

EI-707

MARIA VON TRAPP

BIRTH DATE: SEPTEMBER 28, 1914

INTERVIEW DATE: NOVEMBER 3, 1995

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 7/1998

TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED

AUSTRIA VIA ITALY, 1939

AGE 25

PASSAGE ON *BERGENSFJORD*

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Maria is the sister of Agathe Von Trapp, EI-706, and Johannes Von Trapp, EI-708. She is one of the older Von Trapp children and should not be confused with her famous stepmother who was also named Maria. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., 2/24/1998.

LEVINE: Today is November 3, 1995, and I'm here in Stowe, Vermont, and I'm here with Maria Von Trapp, who came here with her family from Austria in 1938 for the family to sing, and then again in 1939, and at that time the family was detained at Ellis Island. Okay, this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I think, if we could start at the beginning, just for the tape, if you would say where in Austria you were born.

VON TRAPP: I was born in a place called Zell am Zsee.

LEVINE: How do you spell that?

VON TRAPP: Z-E-L-L, another word A-M, another word capital Z-S-E-E. Zsee means lake, Zell on the lake. But we were born across that village, across the lake. So we were sort of in that country, but with a beautiful view of the . . . (disturbance to the microphone)

LEVINE: Whoops, let me turn you . . . (break in tape) We're resuming here. So that's a picture of the lake?

VON TRAPP: Of the lake, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: And we lived in our grandfather's house because my parents used to live in Polau[ph], which is Poula[ph] now. (she clears her throat) But when the war was on, this was war zone, so they evacuated all the civilians back to Austria to the inland, you know? So my mother went to live with her mother and my grandfather opposite the village of Zell am Zsee.

LEVINE: I see. Uh, would you say your birth date for the tape?

VON TRAPP: Yeah, I was born on September 28, 1914.

LEVINE: And, so, um, when you, when you were how old did you start living, did the family start living with your mother's mother, with your grandmother?

VON TRAPP: Well, I was born there.

LEVINE: Oh, you were born there. Oh, okay.

VON TRAPP: I was the first one to be born there, and then three more were born there, all during the war.

LEVINE: I see, I see.

VON TRAPP: And because we could not send telegrams to let my father know the child was born, we had to send a military telegram, and my mother pretended that we were like a ship, you know the ship Maria, uh, S.M.S., Santa Maria Stateship, Maria, uh, came into harbor on September 28th. (they laugh)

LEVINE: I see. Now, did your father visit a couple of times?

VON TRAPP: Yeah, he came home, yeah. I remember his visits home. I must have been very small, but I do remember him coming home. And, of course, then after 1918, 1918 the war was over, you know, then I remember him coming home.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember when he came home from the . . .

VON TRAPP: No.

LEVINE: And how about your grandmother? What do you remember about her? What are the kinds of memories that you remember her doing, or how she was?

VON TRAPP: She was a very kind lady. She, uh, and she must have been very talented, because the house she built was at the time when her husband had died already, and she was the architect for that house, and it was a beautiful house. I can show it to you. I have a picture.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

VON TRAPP: And, uh, she, uh, she conducted the household, she played the piano, she was very musical, you know? And, uh, she had six children, she brought up six

children all by herself, you know, because her father, her husband died. And, uh, she was quite a woman.

LEVINE: Yeah. Was your mother . . .

VON TRAPP: And very practical.

LEVINE: Oh? In what ways?

VON TRAPP: Well, she knew how to fix things, you know, and she had, she saved, during the war you couldn't get many things, so she, every nail that was pulled out of a board she would flatten out and put in little, uh, matchboxes. She made a little cupboard out of matchboxes for the different kinds of nails and screws and so. If she needed to repair something, she knew where to go to. (she laughs) She had a little workshop in her room. And, uh, I don't remember much else that, she used to smoke cigars. (she laughs) After dinner she would always smoke a cigar. And, uh, she loved order, you know? She wanted all this order. She made puzzles with a jigsaw, pedal jigsaw.

VON TRAPP: Saw? With a . . .

LEVINE: With a saw, yeah. Like a, like a sewing machine, you know? It went up and down, and she made puzzles, and she put them together. She loved to make puzzles. And then music, you know, she . . . I know that when, (she sighs) before she lived with her husband in Fuhmer[ph], that's also on the Adriatic Coast, and, uh, you know, at that time the, the society gave balls for their daughters to marry there, maybe to navy officers, so they gave balls. And I remember my father telling me he went to one of those balls, and here she was playing the piano because it was a family affair, you know, and no orchestra. (she laughs) So she played the piano, and my mother the violin, and this is how my father knew, he said, "When I saw your mother play the violin there, I knew she was going to be my wife." So. So this is how it happened.

LEVINE: Was your mother very much like her mother? Were they, in temperament?

VON TRAPP: No, I don't think so. I think she was, uh, she was not so strict and not so strong, you know, strong-willed. She was very gentle and kind, so that's how I remember her, very kind. And when, whenever you

meet people, uh, who worked for her, they always praised my mother for being so kind and thoughtful, you know?

LEVINE: Was your mother a religious woman?

VON TRAPP: Uh, this I don't know. I don't think especially religious, but she, I think she just lived the Christian laws.

