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Preface

I never knew my grandfather Georg von Trapp; he died in 1947 when my mother, Eleonore “Lorli,” was sixteen. She speaks of him with great affection; her voice often wavers and tears fill her eyes as she tells stories about him and her pride in his accomplishments. He was supportive of her when no one else was, and was always loving and affectionate. This made his loss all the more poignant. In my mother’s mind and heart, Papá stood way above everyone else in the family. So I decided to read his book in order to learn more about him. The more I read, the more I wanted others to know his story. The book was originally published in Austria in 1935, in German, and has been out of print for sixty-seven years. This is the first English translation, though originally it was translated into French.

What makes my grandfather’s book so appealing is the simplicity with which he writes. His modesty underscores the events that occur and the famous people he meets. He was the most successful submarine captain in the Austro-Hungarian navy, but he was always self-effacing. He never let his work interfere with his family. By the end of World War I, there were five von Trapp children; two more were born after the Armistice.

When his career as a navy captain ended with the defeat of Austria in the war and Austria’s loss of coastline, he was crushed. His love for his country was so strong that it melded into his own identity. Part of him died when he lowered the Austro-Hungarian flag for the last time.

While researching this book, I spent time talking with my mother, Lorli (Eleonore) Trapp Campbell, and her living siblings, Werner, Agathe, Maria, Rosmarie, and Johannes von Trapp. Like my mother, his children were all close to him and loved him a great deal. Their research, stories, and impressions helped me to understand my grandfather better. My deepest

thanks to all of them. Agathe has written a book called *Memo-ries Before and After the Sound of Music* (PublishAmerica, 2004), which I recommend for more details of their family life.

There are two reasons why I wanted to translate this book: one, to let my children become acquainted with the extraordinary man who was their great-grandfather; and two, to rectify the false image of him portrayed onscreen and onstage. It is my hope that reading his memoir will bring to life the real Georg von Trapp for you too.

One. **Between the Islands**

S.M. torpedo boat 52 lies docked in Sebenico amid her nine comrades of her torpedo division.¹

We had been out all night searching for enemy ships that had been reported, but once again, had found nothing.

Far out in the Adriatic we had investigated, looked, and looked, and again came back disappointed through the “Incoronate,” the barren, rocky islands that extend in front of the harbor at Sebenico.

They could have been called the “Thousand Islands” as they lay scattered about there. The people tell how there was once a giant who waded down the length of the coast and carried a big sack full of stones. At one point he noticed that his sack had burst and that he had lost half of them. He threw the rest angrily toward Sebenico and took off. There were big and little stones; some of them became actual, respectable islands with mountains. Signal stations that can be seen far out to sea stand there. Some are so small that they are barely visible above the water, and some are covered at high tide and then become invisible reefs. It is these that ships have to avoid in the narrow, twisting passages so that they do not rip open their sides on the sharp, pointed rocks.

These islands look bleak; nevertheless, years ago people found them and still live there. Whether they live in one of the little dells or in a minute valley where a small patch of red earth shows, they have spent long, toilsome hours picking out every stone from the earth. A patch not even as big as a room is already called a “field.”

With these rocks the people built stone walls around the fields as shelter against the wind and rain that could blow or wash away the precious earth. The walls grow layer by layer, raised higher by each generation. They stretch themselves over the big islands

in long, straight, or jagged lines. At the same time, they form the borders for adjacent pastures for goats and sheep that look for the sparse grasses growing between juniper and blackberry thickets and among the wild asparagus and gorse.

A few olive and fig trees always grow beside each of the cottages that are scattered about the inlet. The roots grow deep down between the stones to provide nourishment and water when the heat of the summer dries up the earth.

It is a poor land—rock, rock, nothing but rock. A land without colors. For people from the north who are used to the maidengreen of the spring forest, the silvery shiny olives and the cypresses dark as night do not appear very green. This is a completely new color harmony: blue—blue in all shades, like swimming in blue. The sky above, the vast blue sea all around, the only contrast coming from brilliant white summer clouds above and equally white rocky islands below, the white of the islands being modified only slightly by the gray-green or black-green of the woods.

It is as if Nature were abundantly replacing the bleakness seen by the naked eye. The whole land is fragrant; you can smell it from many miles out: juniper, thyme, myrtle, rosemary!

It is a heavenly trip there between the islands with the many large and small inlets swarming with fish. But it is most beautiful in the wind still nights, which are uniquely animated.

From one place or another, red and white lights flash on and off. They are the beacons that flash their warnings to the ships. Out of the many inlets merge innumerable fishermen's boats. Some are under sail, hauling big nets; others, sculled about almost silently by heavy steering rudders, search the water with strong lanterns. Right at the bow a man stands carrying a many-pronged harpoon in his hand; he watches for squid, prawns, and whatever fish come along. As they put out to sea, the people always sing their ancient folk songs: ballads with countless verses, wild war cries, soft, wistful love songs. Unfamiliar melodies with drawn-out, echoing tones tell us northerners of the secret love,

sorrow, and longing of a proud nation enslaved for centuries. And although I do not understand the words, I understand the sad yearning of these men for their past. Their singing touches my heart strangely the first time I hear it. The concert of many hundreds of cicadas is like an accompaniment, and the light evening wind brings the land's fragrance—intoxicating, heavy, and sweet.

Every night spent between the islands becomes a rich, unforgettable experience for everyone.

The war broke into this peaceful world. Traveling between the islands changed overnight. Although the gentle night air is still full of the chirps of cicadas and of the heavy fragrance of the land, no one has any time to notice. The singing has become silent, for fishing is forbidden, and the men are fighting in the war.

While earlier, navigating these waters of many shoals and reefs was perilous, it has now become highly dangerous.

Mines lie between the islands. At any moment an enemy periscope, or a plane with bombs, could appear, and the nights have become exceptionally interesting; there are no more beacons! The war has extinguished them. Now we seamen must find our way about the maze of islands and tiny islands without beacons, often with overcast skies and heavy seas.

And we find help—the islands themselves offer it. Many are recognizable from a distance because of their peculiar shapes, their sharply defined silhouettes that stand out from the others at night; they make it possible for us to orient ourselves.

It is hard to believe that every island, every reef, every cliff really has its own name; however, there are some that no one forgets. Anyone who has had to prowl among them on dark nights or when there is bad weather remembers them. These are Skulj, Kurbavela, and Tetevinšnjak, before which we take off our caps in salute. These rocks and islands have often enabled our torpedo boats to find their way when the sirocco or the bora blow, and we must find our way in the night without lights!²

That's how it had been tonight, as our boats once again came back from an uneventful expedition through the islands.

Two. U-Boats Mobilized

The torpedo boats take on coal.

Then the boat is washed with the help of steam pumps: the exterior, deck, structures, guns, and torpedo apparatus. First the boat; then the men.

Coal dust penetrates everywhere, even under the eyelids of tired eyes. We want to sleep and cannot close our eyes because they burn so much. That's why we all stand around on the dock and talk about the last trip.

The sailboats come in from the islands. Heavy, massive crafts that carry supplies, they bring sheep's cheese, fish, and schnapps, and their owners buy sugar, tobacco, and whatever else they need in town.

There is hardly any wind, and the boats must be rowed. The man sits at the helm and smokes; the women stand to row the long, heavy oars. They also moor the boat and furl the sails. It's more or less like that in the Black Mountains. When the Montenegrins come to the market at Cattaro, the man sits on the donkey; the wife runs alongside and carries the load.

One of the officers goes to see the man, who has sat down on the mooring post while the women unload the boat.

"And you? Do you do absolutely nothing whatsoever? Do you let the women do all the work?"

"Nothing? I sleep with my wife!"

But it is not as bad as it looks. All the men are fine mariners and fishermen and cultivate their land, which no farmer from the flatlands would dare to try. Their dream is to go to America where their brothers and uncle are already, to come back with a pile of dollars, and to open a restaurant.

In the evenings we officers sit in one of the two coffee houses that Sebenico boasts. It bears the impressive name, Hotel de la Ville. Greasy elegance, the floors always dirty and full of cigarette butts, the waiter in a third-hand tuxedo, with shirt and collar nearly as black. His bunions squeeze through holes cut into



Fig. 1. A torpedo boat division on a trip through the islands

someone's cast-off patent leather shoes and are polished along with the shoes!

Also, officers from the merchant ships are there. They must supply the provisions for the Gulf of Cattaro. The narrow-gauged railway cannot handle everything, and the ships that have been lying there since the beginning of the war must be supplied, as well as the military installations.

Intelligence reports come from the Bocche via cargo vessels and the incoming torpedo boats.¹ Right at the beginning of the war there had been heavy fighting there.

On top of the 1,760-meter-high Lovćen the Montenegrins had built their batteries; from there they could conveniently survey all Austrian positions.² They kept these positions under heavy fire daily. It was hell for our men.

Constant enemy fire hammered on their concrete bunkers, devastating them during the day. The crews would come out and patch the destroyed shelters with concrete. Day in, day out, it was like that—they did not let themselves be crushed. It was they who prevented the capture of the Bocche.



Fig. 2. A French battery shot to pieces on the Lovčen



Fig. 3. A Dalmatian sailing vessel



Fig. 4. Women “man” the fishing boats

The enemy realized all along as well as we did: the Bocche, the southernmost harbor of the monarchy, is the obvious exit of the Austro-Hungarian ships toward the Mediterranean. If the enemy succeeded in taking this harbor, then Austria would be a prisoner in the Adriatic. The Bocche is big enough to take in all the Allied ships. It would serve as a splendid harbor for the French fleet, which would then control the entire Adriatic.

For this reason it was of utmost importance to the Allies that small Montenegro be hostile to the larger Austria. Her position there above the Bocche in the Black Mountains was clearly ideal.

This was also why the French did their utmost to support Montenegro. They transported food, clothing, and munitions there. These shipments for Montenegro were accomplished with a great show of power; a major part of the French fleet had been ordered out just then to accompany the freighters to Antivari, Montenegro's only port. On these occasions, they shot constantly at coastal installations of the Bocche. They accomplished nothing, though; it seemed more like a military demonstration compared to the power at hand.

At the first appearance of the enemy fleet the small Austro-Hungarian cruiser *Zenta* was cut off by the enemy on her return to the Bocche. Seventeen big, fast, and modern warships, both English and French, had easy target practice on the small, old cruiser. The enemy ships needed only to stay out of range; the guns of the *Zenta* could not reach very far. Just one of their small, fast destroyers would have sufficed to sink the old ship.

Although her situation was hopeless, the *Zenta* defended herself furiously to the end. Everything was already destroyed; the ship was sinking, the deck awash. The commander, Captain Pachner, ordered the last salvo. The survivors thought of saving their lives only as their ship had sunk literally under their feet. But of the seventeen ships there was only one broad trail of smoke visible. The ships had left their dauntless enemy to his own devices without thinking of giving help. So the shipwrecked had to swim many miles to reach the Montenegrin coast. Enemy gunfire thinned out the rows of those exhausted to death, and when the captain finally reached the shore with the last of his men after hours of maximum exertion, he knew that a harsh imprisonment awaited them.

As a last effort to capture the Bocche, the French brought batteries to Montenegro. They pinned their highest hopes on them. The Austrian fleet waited until they had been installed on the Lovčen and then sent S.M.S. *Radetzky*. Together with the old ships that were already lying in the Gulf of Cattaro, the new batteries were bombarded and totally demolished.

Consequently the Bocche was saved and remained spared.

With the appearance of the French fleet the four Austro-Hungarian submarines that were still capable of operation were ordered down to the Bocche; more were not available. Later a fifth U-boat was added, which under the name *U-12* had fired on the French battleship *Jean Bart* near Valona and heavily damaged her.

This was the way things stood that spring evening as we officers sat together in the Hotel de la Ville in Sebenico. We discussed these and other events of the war.

In April 1915, not much was going on at the Front. We waited for something unusual, something decisive! Someone had an uncle in the ministry of war who had written very mysteriously . . .

We still believed everything that came from the hinterland.

The flotilla's missions were thankless and boring: escorting cargo vessels, looking for and blowing up mines. Every now and then we had to quickly stoke up, then let the fire go out because some message about the enemy was false after all. Or we were sent out and then came back uneventfully, like this time.

"Why aren't you on a U-boat? You are an old U-boat man, aren't you?" someone asked me.

"Well, I expected this war to be quite different! I thought that on the second day after the declaration of war, we would be fighting the French in the Straits of Otranto. Was I glad I got a torpedo boat! Back then a U-boat was expected to lie in the harbor and attack the enemy only when he approached. So I wasn't very excited when they offered me a U-boat. Now, by all means, I would gladly swap."

"What kind of war is this?" grumbles another. "All the fleets lie in their harbors. The English have practically disappeared. No one knows where their fleet is. Only the small stuff is there."

"Well, what do you think?" joined in a third. "What should our and the German fleets do out there? What is the war at sea actually about? Certainly not about a cheerful little battle where we demolish each other's ships for no purpose.

"It's about control of the seas. It's about the safety of our own steamers, so we can carry on trade and safely bring back what our country needs from around the world. And this—we Central Powers can never have, because we are too weak."

Now everyone is interested in our discussion; it is obvious that this is not the first time we have debated the subject.

"Do you think Germany can so decimate the English fleet in one sea battle that she will gain the High Command of the Seas? No! No matter how many they sink, the Germans will come out so weakened that England will again rule the seas."

Obviously this would be senseless.

“And we against the French fleet? Don’t even think of it. Just tell me why the fleet should put out to sea and where to! They would find no opponent out there. At best they would fall into the arms of their U-boats.”

“Oh, the U-boats! They are our trump card! It’s only with them that we could make it difficult for the Allies to keep command of the sea, but we’ll never get it because Austria is too small.”

“But then, let’s move with the U-boats,” I exclaim again. “Now we have finally discovered that you can shoot steamships with them; now they should be set loose like wolves on a herd!

“But the diplomats are worried. We can’t sink American and Italian boats anymore; those nations could declare war. They will do that sooner or later, anyway. Yet now the English move their reinforcements under neutral flags, and our U-boats know it and have to let them go.

“We can eat cornbread but very soon this, too, will be gone. My God, haven’t they caught on that this is our last chance. It’s now or never!” I push back my hair excitedly and then am quiet. I let the others continue the discussion and chew on my moustache.

The officers there who know me understand how deeply I feel about U-boats.

“The German Kaiser has, however, spoken of a possible peace!” says one.

“We should be able to celebrate Christmas at home!”

“Yes, let’s hope so. Waiter, my bill!”

The next morning the flotilla’s flagship, the cruiser *Admiral Spaun*, hoists a signal.

“Have TB 52 get up steam by 8:00 in the evening. At 4:00 tomorrow afternoon change of command. The boat’s commander is summoned.”

“What can they want from me? Please, not on some big crate!”