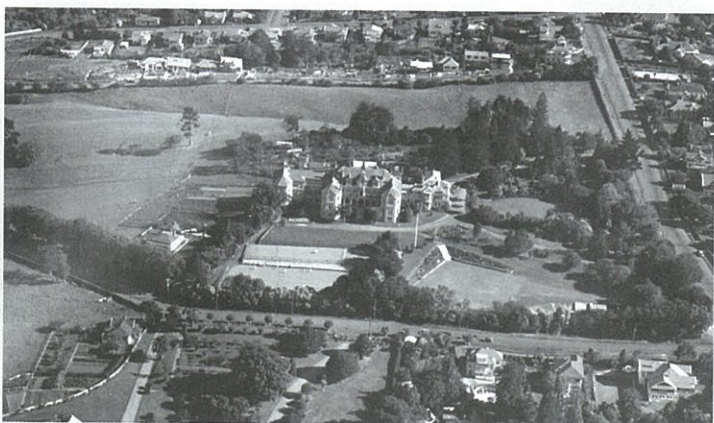


Town & Around

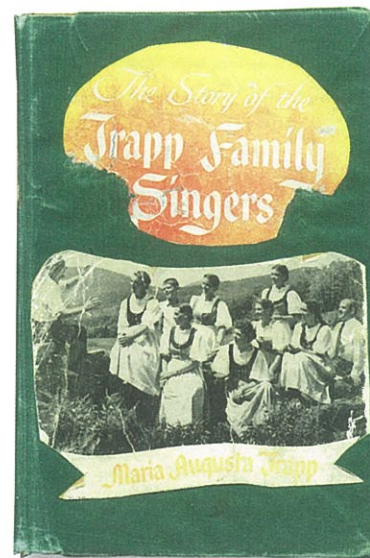


WHEN THE VON TRAPPS CAME TO REMUERA

Orakei resident Margaret Stone is the nurse manager at the convent within Baradene College of the Sacred Heart, working with the Sacred Heart nuns who live there in retirement. A chance remark led her to the little-known Remuera visit by the family whose story inspired The Sound of Music.

At a Baradene College fundraiser quiz evening recently, there was a section entitled, "How well do you know your partner?" – always slightly dangerous ground. One of the questions was "What is your partner's favourite movie of all time?" That was an easy one for my husband to answer – *The Sound of Music*.

I've been a devoted fan since childhood – for years I couldn't look at a set of curtains in anyone's home without thinking how I could fashion them into play clothes for my future children. And although I've worked at Baradene for five years, it was more recently that I discovered the school's connection to the singing von Trapp family, whose somewhat embroidered tale of escaping from Nazi-annexed Austria



Left, the only known photo of Maria von Trapp at Baradene, snapped on a box Brownie by pupil Rhys Hitchcock-Clark. The school as it stood in the mid 1950s (Vicky Ave to the right) and above, the copy of Maria's memoir in the school archive, with a hand-decorated cover of cut-out images

inspired the Rodgers and Hammerstein stage musical, and the 1965 film.

One day in the convent, I remarked that I had just read that the last of the original seven von Trapp children had died. At which, one of the Sisters enquired the name. It was Maria Franziska von Trapp.

"Yes, she would have stayed here," the Sister said.

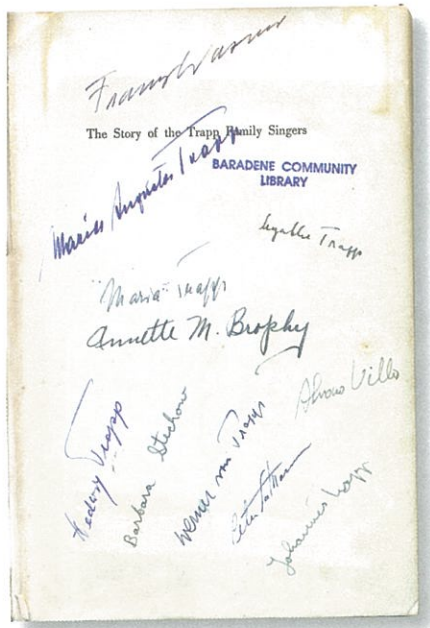
"What do you mean, stayed here?"

"Oh yes. The von Trapp family stayed here at Baradene Convent."

It is little known beyond the College community that Baroness Maria Augusta von Trapp, her stepdaughters Agathe (renamed Leisl in the musical, the writers reportedly changed the children's names for privacy), Maria Franziska (Louisa) and Hedwig (Brigitta) stayed for around 10 days in May 1955. Werner (Kurt) and Johannes von Trapp and the family's priest and musical director, Father Franz Wasner, were hosted at the St Francis Friary in Hillsborough.