LEVINE: Right. And, um, let's see. So did you go to school then when you were . . .

VON TRAPP: No, because on the other side of the lake, the country school was too far to walk to, and to go over the lake every day somebody would have to cross the lake two times a day, you know? So we had a tutor at home.

LEVINE: And what was that like?

VON TRAPP: Well, I didn't know anything else. It was all right. Yeah, we learned. Yeah, we had one very good tutor.

LEVINE: Would you be all together?

VON TRAPP: No, no, no.

LEVINE: Oh, separately.

VON TRAPP: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And, um, let's see. So when the war was over and your father came home.

VON TRAPP: Yeah?

LEVINE: Do you remember anything he said about being in the navy, or the war, or . . .

VON TRAPP: He always, uh, you know, I was too small to, to understand what was going on in the war, you know? But, uh, he, he used to, he used matches to show us the position of boats, and how he sank the enemy, you know? And so. And then he used to play with us. I remember how he played Indians with us.

LEVINE: What would you do playing Indians?

VON TRAPP: Oh, yeah. We were tied to the trees, you know?
(she laughs) And we were, the enemy tried . . .
(she laughs) It was all fun, you know? And I remember he had a horse, a black horse, which he called Darkie, you know, it's an English word, but at that time we didn't know it was an English word.

And, uh, you know, I don't remember too much. They used to go on sleigh rides, but I was too small to go on them. So my oldest brother and Agathe, you know, she went on the sleigh ride, but I was too small. And the funny thing is, I didn't even resent it. They were the bigger ones, so this was what they did, and we did, we had to stay home. (she laughs) Strange, huh?

LEVINE: Well, I had the idea that your father was a stern man.

VON TRAPP: No. No, no, no. Not at all. No. And then later on when we moved and we were bigger, you know, we, he, you see, we had, at that time it was the fashion to have the children, the smaller ones, with nanny, with a nanny, and the bigger ones with the teacher, you know? And, uh, so I, when I was at the age to go to school, I moved up to the schoolchildren, you know? So, and, uh, I remember we, my father was the happiest when we were in his study. We could turn the chairs upside down and put blankets over and play house here, and anything, and he would take us down to the river, you know, and showed us how to make fire without matches. And so The Sound of

Music is a bit off concerning my father, you know? And then whenever the guests came, you know, he, if he thought this would be interesting for us, we could come down and join him in the, in the, in his study, you know? I remember there was once a man who was, who started, how do you call them, Pathfinders, you know, the boy scouts, the boy scouts, you know, in Austria, and he showed us pictures, what they do and how they go outside and make tricks and make fire and live in tents. But my father, we had to sit home. He, when we were in Salzburg he bought us hammocks and built us a house so we could sleep in hammocks outside. He had tents, we could sleep in the tents. He took us down to the Adriatic Sea, which he knew like his pocket. And all the islands, a special one near Poula[ph], or Poula[ph] now, where we spent the whole two months there, and he taught us how to sail, and, you know, we slept in hammocks and had the tents just in case it rains, which it never did. So we had, he took trips. You should have asked Agathe. She made a very exciting trip with him with two folding boats. My father and she, and my father and my other sister, and Verna, my brother, and she. Oh,

it was very, very, she wrote a story about this trip, because it was, it got very dangerous. (she laughs) But they made it back to our island. So, you know, it was completely different. My father was, he taught us how to do handicraft, how to use the nails and hammer and saws, and we had a circular saw, we had a band saw in the cellar, we could make Christmas presents, and he used to make furniture later on for your harness. It's still in his house. And my sister painted it, you know. We all did a lot of handicraft. And, uh, you know . . .

LEVINE: Well, it seems like, uh, people in the family tend to sketch and . . .

VON TRAPP: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Have, uh . . .

VON TRAPP: Yeah, they were, my sister Agathe, she made this picture.

LEVINE: Oh!

VON TRAPP: And this one here.

LEVINE: Lovely!

VON TRAPP: It's just a certain method she invented, or she copied.

LEVINE: Yeah.

VON TRAPP: And she had a whole, uh, exhibition of her paintings. Yeah. And I did some fingerpaints. I can show you afterwards.

LEVINE: Okay.

VON TRAPP: And so, and then the other sister, she's also in flowers and animals, and, not so much people, but nature.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: And illuminations, you know? So, like the, um, 16th Century books, you know?

LEVINE: Yes.

VON TRAPP: And, uh, yeah, she was very good, and ceramics, and name it and we did it. (she laughs) At least some of us, or one of us. And the youngest sister from the seven, the first seven, she was also fantastic, artistic, you know? And never had lessons. It just flowed out of her. And, of

course . . .

LEVINE: Was your mother artistic also? Or she was . . .

VON TRAPP: I don't think she painted.

LEVINE: She was musical.

VON TRAPP: I don't think she, but her sister, her younger sister was a perfectionate artist. She, she did beautiful things. I'll show you a picture of the house where we were born. When she was sixteen, she painted it.

LEVINE: Oh, really!

VON TRAPP: I have it in my bedroom.

