fortunately a little bit of the house remained standing, so we could build on that.

LEVINE: And did the whole family live here, at that house?

VON TRAPP: Yes. But then my brothers, my older brothers, they were inducted into the Army, and they went over to—they went to the ski troops, and they served in the Army until the war was over.

LEVINE: How do you consider yourself when you think of yourself, as American and Austrian? Do you have the feeling more of one than the other?

VON TRAPP: Well, I live here, and I mean, I like it here. I don't think in national terms anymore. I mean, I left Austria, and that was all right. And it's a new country, and I like it here a lot. I learned to live here. I don't think I would want to go back to Austria.

LEVINE: Because you've been here so long?

VON TRAPP: Yeah, because, you know, [pause] I'm glad to be here, that's all I kind say.

LEVINE: Well, you've created a little bit of Austria here, too.

VON TRAPP: Well, that was my stepmother's doing, mostly. I think she was very, very more homesick than I ever was. I mean, I'm only one of so many! I don't know how the others felt, really.

LEVINE: Were you, would you say that you were closest to any particular family member? I mean, one of the children, or the parents?

VON TRAPP: Not at that time, no. We were just all together. And we were so busy. I mean, traveling and giving concerts is hard work, and even if you only sit in the bus. I mean, we had to travel during the day, and then in the evening we gave the concerts, and in the morning, had to leave and go somewhere else. I mean, towards the end of the tour, we wished, "When can we stop singing?" because it was getting very—I wouldn't say boring, but it's always the same. And you know, we were in our best years in those days, and we couldn't do anything but sit in the bus during the season. And then because we had this place here, then we came, and then we liked to do the work here, and build up our new home. And that was a relief.

LEVINE: Did all of your family members continue on with the singing tours, or did some of them stop?

VON TRAPP: Yes. No, one of my sisters got married, and then my brother got married, but he kept on going with us.

LEVINE: What would you say--?

VON TRAPP: And my oldest brother studied medicine, and he wanted to finish his studies, so he stepped out. And then we had to take other people to supplement, you know, the voices. And then it got a little bit difficult,

because we had to pay them, and we didn't make a lot of money with our concerts anyway. And so it became almost impossible to keep on.

LEVINE: You must have chosen not to make a lot of money with your concerts?

VON TRAPP: We could not choose anything, because the management arranges, and there are set fees for choirs, and there are set fees for soloists, and we had to take what we got.

LEVINE: Can you, do you have any sense of how it affected you, as far as coming to this country as a young woman, and then staying here?

VON TRAPP: Of course, in the beginning, we compared everything here, what we saw. And we wondered about a lot of things [laughs].

LEVINE: Can you think of any of the things?

VON TRAPP: Well especially what we saw on the highways. Like, there were trees that were dead that were lying around. There were apple trees where the apples fell down under the trees, and nobody picked them up. And we just couldn't understand that! In Europe, this doesn't exist. I mean, every apple is being valued, and every piece of wood is being used for firewood or something. And here, long, long stretches. But we didn't realize how big the country was, and that you just can't keep it clean like Europe, where it is so densely populated, and everything is already well-organized.

LEVINE: And of course you got to see how big this country really is.

VON TRAPP: Oh yeah, of course, because we drove through it, yeah. But it was interesting, because we saw many things that we didn't have in Europe, especially in the South, you know, these cypresses in the swamps, and the moss that came down from the trees. That was all very intriguing. It's very interesting.

LEVINE: What do you think—what affect do you think it had on you personally, the fact that you immigrated as a young woman?

VON TRAPP: I didn't have time to think it was anything, except what we had to do, really. It was just the fact that we took it—the fact that this is our life. You know, it didn't make me sad, or it didn't make me happy, or anything. All we could do is do what we had to do, and do it as well as we could.

LEVINE: What would you say has given you satisfaction, or that you feel proud of having done?

