

EI-708

JOHANNES VON TRAPP

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RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is November 3rd, 1995 and I'm here at the Trapp Family Lodge in Stowe, Vermont. I'm in the office of Johannes von Trapp. You—you don't use the von. You—it's Johannes Trapp.

VON TRAPP: No, I use von Trapp.

LEVINE: You do—

VON TRAPP: Yeah.

LEVINE: —use von Trapp? Oh, okay. And Mr. von Trapp was born in Philadelphia while the family was here in the United States. And then they returned to Austria.

VON TRAPP: We returned to Europe, not to Austria.

LEVINE: Not to Austria.

VON TRAPP: [chuckles] We—we were not popular in Austria.

LEVINE: Okay.

VON TRAPP: We spent the summer in Sweden. I—I, of course, have no memory of this. I was a few months old. But we spent the summer in Sweden and then managed to get our visas renewed and returned to the United States in September or October.

LEVINE: Okay. So that was 1939 and you were less than one year—

VON TRAPP: Right.

LEVINE: —at that time. Okay. Well, since you're—you don't have any first-hand memories of this phase of—of—of the—of your life and the family's life, maybe you could recount some of the things that—that your father, first of all, said about the situation.

VON TRAPP: I—I'll tell you. It's not—it's not something I remember discussing very much in the family. I have—I have [chuckles] no memories of it at all, obviously.

LEVINE: Oh. Okay.

VON TRAPP: Personally, and I really don't remember much talk about it in the family.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

VON TRAPP: We were there for, I think, two days—two or three days and the visa situation got straightened out and—and that was the end of that.

LEVINE: Okay. So—so your earliest memories are from where? Where were you—where were you—

VON TRAPP: I have a—a few vague memories of Philadelphia but—but not much. And then my early memories are of growing up in—in Stowe here in Vermont.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-huh. Do you—do you re—did the family ever talk about why they chose Stowe or how it came—

VON TRAPP: Oh, I think my mother spells it out very well in her book. You know, we had traveled all over the United States. And various family members liked various parts of the country. But we really needed to be on the East Coast. Communications and travel weren't what they

are now, in the '40s. And if you were a—a musical artist, you had to—a performing artist, you had to be either in California or in the East Coast. There really wasn't any other place to be.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: But they—they found Stowe and the—the mountains were lovely. The—the village was picturesque and pleasant. The people were nice. And they just felt very much at home. It was—although different in many ways, it was also very similar to Austria, a—a mountain village, mountains all around, fields and then the village center with the church and the steeple. It wasn't baroque but [chuckles] it was lovely. And they found this property. Unfortunately, you can't see the view today but it is a lovely spot.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: And they—they felt very much at home, found this place for sale and bought it on the spot.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you remember, you know, building up the house that was here and—and were—

VON TRAPP: I—I remember cleaning up. It—that seemed to take forever. [chuckles] Between collapsing old barns and junk and old farm machinery and so forth, it was a—a long process. So as a kid, I can—I can remember helping throw things into trailers to haul away to be dumped. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: We—we had a dairy farm at that time and I can remember milking the cows and feeding them and so forth.

LEVINE: Well, so did you go to school then here in—

VON TRAPP: No, I was home schooled.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Uh-huh. Were you the only one or w—did you have also—

VON TRAPP: I had—I have two sisters, one 10 years older and one 8 years older, and they were mostly home schooled also. They—they did go to a convent school for a couple of years.

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LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So then did you—did you go to high school here? Or did you continue—

VON TRAPP: I did one year in boarding school and then finished high school by correspondence.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-hmm. Oh, so you're unique in that. I mean, home schooling is—is not a—

VON TRAPP: Well, a lot of kids these days are being home schooled again.

LEVINE: I suppose it's a n—it's a new—

VON TRAPP: A new cycle.

LEVINE: —[unclear] cycle now.

VON TRAPP: Yes.

LEVINE: So then you—did you become one of the family singers?

VON TRAPP: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Early on?

VON TRAPP: I—I traveled with the family and sang, played the recorder. I think from about seven years of age on, so I was a—an early—early performer. And I was 17 when we stopped singing.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How did you feel—

VON TRAPP: But the year that I went to boarding school was the year that my voice was changing and I—I couldn't sing.

LEVINE: Anyway. [chuckles] Oh, that's funny. Yeah. So [clears throat]—so how—how did—how was it for you? I mean, as a child, traveling the country with your family and—and singing? I mean—

VON TRAPP: Well, it—it—you know, I didn't know any other way of growing up so it was—I thought it was perfectly normal. It was—it was very pleasant, saw a lot of the world.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: Didn't have to march off to school every morning.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: I—I enjoyed it.

LEVINE: Was there ever a time after the Second World War when the family sang outside the United States?

VON TRAPP: Oh, yes. Yeah, we—we traveled all over South America, Mexico. We traveled to Europe twice, I think, and Australia and New Zealand, Oceania. Lots of travel.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. And how did you feel—it was 1956, I think, when—when—when the family stopped singing. And how did—how did you feel about that at that time?

VON TRAPP: That was fine with me. We'd—we'd been doing it for a long time and I—I didn't mind that change. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Let's see. So [clears throat] did the whole family settle here when—

VON TRAPP: Originally, yes. And then my brother, Werner [PH], bought a farm in Waitsfield and moved to Waitsfield after we stopped singing. And one of my sisters also has some property in Waitsfield.

LEVINE: Did the rest stay here?

VON TRAPP: Oh, one of my sisters moved to Maryland.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: And—but the—the unmarried ones, this was still their—their home, their base.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Do—do you feel that your—your parents instilled some values that were strictly Austrian in you, growing up?

VON TRAPP: Yes, I—I think that's very much the case.

LEVINE: Wh—what kinds of things w—would you say that they wanted you to know and—and—

VON TRAPP: Well, I—I was brought up in a—in an Austrian culture, not in a mainstream American culture.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: How does it differ? Well, that's going to more time than [chuckles] we want to spend here. But a—a more—more emphasis on arts, on religion, on crafts, on doing things yourself rather than buying them, on a long-term outlook on things. I—I think as a kid I—I used to chafe at—at the amount of discipline that—that I had to grow up with. I've been escaping from it ever since.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: But it was probably—it was a good upbringing.

LEVINE: Did you have chores around the farm and—and all that, growing up?

VON TRAPP: Yeah, yeah. We—we were always working. When we weren't working, we were probably singing, rehearsing.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Yeah. How did your mother and father adapt to—to life here? Do you have any sense of that?

VON TRAPP: Well, when you say my mother and father, it's difficult because my father died when I was eight. So I—I don't really have a good—a good handle on how he adapted.

LEVINE: Do you have any memories of him?

VON TRAPP: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I have some very good and strong memories of him but not the kind of insights that—that you've asked me for. I—I couldn't express that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: I—I think he was a little bit lost, being away from the ocean. Ships and the sea was his life and—but I think he liked Vermont and Vermonters.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: The—yeah, I—I really couldn't say. My mother, I think, adapted very well. You know, her—her command of English was very good.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: She wrote her book in English, or her—her several books were all written in English. Some of them have been translated back into German. But she was—her personality was not one of an adapter. It was one of an innovator and she tended to get other people to adapt to her, rather than—

LEVINE: [chuckles]

VON TRAPP: —she adapting to them.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: Very, very strong personality.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Was she active in the community at all here?

VON TRAPP: She was not a—a committee person.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: If you know what I mean. She found it very difficult to sit at meetings. She was too impatient. She couldn't see why things had to be discussed for hours and—and then voted on and, you know. To her, it was very simple. You—you decided very quickly what to do and then you got busy doing it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: And as a result, she—she was not a good committee person. She loved the community. She loved Stowe and, in her own way, she would do a lot of things for people.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Were you—as a family, were you active in a church here in Stowe?

VON TRAPP: Yes, uh-hmm. Yeah, the—we used to sing at the Catholic church for Sunday masses and so forth, Christmas and Easter and the—the local parish priest once boasted to someone that he had the best church choir in the country. And the—the other party said, “Oh, well, that's very nice.” He said, “No, I'm serious.” [chuckles] He said, “I have the Trapp family singers.” [laughter]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Oh. Well, I—I guess that was always very strong in the family, the religious aspect of life.

VON TRAPP: Yes, it was. Yeah. Not—not particularly for me, although I—I grew up with it. But maybe because I had so much of it, I—I don't rely very much on it now.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: But it's still given my life a structure and—and a framework that—that I—for which I'm very grateful.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Do you—do you feel that somehow—I—I usually ask this question about how people feel it has affected them, having come from another country and, you know, established themselves here and lived out their lives here. But do you feel that your—your family, having come from—from another country—do you—how do you think that affected you as—as a personality? As a—just as your way of being, that the family had immigrated here and—and then settled?

VON TRAPP: Well, I—I think having—having two cultures to draw on is—is very rewarding, enriching.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: I think we were not the typical immigrant who came from perhaps a less advantaged position than—than we had come from. And our experience of the—the “immigrant experience” was, therefore, different. We were taken under the wing of some wealthy, well educated, influential people in Philadelphia and in New York, who enjoyed our music and—and appreciated our cultural activities. And as a result of that, I think we—we felt not discriminated against for whatever ethnic things we brought along. They were welcomed, rather than discriminated against.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: But—my God, look at it rain! [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, my gosh.

VON TRAPP: That wasn't supposed to happen today but—

LEVINE: Well, that's not snow so—

VON TRAPP: [chuckles] Well, it's going to snow tomorrow.

LEVINE: Is it? [chuckles]

VON TRAPP: I—I think the perception I had was that Americans liked our uniqueness, our differentness. Then when I went away to school, I absorbed more of the American way of doing things but again, at a fairly privileged level, private school and then Ivy League college and that the sort of thing. So there—I—I felt enriched. To me, the—the—the Austrian culture was not something that—that caused difficulties. People didn't make fun of me for it or discriminate against me.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do—do you feel—how do you—how do you sort out your Austrian heritage? I mean, do you feel that that's a big part of who you are?

VON TRAPP: No, no. I'm just me. [chuckles] And that's taken a while. But I—I'm more American than—than Austrian by—by a long shot. But I think of myself as sort of being a little international. I could happily live in Mexico or the United States or—I'm not sure I could live in Austria unless I was way out in the country somewhere. But—

LEVINE: Why do you say that?

VON TRAPP: It's too crowded. There are too many rules, too many regulations, too many people. Things are done this way and they're not done any other way. And I'm—I'm not used to following all those rules. My mother used to go back to Austria every year in—in April and May and come back here in June. And—and she would write me a note saying how wonderful it was to be back in Austria. And then when she came back here I—I used to drive up to Montreal and pick her up. And she would say, "Oh!" We'd be driving through Vermont and she would say, "Oh! It's so to be back here." [chuckles] She really loved Vermont and Austria had gotten too restrictive for her as well. So—

LEVINE: Hmm, hmm. Yeah. How—do you feel that this lodge is a—is a sort of a—an extension of your whole—of your whole family experience or—

VON TRAPP: Well, in a way, it is. I—I have to struggle to prevent it from turning into a "Sound of Music" theme park, because the—the success of the Hollywood interpretation of my family's story has been so overwhelming that it would be easy to just allow that to take over.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: And I'm un—I'm—so far, I've resisted that impulse. But if—

LEVINE: What would that mean?

VON TRAPP: —if we do at some time give into it, then I'll let Walt Disney do it and I'll go off somewhere else.

LEVINE: Good idea. [chuckles] I see. Well, I mean, what would it mean to—to do that? I mean, to—

VON TRAPP: Well, have—have you read any of my mother's books?

LEVINE: Yes.

VON TRAPP: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: Well, then you—you, perhaps, understand the difference between the Hollywood interpretation and the real story. And I suppose, you know, we—we could easily just turn this into a—a theme park.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: Base it on the movie and forget the—forget the real story.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: What I've tried to do is to say, "Yes, Hollywood did this movie about us but we are real people and this is what we really did and do and, yes, we—we like 'The Sound of Music' but, no, it wasn't exactly that way. It was Hollywoodized and"—"The Sound of Music" has been a great success in English-speaking countries, to a lesser degree in some Spanish-speaking countries, a total flop in German-speaking countries because, culturally, it's just not the real thing. It's a—an Anglicized version of—of Austrian culture—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: —and perceived, whether or not correctly, as being kitsch in—in Austria. But it's—the priest who was our conductor for the [unclear] said, "You know, when your mother was trying, she'd make these decisions on whether to—to do this or not, she discussed it with me and I said, "Look, your book has been translated into French, into Spanish, into German, into Chinese. Think of this as the Broadway translation. And the film is, of course, the—the Hollywood translation. This is simply a different language."

LEVINE: That's interesting.

VON TRAPP: And—and I—I'd like to look at it that way.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Yeah, that's good. Yeah.

VON TRAPP: I—I have nothing personally against the movie, except that I don't want to be put in the position of having to change myself to conform to the movie.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: And I don't like to see others in the family put in that position.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Yeah. That's—that's [unclear]. Well, do you feel—I mean, you're actually the person who is running the lodge and, therefore, sort of the—the link with the public about—is—is that a—is that a difficult position or—

VON TRAPP: Sometimes, I feel if I have to answer one more question about "The Sound of Music," that I'll—I'll either choke the person or—or run screaming through the halls. [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yeah.