LEVINE: Okay. Shall we do that now? (disturbance to the microphone) So we'll stop here. (break in tape)
Okay, we're resuming here. We were talking, you have a picture that your aunt painted of your grandmother's house, and, uh . . .

VON TRAPP: Where we were born.

LEVINE: Where you were born.

VON TRAPP: Four of us.

LEVINE: Four were born. So when your father got back, then where did you go from there?

VON TRAPP: From there we went to another house, because we were too many for here. A neighboring house, which belonged to a brother of my mother. And that was impossible because in the spring the lake would rise, and half of the kitchen was flooded. Lots of rats. So we went to eat to my grandfather's house as it was an impossible situation. So then we went to, close to Marborough[ph], which was a place near Vienna. And there we lived four years, I think? And then we went, then my mother died there. We all had scarlet fever. You know, she had . . .

LEVINE: Yeah, would you tell about that, the epidemic, how . . .

VON TRAPP: Well, we all had, except the little one, we all had scarlet fever, and my mother got it when she was grown up, so that's very dangerous. And she recovered from that, but my aunt said that afterwards she got pneumonia, and there was no remedy at that time for pneumonia.

LEVINE: Hmm. Oh. So, um, were you being, uh, taught at home when you lived there?

VON TRAPP: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: And I was too sick to go to school, so I had to repeat a class just to get busy, to keep busy. And, um, and then after, in 1924, my father bought a house in, in Salzburg.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And, um, were you happy, too, to leave, to leave the house where your mother had died?

VON TRAPP: Yeah, yeah. I was, I was an adventurer. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And you were the one, you had, also, scarlet fever.

VON TRAPP: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Did all of the children . . .

VON TRAPP: So that's why, I had something on my heart stayed, you know? That's why I couldn't go to school, I mean, and then repeated the same class just to keep

busy. And, uh, and then, well, later on we sort of, there was another time when we couldn't go to school at the end of, after graduation again. But somehow I made all the trips, singing trips, you know?

LEVINE: Hmm, hmm. So you were the one, you were the one that had the, you were the one that needed the tutor, which was why Maria came initially.

VON TRAPP: Yeah, yeah. When I was about to go to high school, to junior high, sixth grade, you know, I was again not allowed to go to school, and so my, so I asked my father to give me books so I could study myself. I loved to study by myself. And he said, "You cannot do that. You have to have a teacher." So he went to the convent and asked for, uh, where he could find a teacher, and this is how it happened.

LEVINE: I see. So did, did it make a big difference to you when Marie came to the house?

VON TRAPP: Yeah, it did make a difference, because there was somebody, you know, who, who took, you know, she, she was very good in storytelling, and she was very good in part singing. We always sang with my father already, you know? Folk songs, and his navy songs,

and, and then, you know, I played the accordion, and he played the violin, my sister played the guitar. So we had music, but what she brought to the house was the part singing, like magicals, you know, and masses, you know, three, four, five part masses, and folk dancing. She belonged to the Norland[ph], you know, youth, youth group, something like girl scouts, but it was more refined, I would say. They did not go out to make fire in the woods, but they tried to bring back good music, it was the time that jazz started, you know? So they wanted the folk songs going on, magicals and Brahms and, uh, all these famous people who wrote songs, you know? Mozart and so. And, uh, and then they also, they were for reviving Austrian style clothes, you know? So this happened through this, these kind of groups, you know.

LEVINE: What, could you say anything more about the clothes? What was the idea, that they would bring back the sort of old, uh, customs of dress?

VON TRAPP: Yeah. They were more colorful, and it suits girls better than anything else. You know, we had, the dresses they wore at that time were awful, you know,

the middle down here, and no color or nothing, all through, too high here, or, you know, it was not becoming. And that there were beautiful dresses, you know, with the white blouses and bodice and apron. So why not use something nice instead of drab.

LEVINE: And did that, did that happen? Did they revive it?

VON TRAPP: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Now in Salzburg, in the summer, you see them all the time.

LEVINE: So, um, so was it, was there a big adjustment getting used to your new, uh, mother, your stepmother?

VON TRAPP: No. I didn't feel it was something you have to get used to, no. It was something that, you know, it was something exciting.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And did, did your father change much after that?

VON TRAPP: Change?

LEVINE: Yeah. Was he, was he always the same, or, I'm probably prejudiced from the movie.

VON TRAPP: Well, you know, he, well, he was always with us, and still was with us, you know? So that . . .

LEVINE: That stern aspect of him wasn't, uh . . .

VON TRAPP: And we lost the money, you know, and he started the chicken farm, and we all worked together with him on the chicken farm, you know? So there was no . . .

LEVINE: This was outside of Salzburg, where the chicken farm was?

VON TRAPP: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: Why do you want to know all this for Ellis Island?

LEVINE: Well, what was usually do is we ask about life before people came to this country, because the part about Ellis Island is very small.

VON TRAPP: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: But it's kind of to get a sense of what people's lives were like, and then what happened. So, so did you have chores around the, around the house, around the . . .

