MEDIAINFO

Silent Night 200TH ANNIVERSARY

Austria and the world at the dawn of the 19th century
New borders and natural catastrophes shape Europe around 1800

Europe at the dawn of the 19th century: Political upheavals and economic misery rock the Archbishopric of Salzburg, the Habsburg Monarchy and Bavaria. Deprived of power, looted, and ravaged and depopulated by fires and crop failures: Following the Napoleonic Wars, entire areas of land and valleys were left devastated. Political crises took turns with natural catastrophes, bad harvests and famines. With this state of affairs in the background, Joseph Mohr drafts the "Silent Night" poem in Salzburg's Lungau district in 1816. On Christmas of 1818, he hands the text to Franz Xaver Gruber, who adds a melody to the poem. The result is a Christmas message filed with hope and solace, addressed at the traumatised and hungry citizens of Oberndorf.

Today, the borders are clearly defined. The "Silent Night" locations are spread across the Austrian provinces of Salzburg, Tyrol and Upper Austria. But this wasn't always the case. From the end of the 18th century to 1816, Europe was in a state of war and engulfed in Napoleon's conquests and revolutionary campaigns.

Salzburg, Tyrol and Upper Austria during the Napoleonic Wars
Salzburg was particularly affected by the political reshuffling. For centuries, it had been an independent, clerical and affluent Archbishopric under the rule of the Archbishops of Salzburg, but by 1800 the land was occupied by the French and then secularised in 1803. First, it is passed on to Ferdinand III of the Habsburg family as a secular electorate, then, from 1805, following repeated occupation by the French, to Bavaria with several partitions, and finally to the Habsburg Monarchy.
Tyrol, being a relatively independent part of the Austrian Empire and a princely earldom, was also occupied by the French, becoming part of the Kingdom of Bavaria, which is allied with Napoleon, in 1805. What followed was as legendary as it was bloody – the Tyrolean Rebellion of 1809 against the French and their allies. The Bavarian part of Tyrol was only returned to Austria in 1814.
The Coalition Wars transform Upper Austria into a battlefield for years. After the Innviertel region had been part of the Duchy of Bavaria for centuries, it only fell to Austria in 1779 as a result of the War of the Bavarian Succession and following the Treaty of Teschen. In 1814, the warring parties agree to return the Innviertel and western Hausruckviertel regions to Austria. The transfer, however, takes until 1816.

Bitter consequences wherever one looked
The Congress of Vienna of 1814/1815 sealed the end of the Napoleonic era. On 1 May 1816, Salzburg finally fell to Austria as a result of the Treaty of Munich. However, not as an independent part of the Habsburg Empire, but as a district of the Archduchy "Österreich ob der Enns" and administrated from Linz. The arrangement lasted until 1850.
The valleys of Zillertal and Brixental, part of Salzburg for centuries, were now part of Tyrol. The title of Salzburg was cleared off the map. The once magnificent residential city degenerated into an unknown district town. Officials left the city, the population decreased from 16,000 to 12,000.

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Tyrol and Upper Austria remained unaffected by territorial losses. Nevertheless, the war, with side effects like plunders, forced deportations and reparation payments, left nothing behind but misery.

The war is followed by the devastating "Year Without a Summer"
In 1816, the Austrian population fell victim to a natural catastrophe they had never seen before. A gigantic volcano eruption in April 1815 on a small Indonesian island triggered dramatic climate changes across continental Europe a year later. The temperatures fell, the harvest withered away in the never-ending rain and summer-time snowfall. Especially the farmers of Salzburg, Tyrol and Upper Austria had to carry the burden. In light of the failed harvests and famines, they spoke of "punishment from God" and fell into despair and apathy. The year 1816 went down in history as the "Year Without a Summer".

The people starved and searched for new opportunities for income
But that wasn't enough. In 1818, a disastrous fire in the city of Salzburg destroyed 93 buildings, as a result of which 1,000 people lost their livelihoods. The situation on the fields as disastrous. The farmers in Upper Austria, who, like Franz Xaver Gruber's family, had been earning additional income through weaving, lost their supporting leg with the invention of the mechanical loom in 1786. In the barren mountain landscape of Tyrol, overpopulated since the 16th century, more farmers than travelling merchants had to head out to make a living, send their children to work in Germany and Switzerland or even emigrate completely.

"Silent Night" provided comfort and solace to a traumatised public
The Upper Austrian Franz Xaver Gruber, a teacher in Arnsdorf, and Joseph Mohr from Salzburg, assistant priest in Oberndorf, both grew up in modest circumstances and experienced the misery first-hand. From a young age, both of them understood the ability of music to soothe the soul. It should thus come as no surprise that the priest and the teacher decided to lift the low-spirited believers in Oberndorf out of their misery in 1818 by way of a musical message about God's love and salvation. And the Tyrolian path which led the consoling song into the world was also unsurprising: Like so many others, the farmer families Strasser and Rainer from the Zillertal valley were travelling through Europe as merchants in order to earn an additional income during the winter months. Besides selling home-made goods, the highly musical families also performed songs from home. And thus, they popularised the Christmas song on their travels through Germany, Europe and the USA during the 19th century.