VON TRAPP: Th—that part of it can be tiresome. You know, we're trying to create something beautiful here and—and something with real integrity and value. And then if people can only remember the celluloid thing, it's—it gets discouraging sometimes. However, when someone comes along who appreciates what we're trying to do and sees the authenticity and the value and the quality, then that's a great feeling. And that makes up for everyone else that—that doesn't.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. Do you have any—well, you said you—you—you'll turn it over to Walt Disney [chuckles] if you make that decision, but do—do you—do you plan to stay here and—and continue running the lodge and—

VON TRAPP: A lot of the—the business decisions we've made as to quality of construction and materials and so forth wouldn't really make sense unless we had planned to keep it in our ownership for generations. So—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: My son is currently in Mexico [chuckles] improving his Spanish and his knowledge of Mexico. But I think he would like someday to get involved.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. And I—I understand you had a fire here in 1980?

VON TRAPP: Yes.

LEVINE: Was that?

VON TRAPP: The original house burned down.

LEVINE: [unclear] your son—you can imagine your son sometime taking this over. And—and then we were talking about 1980, the fire.

VON TRAPP: Yes, you asked me about the fire. The original house that we built when we came here in 1943 burned down. And it was a—a tragic fire with one loss of life and, of course, loss of all the belongings, totally destroyed. My mother got out barefoot with nothing. And so [sighs] then we had to make a decision what to do. And we decided to rebuild as a hotel. The previous—although it was called the Trapp Family Lodge before, but it was small and it was really an overgrown family house that took guests, a—an overgrown bed and breakfast.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: And we—when we rebuilt we rebuilt it as a commercial venture and said, “Okay, we’re going to do this and we’re going to do it right.”

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: And that’s the building that you see now.

LEVINE: And that was a whole family decision about making—

VON TRAPP: Well, at that time there were—was primarily my mother and my brother, Werner, and myself that made that decision. I’ve been president of the company since 1969 and have—have operated it.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-hmm. So are you pleased that you—that you—that that decision was made and followed and—

VON TRAPP: Well, it’s changed a lot of things. I don’t think we really had a choice. You—you can’t go back again, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: You—you can't—it—it would be nice to just have a little country bed and breakfast here with no crowds and—but even—even before "The Sound of Music" came out we had crowds coming up here. So after "The Sound of Music" came out it was—it was out of the question to have a quiet little place. You know, we're—there's a certain—the—the question really was whether we would do it or somebody else would do it.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-huh, uh-huh. And how old was your mother when she died?

VON TRAPP: She was 82.

LEVINE: And did she—did she—in her old age, did she—were there any—was there any idea of her going back to Austria or anything like that?

VON TRAPP: I don't think so.

LEVINE: No.

VON TRAPP: No.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: She'd had a series of slight strokes and it was—it was very sad to see her decline.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: It was—it was apparent, even after the fire, even as early as 1980 that—that she had had substantial memory loss. So [sighs]—and it just went sort of steadily down.

LEVINE: Hmm. Well, is—is there anything else that you can think of that pertains to the family immigrating here, Ellis Island episode or life since?

VON TRAPP: I think—I think it's wonderful what America allowed my family to do, to become. The opportunity was here. The discipline came with my family.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: [chuckles]

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LEVINE: Well, th—that's—

VON TRAPP: Yeah, I think one reason that immigrants have been so extraordinarily successful in contributing to what America is is because they bring the discipline with them. The problem then is seeing further generations [chuckles] maintain it.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Uh-huh.

VON TRAPP: And I—I don't have an answer to that. But, you know, both—both my brothers served in the American Army in World War II. I just missed Vietnam. I was in the Army but I didn't see any active duty. My son will probably not even be in the Army. My father and grandfather were both career military people so there's a—a decreasing military involvement.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

VON TRAPP: Which—which is fine. [chuckles] I—I was looking for some symbolism there but I—it's escaped me.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Okay. Well, I—I thank you very much for making this possible to interview you and your sisters.

VON TRAPP: Well, it's a fortunate thing that my sister, Agathe, just happened to be here.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. That's wonderful. Well, thank you very much.

VON TRAPP: You're very welcome.

LEVINE: We've been speaking with Johannes von Trapp. It's November 3rd, 1995 and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]