VON TRAPP: Well, [pause] we didn't think in those terms [laughs]. And we felt that we were serving God, because we noticed that people would tell us, "This is our best Christmas." Our performance, Christmas performance, "Was our Christmas." And we sang many, many sacred songs. We sang madrigals; we sang folk songs. At Christmas we had a whole Christmas program with a Christmas tree and everything. And so people were very touched with that, and we only found out, you know, little by little, that this is what God has given us, the gift. And so we were conscious about that, and we did the best we could.

LEVINE: And what part did religion play in your life?

VON TRAPP: It was part of our life. I mean, we didn't even think about it. We just grew up that way. We knew God, and we knew the Lord Jesus, and we were believers in every way. We were Catholic. But we were—that was one thing why we were glad to leave, because we saw that Hitler was sort of an anti-Christ, and we knew that our religion was in danger.

LEVINE: So it was religion, and I suspect also your country—

VON TRAPP: It was a necessity, it was absolutely. I mean, we felt that we were led by God to leave our country, and we were given this gift in order that was possible. You know, a family where every member is musical, every member is willing to sing, every member has a different type of voice, so that we all blended together—that is something very unusual, and I think a lot of people noticed that, I mean, recognized that. And so we were very conscious of being guided by God, and we sought his guidance because we didn't know our way around. I mean, everything was falling apart!

LEVINE: Well, is there anything else you can think of that pertains to this whole growing up in Austria, and coming here, and being part of the Von Trapp family, and living your life here?

VON TRAPP: Well, yeah, I don't know. I mean, it was just, you know, like in every other family, one day you have to say, "I've got to do something on my own." And after we finished singing, then I joined this nice lady that you just met, and she's a teacher, she's an absolutely wonderful teacher. And we decided we're going to make a kindergarten. We started a kindergarten. And so she was able to do the teaching, and I said, "I will do the, everything else. I will keep house and I will do the meals, whatever is necessary to keep our school running."

LEVINE: So you do that in Baltimore?

VON TRAPP: We did it in Baltimore—we did it in, first we had a kindergarten here, up here in a little house across the valley. After two years, then we saw that we couldn't make a living here, and there wasn't enough children. And they voted kindergarten into the public schools, so there was no possibility for us to keep on going here. And Marylou had some, a sister in the vicinity of Baltimore. So we went to visit her, and then through a friend we got in touch with a priest who just started a new elementary school. And we went to see him, and he immediately said, "Yes, I will help you, anything you can. You can establish a kindergarten on the property of the parish." And so we got in touch with him, and we kept in touch with him. He built us a house—he remodeled a house that was on the parish grounds, and he added a kindergarten to it with donations and voluntary helpers, and so on, so that we can start there. And that was in, on the fourth of September, 1958, we started our kindergarten there, in '58. And we had it for thirty-seven years, and now we are retired.

LEVINE: Wow! That's wonderful! Now how do you like this phase of your life?

VON TRAPP: I like it a lot! [Laughs] I think now I'm a bird, free [laughs]!

LEVINE: Oh, that's good. Well that's quite something! So you had a kindergarten for thirty-seven years?

VON TRAPP: Yeah, two years here, and then thirty-five years in Clinton, Maryland.

LEVINE: Wonderful! Okay, well I think maybe this is a good place to stop. I want to thank you so much.

VON TRAPP: Yeah, I think it is a good place to stop. But are you going to put this whole thing into the—

LEVINE: We usually just take the tape as it is, and we make it into a standard cassette tape, and we send a copy to you, and a tape, and a copy goes in the Oral History Library at Ellis Island.

VON TRAPP: So, you interview everybody like that?

LEVINE: Everyone we can find who came through Ellis Island.

VON TRAPP: Because it tells a story, right?

LEVINE: Yes, it does. It tells it from the people who lived it.

VON TRAPP: Yeah. That's very nice. I think I like that.

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LEVINE: Oh, good. Well, I'm very happy that you're a part of this whole thing.
Thank you.

VON TRAPP: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW