

“The Sound of Music”: Fact or Fiction

Real Story of the von Trapp Family

The von Trapps: The Real Family That Inspired “The Sound of Music”

Even the number of children was not correct in the movie. When the von Trapps escaped Austria there were in fact nine children: seven from Georg's first marriage and two from his marriage to Maria, Rosmarie and Eleonore. The tenth child, Johannes, was born in America in 1939.

The real family wasn't as wealthy as portrayed on screen

Though money did not appear to be of concern to the family depicted in the movie, in real life the fortunes of the von Trapp family had faltered during the global depression of the early 1930s to the extent that at the time the film is set, most of the household servants had been dismissed and the family had begun taking in boarders. The lack of funds also prompted the family to consider turning their love of singing together into a profession. “It almost hurt [my father] to have his family on stage, not from a snobbish view, but more from a protective one,” Eleonore is quoted as saying in a 1978 [Washington Post](#) interview.

The von Trapps were a musical household well before Maria entered their lives

Both in real and reel life, the family singers won first place in the Salzburg Music Festival. But the sound of music was already well established within the household before Maria arrived. In a reversal of the stern, music-forbidding retired naval officer depicted in the film, the real Georg and his first wife encouraged song in the family home years before Maria arrived. “In reality, Georg was a warm and loving if somewhat overwhelmed father,” author Tom Santopietro writes in [The Sound of Music Story](#). “It was actually Maria herself, with her emotionally stunted upbringing, who needed thawing.”

The real von Trapps did not secretly cross the alps by foot

The family's exit from Austria under Nazi occupation was also given a glossy Hollywood treatment, depicting the von Trapps as having to cross the alps on foot to avoid detection. In reality such a journey would have brought them to directly into Germany, not Switzerland as in the film. “Don't they know geography in Hollywood? Salzburg does not border on Switzerland!” [complained Maria](#) to a reporter in 1967.

Though they left Austria only a day before the borders were sealed, their actual departure lacked the drama contained in the film according to documents and interviews contained in the [U.S. National Archives](#). “We did tell people that we were going to America to sing,” daughter Maria told [Opera News](#) in 2003. “And we did not climb over mountains with all our heavy suitcases and instruments. We left by train in broad daylight, pretending nothing.”

The von Trapps traveled with their musical conductor, Rev. Franz Wasner, and secretary Martha Zochbauer. On film Wasner became the fictional Max Detweiler, who remained in Austria.

The real journey took the family first to Italy, where Georg attained citizenship due to his birthplace having become Italian territory in 1920, then on to London before boarding a ship for America. During the early 1940s they toured the U.S. as the Trapp Family Singers, eventually settling in Stowe, Vermont. There they opened a [guest house](#), which is still owned and operated by descendants of the von Trapp family.