VON TRAPP: Well, after, first we had lots of, we had a lot of money, you know, so we had servants with a cook and someone to wash the clothes and someone to iron the clothes, and somebody to clean the house, and somebody to serve at the table, you know, and somebody for outside. We had three cows. We had our own milk. And so we, you know, we didn't have to do much, just go to school and study. But then when we lost the money, then we divided up chores, you know? And we loved it, because we always wanted to do things like this, you know, and we didn't mind at all.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, um, do you, what do you personally remember about the rise of the Nazis in Austria? Do you remember any incidents?

VON TRAPP: Well, yeah. I remember when they came in. It was my older sister's birthday, and we were sitting in my father's study, and, uh, it was midnight, and all of a sudden we heard all the bells in Salzburg ring. You know, we have thirty-two churches, so there were lots of bells, at midnight, you know? So my father called the police and said, "What's going on, you know, why all these bells?" (she laughs) And

they said, "Well, Hitler just moved in." And they went immediately all to the, to the churches and demanded the bells are rung, you know, to, to show how Austria welcomes Hitler. But they will count themselves. I mean, they did have fifth columnists, people who wished to belong to Germany, but they learned better now. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Yeah, right, yeah. So, um, do you remember the butler that declared himself a party . . .

VON TRAPP: Yeah. But he was, he was, he showed my father, you know, that he belonged to the party, but just to sort of warn us not to talk about these things at the table when he's around. He didn't want to give us away, or betray us, you know? He just wanted to warn us. He was a very quiet man, yeah. And very loyal, really. But we never knew what happened to him. He probably was killed during the war. Because I think he would have come up some time when we came to Salzburg, you know, so we never saw him again. But he was not a vicious man, you know? No.

LEVINE: So, um, do you remember when the decision was made

that the family would, would, uh, come to this country?

VON TRAPP: Uh-huh. Yeah, because, um, we had a concert in Salzburg during the festival time. Not, it was not a part of the festivals, but at that time they had a concert in, in, uh, (?) Music School, and there was a manager from America, and he heard us sing, and then he came out and asked us to come to the United States. So my father called us all together and said, "This is the offer we had." And he said, we were sitting, sitting around the round table, he said, "I will ask each one of you now, but, you know, you have to say honestly what you want to do, you want to go or want to stay, yes or no. And if one doesn't go, doesn't want to go, nobody goes." He said, "We stay together." And, uh, so he asked each one of us. So no complaints afterwards, you know? (she laughs) And everybody said yes. Everybody wanted to go. But then I remember he, which he never had done before, he took a big Bible, and wanted to know from the word of God if this is really His will, because it's a big step, you know? I'm sure he wanted a blessing, God's blessing,

because to take, we had no money, you know? America would pay our fare over, and then we'd pay it off. But we could have never escaped by ourselves. And, uh, so it was a big step, you know, for my father to say, to warn, or not to go, or whatever, you know, what to decide. So he took the Bible and he closed his eyes and he opened and it and took a pencil and went to the page. And then I thought, well, is America in the Bible? (she laughs) And, uh, his pencil went to the place, you know, where God speaks to Abraham, "Take your family and go to the land I have prepared for you," or something like this, you know? So he was, I'm sure he was confirmed, he had a confirmation that God will be with us, and He was all the time. I mean, it was hard many times, but we got through everything, you know?

LEVINE: Yeah. So when you left Austria, where did you go first?

VON TRAPP: To Salstiro[ph]. Right, straight south from Salzburg, through the Alps, into Italy, which was Austria before the First World War.

LEVINE: So, and, and, um, your father, if you would tell the

story for the tape about how your father woke up and was all of a sudden Italian.

VON TRAPP: Yeah. So, yeah, so, you know, we didn't have to flee, because we were Italians. They couldn't take us.

LEVINE: Well, tell how you came to be Italians.

VON TRAPP: Oh. Well, I have to start with my grandfather.

LEVINE: Okay.

VON TRAPP: My grandfather was from Germany, and he wanted to join the navy. At that time the German navy was not allowed to have ships, you know, anything, no navy, no German navy. So he went to Austria, and he became an Austrian citizen, and a citizen of Trieste[ph]. Now, Trieste[ph] is opposite Venice on the other side of the bay, and, uh, in, you know, in Europe you are, oh, maybe on the Austria, you are what your father is, so my father became automatically a citizen of Trieste[ph], because his father was a citizen of Trieste[ph] now. And, uh, so that was Austria before the World War, the First World War. Now, after the First World War, this

part was given to Italy, and so one day after he fought against Italy, he woke up and heard that he is not citizen of Austria any more, but of Italy. So he was an Italian citizen, and we automatically became also Italian citizen. So, at that time, when Hitler came in, he and Mussolini were not the best friends, so he couldn't touch us,

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: But my father left because he, first of all, we had the opportunity, and then he was against Hitler's philosophy, you know? And, so he said we have the opportunity, and we really could not stay and receive benefits from the, from the chief, you know, if you are against him. And you are not against him just because, just to be against him, but he was evil. So he didn't want to receive anything from him. So we all left, really more or less because my father, of his principals. He stuck to his principals, and we followed. But it was him, really, who knew why we had to go.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Were you, were you aware of any, of any extent of the, of the Hitler, uh . . .

VON TRAPP: Oh, yeah, we knew, we heard all the things that went on in Germany, how the handicapped people were gassed and killed, you know, and the Jews were killed. And so he came, and the next day already we had a lady in the house, you know, who was supposed to keep the house while, because my mother was not there any more, before the second mother came, and she had a daughter in the handicapped, or the mental institute, and they put them all in a van and gassed them. Finished. You see? And these things, people forget, or they say it's not true, but we had it firsthand.

LEVINE: And you were aware of it?

VON TRAPP: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: In 1938. Uh-huh. Wow. So, so, um, so you went, when you all decided to leave, you went to, uh, Italy.

VON TRAPP: Yeah, Prunek[ph].

LEVINE: Because of your father. To where?

VON TRAPP: Prunek[ph], it's called. It was a, the south of Italy was Austria before the First World War. After the second World War it became Italian.

LEVINE: So how long did you stay there?

VON TRAPP: Oh, I think June, July, August, September. Three months, I think.

LEVINE: And did you stay there for a reason, or just to get . . .

VON TRAPP: Yeah, to wait for the ship to get out from Hitler.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: And, you know, but my oldest brother was already finished physician, and he became an Austrian so he could practice in Austria.

LEVINE: Oh.

VON TRAPP: See, he was Italian, so he had to practice, become and Austrian to practice in Austria. We had no idea that Hitler moved in at that time, yeah? So he had to go out quicker, because he was an Austrian.

LEVINE: I see.

VON TRAPP: Our conductor was Austrian, so these, too, they had to leave immediately, but we could sort of take it a little bit easier and then follow them.

LEVINE: I see. So, uh, when you came over the first time, where, what ship did you take then?

VON TRAPP: Well, it was The American Farmer.

LEVINE: Okay. And do you remember where you landed?

VON TRAPP: New York.

LEVINE: Right in Battery Park?

VON TRAPP: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: You remember . . .

VON TRAPP: Yeah, I remember when we came in, uh, and the sun was setting in the west, you know, and all the skyscrapers, you could see, you know, and that was a fantastic view, because we never saw skyscrapers before, you know? It was a, like a fairy tale city, you know?

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember any of your first impressions when you first got to the United States?

VON TRAPP: Yeah. Well, in the New York first, first we had the, we never saw a subway. Red, green lights, we are not in Salzburg, you know? So we just moved over the street. We did not know what this colored lamps meant, you know? (she laughs) Until we moved wrongly, then we were told, "You'd better watch these lights." (she laughs) You know? And, uh, so then, of course, then we went, we stayed in the Hotel Wellington, that was always our headquarters in New York. And, uh, well, this traffic, of course, was for us, something very new. You know, we went on bicycle mostly. (she laughs) And here all these cars zooming by. And then, and when we went to the country to our first concert, I think it was in Framingham, Massachusetts, or Farmingham, something like this.

LEVINE: Framingham.

VON TRAPP: We were, we laughed at the rows of mailboxes, you know? (she laughs) And then there were lots of signs, advertising signs, you know, and signs which you don't see any more now. That one was, uh, "Don't stick out your arm too far. It might go home

in another car. Burma Shave." (she laughs) You know, all of this, to our understanding, you know? And, uh, to eat in a diner with a Wurlitzer, that music, which we couldn't stand. (she laughs) You know, so we, there were lots of, you know, otherwise we did not have culture shock or anything like this.

LEVINE: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

VON TRAPP: Yeah.

LEVINE: Did you know what that was when you saw it?

VON TRAPP: No.

LEVINE: So, so you went on your tour, and you toured, uh, the country.

VON TRAPP: Yeah. We had a manager who already prepared all the concerts beforehand, you know? And we got the list, and the bus. So, and this is how we went.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then, and then what? Then you came back to Europe after that?

VON TRAPP: Then my, Johannes was born in Germantown, in January, you know? We had, Christmas we had off, then Johannes was born, we rented a house. Because

mother didn't want him to be born in a hospital, so he had to be born at home. We could hardly find a doctor who would do that. (she laughs) And, uh, so, uh, and then we took him, we took him wherever we went. We had a little cradle in the bus, you know, and Johannes was in the, he traveled with us. And, uh, we traveled until he was quite big, and then he stayed home. I don't know. And then, when he was eight years he was on the stage playing recorder and singing soprano. So he had his career on the stage, too.

VON TRAPP: So, uh, then after you did your tour you went back, where did you go back to in Europe?

VON TRAPP: Um, it's not quite clear any more in my mind. We went Holland, Denmark. And some of us went back to Salzburg and, um, and then we ended up in Sweden for the summer. There's no, you know, we couldn't stay in Austria because Obet[ph] couldn't be with us (?). So we spent the summer in Sweden on the Mailor[ph] Sea, and I was just there back again to see the place. I have a picture here of the house where we stayed, and where we ate. So, and then there was the time when Hitler moved into Poland, and we were

really scared we wouldn't get out any more, you know, because the, we didn't know where submarines around or what, when the ships go over back to, no plans at that time, you know? It's incredible, you know, how things developed now, you don't go back over anywhere. You only fly. So, then we had to sing some concerts in Sweden still, you know, in the fall, then Norway, and then from there, from ocean, we went on the Bergensfjord up to (?), and north of England. We saw the Fajers[ph], you know, these islands, beautiful. Purple, dark purple, the rock, and absolutely a fantastic green on top, at five o'clock, when the sun just hit the green, it was unbelievable. Well, on the way we met a boat, and everybody got very excited to see the war ship, the German war ship, or what it is, was only a passenger boat.

LEVINE: So then what happened? You got to New York, and what happened that time when . . .

VON TRAPP: No. We went on tour right away.

LEVINE: Oh, you went on tour.

VON TRAPP: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, now, I thought that was the time . . .

VON TRAPP: Oh, yeah, that was Ellis Island, yeah. Yeah.
Right.

LEVINE: Okay. So you were on the Bergensfjord, right?
That's the name of the ship.

VON TRAPP: Bergensfjord, Bergensfjord.

LEVINE: Bergensfjord.

VON TRAPP: Fjord.

LEVINE: And that, on that ship, do you remember anything
about that voyage?

VON TRAPP: Yeah. They put new cabins at the lower bottom, you
know, for the refugees? And this is how we got on,
on a boat. Because they put this, it was very
smelly because, you know, the lowest thing, you
know?

LEVINE: You were like in a dormitory, kind of?

VON TRAPP: No, we had cabins, yeah. And, uh, well, what did I
remember? It was nothing. In fact, the boat, we
thought it was, I can't remember much on that, from

that trip.

LEVINE: I think your sister said that was a, uh, it had been a troop boat, troop ship, and they made it into a passenger ship. Well, then, then tell me what you remember about Ellis Island.

VON TRAPP: I remember the big hall, you know, like in a, like a train station, very high and, you know, a stone floor, marble floor. And open, you know? And we were sitting there on our luggage sort of, you know. No benches or anything. I can't remember any benches. I believe there were, but I can't remember it. And then for the meal time we had to stand in line, and they always were counting us, you know? My father hated when he came and touched us, you know? His girls, you know? Ooh. (they laugh) And there we heard the stories about a French family who didn't have sponsors and they, you know, the people had to stay on the boat and go back and forth until they get sponsors, or they had to go back. And this French family, or Ellis Island, you know? Either back and forth or Ellis Island, not back in the country. So this French family was continuously going back and forth. And a Chinese family was

there, and they, they had to stay in Ellis Island. They were already I don't know how many years there, because they couldn't find a sponsor, and no relatives I don't know what happened to them later.

LEVINE: Were there a lot of people there?

VON TRAPP: Alive?

LEVINE: A lot? Were there many? There were many people.

VON TRAPP: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

VON TRAPP: Well, I couldn't say how many, you know.

LEVINE: Were you treated, were you treated kindly, or . . .

VON TRAPP: No.

LEVINE: No.

VON TRAPP: No. I couldn't say kindly. You know, you don't slap people on the back counting them when you go eating. And then my sister probably told you that we had to have the light on at night.

LEVINE: Right.

VON TRAPP: So we couldn't get away, you know. Yeah. And then we asked for permission to turn the light off because of Johannes, who stayed with us, so we could turn off the light. And this is all so stupid, you know? I shouldn't say that.

LEVINE: (she laughs) That's okay. And so, uh, were there any other experiences that you can think of on Ellis Island, anything else that happened?

VON TRAPP: Yeah. We had, every afternoon we had to walk outside up and down, you know, to do exercise, you know, behind the, I don't know, ten foot . . .

LEVINE: Fence.

VON TRAPP: Fence, yeah, and then barbed wire, and, you know, just a feeling of how long are we going to stay here, you know? And every time when people were released, the whole crowd clapped. Yeah, it was really nice to see that they were happy for them who could leave. And we sang. We entertained them, see? We practiced and sang, so that was, at least for them, a little bit of relief.

LEVINE: So how, so how were the arrangements made, then,

that you would leave?

VON TRAPP: My brother, I don't know why, he didn't have to come in. He didn't have to stay in Ellis Island, my oldest brother, although he was an Austrian, I couldn't, I could not, I never know how this, or I knew it and forgot it. But Father Wasner[ph] was also Austrian, and he had to stay with us on Ellis Island, but my brother somehow . . .

LEVINE: Is he the one that had the medical degree?

VON TRAPP: Yeah.

LEVINE: I wonder if that made a difference.

VON TRAPP: I don't know. But he could go to the coroner, you know, in Philadelphia, and he goes out. But I don't know his name any more. You would have to find out who was coroner in Philadelphia at that, in '39.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, so he sponsored you. Is that what you would say? Sponsored your family?

VON TRAPP: No. See, everything was okay. It's just because this immigration officer asked Mother, "Would you like to stay in the States?" I mean, this was such

like a, like (?) of total amount, you know? And she said, "Of course." But, and this was attaching a question, we want to enter illegally, which was, you know, I mean, if I want to enter illegally, I don't say that.

LEVINE: Right. (she laughs) Okay.

VON TRAPP: Anyway.

LEVINE: So then when you left Ellis Island, then you went on tour again?

VON TRAPP: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And, and so you toured up until 1956?

VON TRAPP: Yeah.

LEVINE: And how do you feel about that period of your life where you were traveling all over the country singing with the family?

VON TRAPP: You know, you don't think much about how you feel. You just do it because that's your job, you know? And, uh, we liked singing, the part of singing. I mean, the traveling and all this kind, was very strenuous. But the singing part we liked. We

always liked to sing, you know? We always felt a sort of peace coming over the audience, especially a Christmas program, you know? And, uh, we sang two, two Christmas concerts in New York, and two in Boston, and two in Washington, and each time, you know, it was, and when we had the Christmas program all over the county, but these main cities were always a special atmosphere. And, you know, once I, two years ago I was in, in California for a Sound of Music show, and there was, uh, Marie Osmond. You know her? She's . . .

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: She plays Mother in Sound of Music, you know, on the stage. And we were interviewed on the radio, and people could call in, you know? And one lady called in from South Dakota and said, "You know, I heard you in 1942 in Town Hall Christmas, for your Christmas program." And so that's, you know, this is so nice to . . .

LEVINE: Yes.

VON TRAPP: Hear that somebody really was there. Sometimes you think it's so long ago, did you really sing

together? (they laugh) Was that true that we went singing for twenty years, you know? But . . .

LEVINE: Were there any other highlights of your singing, traveling and singing career?

VON TRAPP: Uh, well, I'll tell you something. Our biggest success was in Paris. Before we came to America, we sang in Europe already, you know? We sang in Paris, and the applause was tremendous. We thought the, you know, all these galleries come down. That was fantastic. And the next big success was in, uh, in, uh, Argentine? Now, what's the capital of Argentine? (she pauses) Uh . . . (break in tape)

LEVINE: Good. Okay. We're resuming here, and we have discovered that Buenos Aires is the capital of Argentina. (they laugh) Um, so that was a highlight, when you went to Buenos Aires.

VON TRAPP: I mean, concert-wise, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. So in 1956, um, how, why was it that the family decided to stop?

VON TRAPP: Because we had already two sisters who had married

away. We had to take other people in to train the voices, you know? And, uh, my oldest brother had left already after the war. He did not join us any more. He became a doctor, and was a doctor in Hartford, or in Rhode Island. And, uh, my next brother after me, he did not want to sing any more because he was away while his last baby was born. And, uh, we were six months, three months away from home, and that was too long for him, from our last tour to Australia. And then we met a priest from New Guinea, and I always wanted to go to the mission, so I decided when we stopped singing this is where I will go. So I ask your highness if he comes with me, he said yes, so my sister was married, came too, so we went out on an island off New Guinea, and we were teaching and doing medical work. And after four years we returned. Johannes had to go to college. And, uh, I was there, stayed home to become a nurse, and I went back until '88 for good. I mean, I came home for holiday, but I was working until '88 on the island, and then mostly in the capital. And, uh, my older sister, she started a kindergarten with her friend, a friend who was the kindergarten teacher, and she helped out and

did the household in Baltimore, in Clinton, a suburb of Baltimore. And she's retired now, in Pikesville.

At the moment she is here visiting me. I was in New Guinea after, when Diana came home and he, he bought a farm in Waitesfield, and raised six children, four boys and two girls. I forgot to say, my oldest brother, the doctor, he had four girls and two boys. And then, so this is, and the sister after Thelma, she died, uh, of asthma. Johanna had several children. She married an Austrian, and she died last November in Austria, in Vienna. Martina married in 1950, and she died in childbirth. And Rosemary, she was with me in New Guinea, and now she's here doing sing-along, and she's very active in her church. Lorelei, Eleanor, she has, she married, and she has seven girls, and they're all married, and they all have children, and she's a very busy grandmother. And Johannes is in charge of the lodge and the grounds and cross country skiing, which he started in this country. And, uh, he has two children, a girl and a boy.

LEVINE: Well, what, what do you feel very proud of that you've done in your life? What makes you feel

satisfied, having accomplished?

VON TRAPP: (she laughs) I don't think I'm proud of anything.

I just enjoyed everything we did, you know? I enjoyed the singing, and the, and teaching music, you know? The music camp, you know we had a music camp?

LEVINE: No.

VON TRAPP: No?

LEVINE: Tell about that.

VON TRAPP: From, uh, '43 till, no '44 I think, '44 till '56 we had a music camp at the bottom of the hill here. It was an old CCC camp and military police camp, and before they wanted to tear it down. Mother rented it, and we had twelve summers we had music camps. People came from all over the states, and they had an opportunity to sing in parts, and I taught in recorder, and folk dancing. And Mother did the folk dancing teaching. My brother played the clarinet. I played the accordion. And so I enjoyed all these things, you know? We built up the house here. The old house fell down in a blizzard, so we rebuilt it.

And, you know, this is all a book.

LEVINE: Yes. (they laugh)

VON TRAPP: I just give you the headlines.

LEVINE: Yeah, right.

VON TRAPP: Of a book.

LEVINE: Right, yeah.

VON TRAPP: And, uh, uh, and then, of course, I enjoyed tremendously out in New Guinea.

LEVINE: What was it that was so satisfying to you of doing that work in New Guinea?

VON TRAPP: I don't know, you just love the people. And, you know, it was, uh, you don't have the feeling that you, you do a lot for them, because you learn a lot from them, too, you know? But it was just a nice, being with them. Yeah. You know, I could really write a book.