The family, travelling as The Trapp Family Singers – they had dropped the von – had arrived in Auckland a part of a national tour, but the hotel booked for them was not up to scratch, the Sisters recall. Maria promptly called Bishop Liston, who in turn rang the convent, who gladly accommodated the travellers. Notes in the school archive record that the von Trapps sung masses and also performed a concert for their hosts.

It would be another four years before the *Sound of Music* hit the stage, and six years after that the film, starring Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer, so in 1955, the wider world did not



The signed title page of Maria von Trapp's memoir in the Baradene convent library. The signatures include Fr. Wasner and other members of the travelling party, as well as the von Trapps

know their story well. Maria had published a memoir in 1949, *The Story of the Trapp Family Singers*, which had attracted interest, and they were well-respected in music circles.

The Baradene visit was decades ago, but the Sisters recalled that Maria was elegant, gracious – and formidable. “She gave us her autobiography,” chipped in another of the nuns, and within moments she returned from the convent library with Maria’s memoir, signed by Maria and all the von Trapp children. As Maria is believed to have signed very few copies of her book, it’s a rare and precious artifact.

Spoiler alerts that came with the book: Georg was not as handsome as Christopher Plummer and Maria was no Julie Andrews, and they didn’t actually climb over the mountains.

But aside from that, it’s still quite a story. Maria was a young, boisterous nun in the making and she was sent to help the widowed Baron von Trapp, a highly decorated submarine commander, with his children. He was engaged to a princess at the time, but well, the rest is history . . . as Maria writes. She fell in love with the children first. After she and Georg married, they had two more children together while in Austria.

Three things led them to have to escape quickly after the Nazi annexation of Austria. Georg had turned down an offer to head up the submarine division of the German navy. The eldest child, Rupert (renamed Friedrich in the film and demoted to second-eldest) was a medical student, whom the Germans wanted to work for them. The final straw was that they were invited to sing for Hitler at his birthday celebrations. The family decided they could not compromise their

principles, but Georg knew that a third refusal to the Nazi hierarchy would put them in real danger. So they said yes to the upcoming birthday, then used the ruse of going to Italy on a weekend hiking trip. From there they fled to London: Maria, Georg, nine children and Father Wasner. They were penniless, spoke no English, were dressed only in their hiking clothes and Maria was pregnant with their youngest child, Johannes.

From London, they organised a singing contract in the United States, and so in 1938 arrived in New York. They spent the next seven years touring the US. They experienced great financial hardship. Georg struggled especially, but Maria was 20 years younger than he and the driving force for their assimilation, embracing all that was good about America.

Another difference to their stage and screen portrayal was that their repertoire was more highbrow – Mozart, Haydn, Bach, not at all as depicted in the movie. Their audience on the whole comprised educated, affluent people and some generous benefactors came to their aid, teaching them English, and one couple providing a house in return for private concerts. They did learn that they had to incorporate some folk songs and yodelling to attract a wider audience.

By 1942 the family had enough money to buy land in Stowe, Vermont, a mountainous area that reminded them of Austria. They kept touring, used their home as a musical retreat, and in 1947, began to operate it as a ski lodge. Money remained tight, as Maria wrote. The requisitioned von Trapp mansion in Salzberg was returned to them post-war, sold and the funds used to pay off the property in Vermont. The lodge remains in the family, today run by Johannes’s son, Sam.

While their tour of NZ was brief, there are echoes of it today. The family called their Stowe home “Cor Unum,” which means One Heart – the Baradene College motto.

To quote Johannes Von Trapp’s take on the movie: “*The Sound Of Music* simplified everything. I think perhaps reality is at the same time less glamorous but more interesting than the myth.” I tend to agree. ■ Images courtesy of Baradene

GETTING PETS ONBOARD



A motion by councillor Cathy Casey to allow pets on public transport received a boost from a four-legged friend of the Ōrakei Local Board. Board member Toni Millar took her rescue dog, Toby (above, with Millar) to Auckland Council’s planning committee meeting last month, to support Casey’s notice of motion to allow people to carry controlled and/or contained pets on public transport.

Presently, Toby’s local travel options are limited to Millar’s car and the Waiheke ferry, but Casey’s motion would open up trains and buses to well-behaved pets (like Molly, patiently waiting at Ōrakei station). The motion was unanimously supported by councillors, subject to having a consistent policy including appropriate health and safety guidelines. Auckland Transport will complete a review of guidelines from next month.

Casey says having a public transport option available to pet owners is a major