

## SOUND OF MUSIC

### Maria Augusta Kutschera von Trapp (1905 to 1987)

#### Biography

Maria Augusta Kutschera – born on a train heading from her parents' village in Tyrol to a hospital in Vienna, Austria – was an orphan by her seventh birthday. She graduated from the State Teachers College for Progressive Education<sup>[3]</sup> in Vienna at age

18, in 1923. She entered Nonnberg Abbey, a Benedictine (Roman Catholic) monastery in Salzburg, intending to become a nun.<sup>[4]</sup> While still a school teacher at Nonnberg Abbey, she was asked to teach one of the seven children of widowed naval commander Georg Ludwig von Trapp and his first wife, Agathe Whitehead von Trapp, who had died from scarlet fever. Maria and Georg were married on 26 November 1927<sup>[2][1]</sup>. In 1935, Trapp lost his fortune,<sup>[1]</sup> which had been safely invested in a bank in London. The Captain, to help a Mrs. Lammer – a friend in the banking business – had withdrawn the money from the English bank and deposited it in Mrs. Lammer's bank, which promptly failed. Austria had been experiencing economic difficulties as a result of German pressure and other factors.

To survive, the Trapps sent away most of their servants, moved into the top floor of their home, and rented the empty rooms to students of the Catholic University. The Archbishop sent Father Franz Wasner to stay with them as their chaplain and the family began turning its love of music into a career. After performing at a festival in 1935, they became a popular touring act. Shortly before<sup>[5]</sup> the Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938, the family moved to Italy and then to the United States. The family's former home in Austria became the headquarters of Heinrich Himmler.<sup>[6]</sup>

Initially calling themselves the "Trapp Family Choir", the von Trapps began to perform in the United States and Canada. They got attention when they performed in New York City at The Town Hall on 10 December 1938.<sup>[2][7][8]</sup> The New York Times wrote:

There was something unusually lovable and appealing about the modest, serious singers of this little family aggregation as they formed a close semicircle about their self-effacing director for their initial offering, the handsome Mme. von Trapp in simple black, and the youthful sisters garbed in black and white Austrian folk costumes enlivened with red ribbons. It was only natural to expect work of exceeding refinement from them, and one was not disappointed in this.<sup>[2][8]</sup>

After an unsuccessful engagement with Charles Wagner, they signed on with Frederick C. Schang. Thinking the name "Trapp Family Choir" too churchy, Schang "Americanized" their repertoire and – following his suggestion – the group changed its name to the "Trapp Family Singers".<sup>[6]</sup> The family, which by then included ten children, became famous in a new context and was soon touring the world. Alix Williamson served as the group's publicist for over two decades.

After the war, they founded the Trapp Family Austrian Relief, Inc., which sent hundreds of tonnes of food and clothing to impoverished Austria.