LEVINE: Yeah. Uh, what, what impact do you think, how did it affect you, do you think, the fact that you, uh, grew up in Austria and came here in your early

twenties and lived the rest of your life here, although you did go to New Guinea, but the fact that you were an immigrant to the United States and essentially settled here, what, how do you think that affected you as a person? How did it affect the way you, um, saw the world, or the way you were, the way you are.

VON TRAPP: These are very difficult questions to answer.

LEVINE: Yeah. I guess I'm just . . .

VON TRAPP: How does it affect you . . . Well, if you come to a new country, you, first of all, you can't help, you compare it with your home, and you find the differences. Now it's up to you if you embrace these differences or condemn them or complain, then you'd better stay home, from where you come from, if you think that that is a better place, you know? And we did, I don't think we did a lot of complaining, because the people were so nice to us, and, I mean, everything was a new experience, which you would have never had in, in, if you had stayed home. You see, there's, there's a lot of good in people, you know, in other people country, in other

countries, and you learn a lot. For instance, that they let you live, they don't criticize you all the time. You know, in Europe they live so close together you have to watch what you say, what you do. And everybody knows it and so, you know? Until you're, in New Guinea, too, they let you, they just let you live. It's up to you. If you want to be cranky, well, that's, if it's you, be cranky if you want to be cranky. You know, it doesn't bother them if they don't let it bother you, or bother them. And we learned so much, you know, how generous the Americans were when we did Austrian relief. That's another chapter, you know? My mother, when she heard that they had nothing to eat, we collected food and clothing and shoes, and whatever the people get. It was a tremendous response on the, sometimes the bus was so full we couldn't even sit down. We had to stand in the aisle. And we bought bags to stuff the things in, and went to the post office and sent it to New York, and then it was shipped over by the army to Austria, to Salzburg. There was an American chapter. But the people were so generous, you know, this is all new experiences. A man heard from his wife, she didn't go to the concert. His

wife told him that we were collecting for Austrian relief, he didn't even finish his breakfast. He went into his closet, took a handful of clothes, and came to the bus hoping that we are still here. You know, and on this alone was an overwhelming experience. And the country itself is already open. You know, you don't sit on top of each other here. You know, it's very hard to, uh, because every, you turn around and you have a new experience. It's up to you if you, if you reject it or if you embrace it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: But we love it here now, you know? This is, it's beautiful to go back to Austria, too, you know? So this is America, this is Austria.

LEVINE: How do you think of yourself now? Do you think of yourself as Austrian, part, American, part, or how do you do

VON TRAPP: Or New Guinean.

LEVINE: Yeah, right.

VON TRAPP: I don't think of anything. I don't think in, to

which country I belong. I think I belong to God.
(she laughs) Wherever I am, I feel at home, with
the people, you know? I love people, and it doesn't
matter if they're primitives. (she laughs) Or
highly educated. I cannot answer that question.

LEVINE: You gave a wonderful answer. Is there anything else
you can think of that has to do with, with
immigrating to this country, or being here? How is
this time in your life?

VON TRAPP: Now?

LEVINE: Now, uh-huh?

VON TRAPP: Well, now I know I have to be here, you know? I
mean, I, you know, I gave my life to God, and
wherever He puts me, He has some work for me to do,
and that's what I try to do. And so I . . .

LEVINE: So here, now, do you feel that you're doing God's
work in some ways?

VON TRAPP: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: You know, it might not be tremendous in the eyes of

the world, but I don't care, you know? Everybody has to do his part. Like a puzzle, like . . .

LEVINE: Like a jigsaw puzzle.

VON TRAPP: The puzzles up there, you know? And if one, one piece is missing, it might be a little piece, the whole picture is disturbed. So your part is very important that the whole picture comes out. See, some, Billy Graham, he's called to talk to masters, right? Another person is called to talk to people who would never go to church, would never go to a rally, or whatever, you know? Your piece is as precious to God as another piece, you know?

LEVINE: So are you content here in Stowe?

VON TRAPP: Yes, I'm very happy. Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. And do you have much to do with the lodge? I mean, do you . . .

VON TRAPP: Well, business-wise not, because Johannes is doing, but with the people.

LEVINE: And that's the part you like to play.

VON TRAPP: Yeah, yeah. You experience very nice people, you

know? So, I'm happy.

LEVINE: Yeah. Is there anything . . .

VON TRAPP: I think you're happy when, if you know you are where God wants you to be. If I'm here, God waits for me in, in Buenos Aires, you know? What's the use of sleeping here if He waits for me there, you know? So wherever He is and He wants to work through you, this is where you get happy. I mean, you do get all this frustration and this, but in the whole, you know you're supposed to be here, and that's why you're happy.

LEVINE: And you feel that, that this is where you're supposed to be.

VON TRAPP: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: I don't know . . .

LEVINE: Okay. Well, this is the end of the tape, and I want to thank you so much for a most interesting interview.

VON TRAPP: Yeah, you're welcome.

LEVINE: It's been a pleasure being with you. I've been speaking with Maria Von Trapp here in Stowe, Vermont, and it's November 3, 1995. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm signing off.