

Ordway Center for the Performing Arts

# ONSTAGE

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RODGERS & HAMMERSTEIN

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MARIA VON TRAPP**

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# My Travels with the Baroness

Personal Memories of the Real Maria von Trapp

BY JOE BJORDAL

Once upon a time, I knew Baroness Maria von Trapp, the legendary, real-life heroine of *The Sound of Music*. That brief friendship—me in my twenties, she in the later years of her life—continues to influence me today.

## An Instant Liking

I first met Maria at Gate N6 at Sea-Tac International Airport in September 1979. I was working for a small church-related college and we had hired her to be the speaker at a big anniversary banquet. As I awaited the airplane, my palms were sweating.

I don't know why we hit it off so well. I had actually been warned that Maria could be a little demanding and difficult to work with. I would not find that to be the case. Perhaps it was my young age or the correct answer to the nearly first words out of her mouth as we rode through the airport on one of those motorized carts, "Now Joe, the first thing I want to know is 'do you believe in God?'"

We had a delightful time together that first meeting and on the way back to the airport the following day, Maria turned to me and said, "Joe, I think we're going to be good friends." Her reports back home of such a good time, prompted a call from her booking agent who could not believe she actually had "no complaints" for the first time in his working relationship with her of many years!

It was during that first meeting, along with 1000 other guests at the Seattle Center that I first heard, in her own words, that amazing story of love that inspired *The Sound of Music*, one of the most popular stage musicals and motion pictures of all time. I was to hear



the story again and again. For over the next three years I would accompany Maria on several speaking engagements to cities all over the country. One trip was to Minneapolis, where we stayed in the old Leamington Hotel. Another was to Los Angeles, where we stayed in the guest rooms above Bob Hope's garage. On a return trip to Seattle Maria was a delightful guest in our home (although she did have some strong opinions about when young children should be in bed!). But none of our trips were more memorable than a very important one to a mountain called Angel.

## In Search of Memories

The background for a trip to Portland, Oregon in January 1981 actually started the previous month and not in a good way. On the evening of December 20, 1980 the von Trapp Family Lodge in Stowe, Vermont, which was also Maria's home, burned to the ground. Maria escaped with nothing but a nightgown, a coat and a pair of slippers. Tragically, one guest lost his life in the fire.

I was certain that the Portland engagement would have to be cancelled, but Maria's family wanted her to go in the



hope that it might help relieve some of her despair over the loss of home and all her personal belongings. And so, we went ahead with the speaking engagement and with a little side trip we had planned earlier: to Mount Angel Abbey, outside of Portland, a place where the Trapp Family Singers had performed some thirty years earlier.

The Maria who got off the plane that day was not the Maria I had come to know. She was depressed. She was, as she explained in a letter after the trip, “enveloped in shock.” She hardly said a word. She was, as I determined later on, really in doubt about her own life—the photos and scrapbooks and diaries of which

asked about her children by name. They recalled the specific music. They were real-life witnesses to her famous life story. They walked with us along the tour, each taking time to visit with Maria personally. I could tell Maria was coming back to life. The memories were becoming clearer. Her faith in those memories restored. Any doubts that it all ever happened were gone.

By the time we headed back to Portland, Maria was quite herself. That evening, she told again that famous story of the family von Trapp, this time with a new ending: her first public remarks about the fire. “Had I not been losing every possession of mine, I would have said

thing like those famous words penned by Oscar Hammerstein: “Climb every mountain, ford every stream, follow every rainbow, ‘til you find your dream.”

It was my sense that Maria von Trapp had indeed pursued the dreams of her heart as she joined in the lives of her husband and children to bring some much needed love to the world. They had made, at times, tough decisions and were better off for it. They had followed every rainbow.

Maria always took her leave from me by making the sign of the cross on my forehead followed by a kiss on the cheek. The last time I said goodbye to her, at Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix, Arizona in 1982, she did the same, but with a twist. While there were plans for more speaking engagements, they were never carried out due to her deteriorating health. Perhaps she knew this would be our final time together, which prompted a special charge—a benediction. For that time, as she made the sign of the cross she also uttered those three famous words: “follow every rainbow.” And my palms began to sweat again.

Every now and then over the years, when facing some major life decision, my palms have begun to sweat and I have heard Maria telling me to follow my heart. I have done so and I am better for it!

Once upon a time I knew Maria von Trapp. The memory is blessed.



—Maria von Trapp died on March 28, 1987 at age 82. She is buried on the grounds of the Trapp Family lodge next to her beloved husband, Baron Georg von Trapp.

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had all gone up in smoke. But, our trip to Mount Angel was going to change that.

As we drove to the town of Mount Angel, we were not really sure if the old Abbey was even still in existence, but Maria wanted to visit the area even so. To our delight we found a thriving monastic community and we were warmly welcomed, even without advance notice, by Brother Bernard Sanders, the “guest master,” who agreed to take us on a little tour. Before we set out, he excused himself for a moment and went into his office. I later learned what he had done. He had alerted the community that an old friend had come to visit and apparently announced the route of the campus tour.

We began the tour in the library and it all started. The brothers—the monks—appeared as out of nowhere to greet and talk with Maria. Many had been there thirty years earlier and had met the other members of Maria’s family. They

the fire was spectacular,” she said. She concluded by pounding the lectern and saying, “And, by God, we’re going to rebuild!” They did.

### Follow Every Rainbow

To know Maria von Trapp was to know a deeply religious person who was also quite a character (she used to drive around Stowe in the winter with the top down on her convertible!). To hear her story was to hear a true love story. To spend time with her was to share a little in that love and to experience what had truly been an adventurous and sometimes daring life (she once missed a flight at a small airport and went out and stood in front of the airplane, propellers rotating, until the pilot turned off the motors and let her on board!)

I don’t know what the Rev. Mother Abbess said to Maria that night in the convent when it was decided she should follow her heart and marry Captain von Trapp, but it must have been some-