

Georg von Trapp and the Jews

Georg Ritter von Trapp (1880–1947) is internationally renowned for the high moral standards that he allegedly displayed in 1938 after the “Anschluss”, the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany. Instead of accepting various tempting offers by the Nazis, such as taking command of a modern German submarine, he refused them and emigrated with his family, putting “spiritual goods” above “material goods”, as quoted by his (second) wife Maria.¹

Yet, as I already showed in 2023, there is not the slightest evidence for such offers by the Nazis, nor are they plausible; moreover, there was no emigration, let alone an “escape”. On the contrary: there is proof that in 1937 and early 1938 Trapp tried several times to arrange lectures by himself and a concert tour of the family choir in Germany, but failed because the Nazis were not interested. And in summer 1939 the family, which held Italian, but not Austrian, citizenship, was back in Salzburg, Vienna and environs.² Maria Trapp’s original tale and the depiction of the events in 1938 in the movie “The Sound of Music”³ differ, but both are fiction.

During further research I now looked up letters written by Georg von Trapp to members of the Auersperg family – Austrian high nobility – to whom he was related by his marriage to Agathe (1891–1922), née Whitehead. Three of these letters throw unexpected light on Trapp’s attitude towards Jews in the late 1910s, i.e. at the end of World War I and the beginning of the (first) Austrian Republic.

Soon after taking command of a submarine station in the Bay of Kotor Trapp was worrying about the future and, on 7 July 1918, wrote to Prince Karl von Auersperg (1859–1927) about buying an agricultural estate to be able to feed his family. Karl apparently thought Trapp to be too pessimistic, so Trapp explained further in a letter of 22 August 1918: “Becoming a peasant was just a plan for the most extreme case, when nothing else would be possible, because I’d rather become a peasant than be employed at some Jewish enterprise.”⁴

In a letter sent on 1 April 1919 to Karl’s wife Eleonore (1864–1920), a younger sister of Trapp’s mother-in-law, he thought it fit to mention the following detail about a train journey from the Auerspergs’ Goldegg castle to Zell am See: “I had quite a good time in the aisle because I was constantly busy keeping a family of Jews from sleeping, too.”⁵

Finally, on 8 December 1919 Trapp wrote to Karl’s and Eleonore’s son, also named Karl (1895–1980): “When will the Viennese revolt? Then I’d like to go there and actively take part. From the Jews one could produce so much soap and bone meal.”⁶

At this point Trapp was nearly forty and father of six children; he knew violence and death from his military career.⁷ To put Jews on the level of animals – soap and bone meal were produced from animal carcasses – and to express the intention to help getting rid of them are evidence of a profound and violent antisemitism.

I am not aware of any further statements by Trapp on this topic. So we do not know whether he changed his stance later on, or what he thought about the pogroms after the “Anschluss”. However, in my opinion it is time for a thorough discussion of whether the real Georg von Trapp should be held in such high esteem.

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¹ Trapp, Maria Augusta: *The Story of the Trapp Family Singers*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1949; ch. 13.

² Litten, Frederick S.: *Notes on the Trapp Family in Austria*. From Maria’s grandparents to summer 1939. Norderstedt: BoD, 2023; ch. 3. An expanded German edition is planned for 2027.

³ *The Sound of Music*. Directed by Robert Wise. Argyle Enterprises / Twentieth Century-Fox, 1965.

⁴ Austrian State Archives/Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv (ASA/HHStA): SB Auersperg I-C-53-17-131.

⁵ ASA/HHStA: SB Auersperg I-C-51-35-119.

⁶ ASA/HHStA: SB Auersperg I-C-135-2. Vienna was known as “Red Vienna”, because the Social Democrats were in (elected) power there. Not just in Austria at that time “left-wing” and “Jewish” were often conflated.

⁷ Litten, ch. 2.2.