Chapter 13 – The Story of the Trapp Family Singers

“AND THE LORD SAID TO ABRAM…”

"And the Lord said to Abram: Leave thy country and thy people, go out of thy father's house and come into the land which I shall show thee." (Gen. 12, 1)

IT WAS MARCH 11, 1938. After supper we went over to the library to celebrate Agathe's birthday. Someone turned on the radio, and we heard the voice of Chancellor Schuschnigg say, "I am yielding to force. My Austria—God bless you!" followed by the national anthem. We didn't understand, and looked at each other blankly. The door opened and in came Hans, our butler. He went straight to my husband and, strangely pale, said, "Herr Korvettenkapitan, Austria is invaded by Germany, and I want to inform you that I am a member of the Party. I have been for quite some time."

Austria invaded. But that was impossible. Schuschnigg had said it wouldn't happen. He had said in public that Hitler had promised not to invade Austria. It must be a mistake, a misunderstanding. But the voice of this very same Chancellor had just announced: "I am yielding to force."

At this moment the silence on the radio was broken by a hard, Prussian-sounding voice saying, "Austria is dead: Long live the Third Reich!" Then it went on to announce the title of a Prussian military march. We all went into the chapel silently. And there in the dark you could hear only sobbing and deep sighs. It was as if we had read, without warning, the death notice of a dearly beloved one.

Still in a daze, we gathered together. The birthday was forgotten. We followed Georg's eyes. He was looking at the flag from his submarine, which was hanging above the mantelpiece, surrounded by pictures and trophies from old Austria. "Austria," he said, and tears choked his voice, “you are not dead. You will live on in our hearts. This is only a sleep. We promise you to do all we can to help you wake up again."

No eye remained dry. The little girls, huddled in my arms, cried loud and bitterly. They didn't understand what it was all about, but the young hearts felt the weight of the hour. Georg went to the telephone, and I heard him say: "I want to send a telegram. The address is: Dr. Kurt Schuschnigg, Bundeskanzleramt, Wien. The message: 'May God bless and protect you always."' I doubted very much whether by this time any telegram would reach our Chancellor, but still I was glad and proud of Georg.

"Listen," said Werner, opening a window, and in came, in rich, heavy waves, the sound of numerous bells. We could distinguish the Cathedral, Nonnberg, Saint Peter's, the Franciscans, but there must have been many more. Father Wasner called a priest friend of his to inquire about the bell ringing. The Nazis were marching into Salzburg. A Gestapo man with a gun was supervising the ringing of the bells in every church.

"Close the window, it's cold," said Georg. But I knew it wasn't because of the cold; he didn't want to hear the bells. But what was that? The window was closed and the bells seemed to grow louder—really—they came out of the radio now, and before we could catch our breath, the sharp voice announced:

"Now we want the whole world to hear how the people in Austria greet their liberators. They rush to their church steeples, and all the bells in the whole town of Salzburg are ringing out their grateful joy."

Such a mean lie! Werner jumped up, his eyes flashing, his fists clenched. But what could you do? Nothing.

This was only the first lie in an endless chain. From now on we led a double life. Whatever we had lived through during the day, we listened to an altogether different description of in the evening over the air—until you wanted to take an axe and smash the radio; and that is about all you could do.

"Will you do me a favor and promise me something?" asked Georg next morning. "Please don't go into town for the time being."

"All right," I answered.

He was worried enough as it was, and I didn't want to increase his anxiety.

The very next morning the children coming back from school told me that the whole town was like a lake of huge red flags with the Swastika practically covering the fronts of the houses all over the place. The next thing we learned from friends downtown was that every houseowner had been told how many flags to put out, what size, and where. Over the radio the world was informed that not even during festival time had Salzburg looked like that. "The happiness of its inhabitants is insuppressible."

Lunch. Supper. Nothing had changed outwardly. Everybody was sitting at his usual place, Hans coming and going with plates and dishes, serving noiselessly. Hans was much more than a very good butler. After the loss of the money, he had stayed on at a much smaller salary. He seemed to be as genuinely attached to us as we were to him. All the children were very fond of him. He was their confidant. He always seemed to have a solution to their problems. Now there was a strained expression on his face as he walked around the table.

He knew why Georg had said so pointedly at the beginning of the meal, "I think we are going to have a late spring this year. Have you seen any bulbs coming out in the garden?" and then continued to talk about flowers and the weather. He knew that we didn't trust him anymore, that we were afraid of him. He didn't belong to us any longer; he belonged to the Party.

And this was only the beginning . Soon you didn't know whom you could trust. You might rush in to see a friend and blurt out your indignation, only to discover by his raised eyebrows and strange silence that he didn't share your opinion. That was bad, because at the same time he might feel it his duty to inform the authorities about your lack of understanding.

The town looked like a military camp, German soldiers on every street corner and, so the radio told us, the German Army advancing toward Vienna, wildly greeted by the people of every village or town through which they came, Austria in an ecstasy of jubilation. To this we didn't pay much attention. We knew by now how that worked. It only hurt to know that the whole world was listening to these broadcasts, and the people in foreign countries did not yet know ...

Weeks passed, and it was as if you were living at the open tomb where they had buried your dearest one. We hadn't known until then how strong the love for your homeland could be. When we learned that it was forbidden by penalty of death to sing the Austrian anthem, which had to be replaced by the Nazi song; that it was an order from now on to use the sole and only greeting, "Heil Hitler," and nothing else; that Austria was wiped off the map, incorporated into the Third Reich; that its very name had disappeared, even in its compound forms, and been replaced by "Ostmark," [Eastern March] "Niederdonau," [Lower Danube] "Oberdonau" [Upper Danube]— each time a dagger seemed to go through our hearts.

We learned that the love of one's homeland comes even before the love of family. Automatically we went through our days. No one was concerned about any-one, but all of us were deeply concerned about Austria and her fate. Our cheerful house of song had become a house of mourning.

For days there had been a great anxiety in the air: would there be war? The last request of the old Chancellor had been: no shooting. After all, when a big brother, eighty million strong, falls upon the little one with only six million, what good does it do to fire a few guns?

Easter had passed, but the "Alleluia" had not resounded in our hearts this year.

May came. The ban had been lifted from me. I could go into town. But after the first time I had had enough. I was on my bicycle and wanted to go shopping. At least five times I got caught. The new government had made every other road a one-way street, and one wasn't allowed any more to go this way or that way. The places and streets had new names, too, and with all that super-abundance of red material hanging down from the houses you simply didn't recognize your own home town any more.

One day in May a tall gentleman came in a Gestapo uniform and informed us that the Fuhrer would visit Salzburg, and every single house or dwelling must be hung with flags.

"I have been told that you do not even own a Swastika flag. Is that true, sir?"

"That's correct," answered Georg. "May I ask why?"

With a dangerous twinkle in his eye, Georg replied, "Because it's too expensive. I can't afford it."

Shortly the gentleman returned with a big package, a brand-new, huge red flag with a black spider in the middle.

"Oh, thank you," said Georg. "Won't you put it up right away?" inquired the zealous one.

"I don't think so."

"And why not?"

"You know, I don't like the color. It's too loud. But if you want me to decorate my house, I have beautiful oriental rugs. I can hang one from every window."

I didn't have a quiet minute for days after this interlude, trembling whenever the telephone or the doorbell rang. Amazingly enough, nothing happened.

How long would this go on? The children came home from school saying that this or that old teacher wasn't there any more, new teachers, even a new principal taking their places. "This morning we were told at the assembly that our parents are nice old-fashioned people who don't understand the new Party. We should leave them alone and not bother. We are the hope of the nation, the hope of the whole world. We should never mention at home what we learn at school now."

"Mother, listen what I learned in school today," and little Rosmarie's eyes looked frightened. "The teacher said Jesus was only a naughty Jewish boy who ran away from his parents [Luke 2:49]. That's all. That isn't true, is it, Mother?"

"Mother, the teacher wants you to see her in school," announced Lorli, the proud first-grader. I went the next day. The teacher, a strange lady, was quite friendly.

"You must do something about your little girl, or you will get into serious trouble soon," she warned me. "When we learned our new anthem yesterday"—how hard it was not to wince visibly at the word "our"—"she just didn't open her mouth. When I asked her why she didn't sing with us, she announced in front of the whole class that her father had said he'd put ground glass in his tea or finish his life on a dung heap before he would over sing that song. Next time I will have to report this"—and her eyes, all of a sudden, didn't look friendly any more. I thanked her and went home with a heavy heart.

That same evening I took Lorli on my lap and tried to explain: "Look, Lorli. You must never—never, do you understand—tell anything at school of what you hear at home. If you do. Father will be put in a concentration camp, and Mother will be put in a concentration camp, and so will Rupert and Agatha and all your sisters and brothers. We'll all be put in a concentration camp if you don't keep silent. Do you understand me?

" Wide-eyed, she listened and nodded. A few days later: "Mother, the teacher wants to talk to you again."

"What is it now?" I thought, and went with heavy misgivings. "Madam, this is the last warning. When we practiced our new greeting, 'Heil Hitler,' your little girl wouldn't raise her hand, and pressed her lips together. I had to ask her repeatedly what that meant, and then she only answered, 'Mother said if I tell in school what is going on at home, Father will be put in a concentration camp, and Mother, and all my sisters and brothers!' Madam, you will understand that this is going too far."

Yes, I understood. I went home and told Georg.

"Well," he said, "only a few more weeks to go until the end of the school year. Don't forget, we are right in the middle of an unbloody revolution. Things like this are expected to happen. They will calm down. By next fall everything may look different."

So said his lips, but his eyes betrayed him.

We went to visit some friends. First we parents were alone together and carried on a whispered conversation, emptying our burdened hearts. All of a sudden our host beamed and exclaimed, somewhat unnaturally, it seemed to me: "What a lovely performance that was last night. I have

never heard *Fidelio* so well sung." I didn't know what to make of it and felt a little stunned, when I heard a young voice behind me say, —Yes, Father, I think so too."

Oh, I hadn't noticed: the youngsters had come into the room. From now on the topic of conversation was *Fidelio* but even that got painful very soon.

"Bruno Walter will never be allowed to conduct Aryan music again because he is a Jew."

How strange these words sounded from the lips of an eleven-year-old!

"It's better to stay at home," said Georg that night, and for the first time I noticed that he looked old and worn.

School was over, and Rupert came home from the university. The stories he had to tell didn't cheer us up either.

The "thousand-mark barrier" [an economic sanction which was imposed in May 1933 against Austria by Hitler to criple the country financially. German citizens had to pay before the start of a journey to Austria, a fee of 1,000 realm Marks. This crippled Austria which was largely dependent on Tourism leading to the collapse of many banks] had been lifted with the invasion of course. Since little Barbara had announced her coming, I was not feeling so well. My old ache in the back flared up worse than before. There was a good specialist in Munich, and Georg wanted me to see him.

So we set out one day for Munich. Had I known what the doctor was going to say, I most certainly would never have gone.

Your wife cannot have another child," he informed my husband; "at least not until the kidneys are back to normal. They are both badly infected." "But what can we do now?" and Georg sat down on a chair as if his knees had grown weak. He looked frightened, and I was getting mad at the doctor. I tried to motion to him behind Georg's back.

But he didn't even look at me, and simply said in a very insistent tone of voice, "The child has to be removed, of course, immediately.

" This made me indignant. "What do you mean, 'of course'? That is not 'of course' at all. On the contrary, it is absolutely out of the question—we are Christians, you know."

Now the doctor seemed seriously worried. "The child won't be born alive; this much I can tell you. I just hope," and he turned to Georg. "I shall be able to save the life of the mother. She has to go to bed and stay there, and keep a very strict diet," and he started scribbling things down. "Keep her absolutely quiet—no excitement—the blood pressure is very high." Outside in the street I said. "I don't believe a word of what he said; but if it makes you feel better, I'll keep to the diet until Barbara is here."

"But think of the other two times," and Georg looked so worried. Yes, it was true. Since Lorli's birth in 1931, I had lost two children for the same reason, the bad kidneys. "All right, I'll do everything the doctor said: keep quiet, diet, and all. That's all we can do at the moment —besides pray. Oh Georg, let's pray especially hard that God may let us keep this little one, our Barbara!" In the midst of all his worries Georg had to smile when he heard me talk with such assurance of "Barbara." From the first moment we had known about it, we had decided that this child would not have five or six or more

first names like the others, but only one single one: Barbara. [“Barbara” was a boy, and was named Johannes who now runs the Trapp Family Lodge].

"And now I would like to do something," I said. "Let’s go and see the House of German Art."

That was a new picture gallery only recently opened In Munich at the edge of the English Garden, and there was a lot of talk about it. The Fuhrer, who surprised his people every so often with new talents, had taken care personally of the selections for this exhibition. He had also chosen the color of the geraniums around the building, and in the opening speech, which of course had been broadcast, he had stated that in the past the German people hadn't produced any art—until he had inspired them; but from now on they would look to it, and they would soon be leading all nations. We went and saw for ourselves. This exhibition proved all kinds of things, but not what the Fuhrer had indicated. There wasn't a single masterpiece among the selections, but there were many pictures of such crude reality that my heart ached when I saw one school class after the other, girls and boys, walking through. We learned that it was obligatory for all schools to visit this exhibit. Then we came to the most famous picture in the House, for which a whole wall was reserved: the Fuhrer in medieval armor on horseback, sword in hand. In passing by this picture, one was obliged to salute it with raised arm, pronouncing enthusiastically, "Heil Hitler." Georg didn't want to pass by; he didn't want to see any more. He had had enough. Seeing me still linger behind, he said impatiently and dangerously. "What are you hanging around here for—let's go."

I certainly wasn't hanging around for the pictures, but I had discovered something. "Georg," I said. "I smell something: frankfurters and beer," and I sniffed, looking searchingly around. And beyond, there was a sign: "Restaurant." Never before in any of the great galleries of renown in Vienna, Paris, London, or Rome, had we seen this combination; but when you thought a little bit, you could understand the point. In the Louvre or in the art museum in Vienna, Palazzo Pitti in Florence, a restaurant wouldn't have made any money at all, since the works of Raphael, Rembrandt, Michelangelo, and Fra Angelico made you forget hunger and thirst. It was altogether different in the House of German Art: frankfurters and beer or a cup of coffee and cake were a most necessary antidote to what you had just gone through.

Gratefully, we followed the smell and found ourselves in a very elegant, rather crowded restaurant. We were shown to a table, and very soon we noticed two things. Although the big room was full, there was only a distant murmur to be heard, everybody was talking low, and the unavoidable smoke lingering in all other eating places in Munich was absent here: no one smoked.

When the waiter came to take our order, he whispered, "Have you seen him?

"No," I said, and then, "whom?”

“But look! The Fuhrer ! At the next table!”

And so it was. At the very next table sat the Fuhrer of the German people, surrounded by six or eight S.S. men. They all were drinking beer, and Hitler, raspberry juice, because one of his innumerable virtues was that he didn't touch alcohol, nor did he eat meat. For the next forty minutes we had a first-class opportunity to look at the Messiah of the Third Reich. Among his body' guards there must have been a very good joker, because every few minutes they all roared with laughter in a way which is not accepted as good manners among educated people. The gayest of all was "he." He slapped his

thigh and roared so heartily that twice he started to choke. He rose from his chair, only to fall backward in helpless merriment. His thin hair fell over his forehead, his arms waved in the air, his world-famous moustachelet quivered—he was an embarrassing sight. If one hadn't been so deeply inpressed by the fact that this man held the fate of many millions in his fingers, one wouldn't have looked at him a second time. He seemed to be very, very ordinary, a little vulgar, not too well educated—no resemblance to the hero in silver armor on the wall. What a precious opportunity, though, to watch him so closely at the moment when he seemed to be perfectly at ease! One couldn't stand it too long, however. Knowing who he was, it became too depressing.

Outside again, we walked in the English Garden, a very large and very beautiful park. After a long silence, Georg remembered the mail in his pocket and started to open it. Suddenly he stopped, and very excitedly handed me a letter.

"Read this!" In very polite words the Navy Department inquired whether Commander Trapp would be interested in taking over one of the brand-new huge submarines and establishing a submarine base "eventually" in the Adriatic Sea and later in the Mediterranean. Georg was speechless. His submarine had been forty feet long, had leaked, and could hold only five men. These new ones—it was like comparing Noah's Ark with the *Normandie [the* largest and fastest passenger ship afloat at that time*]*. He started walking fast. I could hardly keep up with him. We were on the main avenue of the park lined with red-flowering chestnut trees in full bloom.

As Georg stormed full speed toward the other end, he said: "Listen. This is the chance of a lifetime; it really is. Just think what can be done with such a submarine. It is perfectly incredible. I am sure you could even cross the Atlantic without refueling!" And, chewing his moustache, he reached the other side of the park, firmly convinced. "Of course one has to accept such an out-of-the-world offer."

We turned back, and suddenly he said: "But what do they mean, 'eventually in the Adriatic Sea and later in the Mediterranean'? They must be pretty sure of going there someday. That means war. I can't run a submarine for the Nazis, can I? Of course not. It's out—it's absolutely out."

We were on the other side and turned again. On the way back: "But perhaps it's wrong not to do it. After all, he is the head of the state now. I am a Navy man. This is really the only thing I know and can do well. Perhaps this is the will of God!" and he waved the letter. "Everybody is warning me to think of the future of my children, which is gravely endangered, the way we live now...."

Once more we turned. I knew there was nothing I could say. This is one of the times when a man is all alone—just he and his God. It is one of those dangerously precious moments when he has to say "yes" or "no," and only he can make the decision. I prayed silently and fervently: "Thy will be done."

Our speed slowed down remarkably. We were heading for the exit of the park. Before we reached it, Georg came out of his deep, deep thinking and, a little woefully, he said, "No, I can't do it. When I took my oath on our proud old flag, I swore: With the Emperor for God and my country.' This would be against God and against my country. I'd break my old oath." With this we went to the station and home.

Rupert was waiting for us at the train. Our brand-new doctor! Two days before the invasion Rupert had graduated from medical school.

"Look what I've got here!" he said, and handed a letter to his father. "Another letter!" I thought, and closed my eyes. I could hear my doctor: "Absolutely no excitement." Barbara had chosen the wrong moment, of this I was sure. This letter was also an inquiry. Would Rupert be interested in coming to Vienna and taking a responsible position in one of the big hospitals? They needed doctors.

Of course they needed doctors. All during the last months they had in a most shameful manner persecuted, killed, and imprisoned thousands of Jews in all parts of the country, and now they were short of doctors, lawyers, dentists; no wonder the young fledgling doctors advanced in a hurry.

"Of course I can't accept," Rupert said. "The only question is how to word it politely enough. They'll be quite offended. I'd have to consent to all kinds of treatments [euthanasia, sterilisations and abortion] and manipulations which I am not allowed to as a Christian—and as a man. So far, I haven't used the Hitler greeting once, and I'd like to keep out of it."

"How do you intend to earn your living?" asked his father dryly, but also proudly.

A stubborn expression came into the young face.

"There must be a way somehow. It's worth trying." And that matter was settled. The week was not yet over when a long-distance call from Munich stirred us up from our quietude for good. The Trapp family had been chosen as representatives from the Ostmark (formerly Austria) to sing for Adolf Hitler's ("our beloved Fuhrer's") birthday.

That meant that we were made. From then on we could sing morning, noon, and night, and make a fortune.

Hans had his day off. After Rosmarie and Lorli had been put to bed, Georg called the family together. He told them about the offers he and Rupert had received, and the great temptations of both, and also about the very glamorous possibilities opening up before our eyes through this flattering invitation to us as singers: and what did the family think about it? After the first minutes of stunned silence, voices were heard.

"Will we have to say, 'Heil Hitler' then?

"Will we have to sing the new anthem on the stage?"

"How about Father Wasner? The Nazis don't like priests."

"In school we are not permitted to sing any religious songs with the name of Christ or Christmas. We can hardly sing any Bach for that reason."

"I am sure we'd have a tremendous success in Germany with our program, but will it be possible to keep up our ideas and remain anti-Nazi while we take their money and their praise?”

Silence.

"We just can't do it"

"This will be the third time we say no to a distinguished offer on the part of the Nazis. Children," and their father's voice didn't sound like his everyday one. "Children, we have the choice now: do we want to keep the material goods we still have—this our home with the ancient furniture, our friends,

and all the things we are fond of? Then we shall have to give up the spiritual goods: our faith and our honor. We can't have both any more. We could all make a lot of money now, but I doubt very much whether it would make us happy. I'd rather see us poor but honest. If we choose this, then we have to leave. Do you agree?

As one voice came the answer, "Yes, Father."

"Then, let's get out of here soon. You can't say no three times to Hitler— it's getting dangerous.'

We all felt that herewith we were beginning a new chapter of our life, to which their father seemed to give the outline when he said at the end:

"We have now the precious opportunity to find out for ourselves whether the words we have heard and read so often can be taken literally: Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His justice, and all these things shall be added unto you:"