

Did you know, that...

1. ...Joseph Mohr's godfather was Salzburg's last executioner?

Indeed, Salzburg still had an executioner at the time: His name was Franz Joseph Wohlmuth and he attempted to improve his bad reputation by becoming godfather to children born out of wedlock. At the time, these were still considered to be a "carnal sin"; mothers even had to turn themselves in to the police. During Joseph Mohr's baptism, a certain Franziska Zachin stood in for Wohlmuth. Joseph Mohr was named after his father. He was baptised at the Salzburg Cathedral just a few hours after his birth, over the same baptismal font as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

2. ... the song's lyrics were actually based on a poem written by Joseph Mohr?

It was assumed for a long time that Joseph Mohr had written the song's lyrics during his time in Oberndorf and on the occasion of the Christmas mass of 1818. That, however, is a misconception. In 1995, an autograph was discovered in which Joseph Mohr personally stated that he had first written the song as a poem in 1816. That occurred in Mariapfarr in Salzburg's Lungau region. Joseph Mohr's ancestors on his father's side were from Mariapfarr and he also assumed his first position as an assistant pastor there following his ordination in 1815. In Mariapfarr, Joseph Mohr got to know his grandfather. He also visited his grandfather's house of birth, the "Scharglerkeusche", as well as his final residence, the "Haasenkeusche". Joseph Mohr's grandfather died in 1816, in the company of his grandson.

3. ...Franz Xaver Gruber was a trained linen weaver?

Franz Xaver Gruber was born as the fifth of six children on 25 November 1787 in the Hochburg municipality of the Innviertel region. His parents Josef and Anna were small farmers and earned an additional income by working from home as weavers. Franz Xaver Gruber's father insisted that his son would also learn the weaving craft. At Franz Xaver Gruber's Memorial House in Hochburg-Ach, visitors can see the loom with which young Franz practiced his trade.

4. ...Joseph Mohr and Franz Xaver Gruber only interacted for a brief period of time?

As an assistant priest, Joseph Mohr was transferred from one small town to the next over and over again. And that is how he made his way to Oberndorf as a coadjutor in the summer of 1817. There, he made friends with the teacher Franz Xaver Gruber from the nearby-located Arnsdorf, who was five years older than him and supervised the choir and the organist service at the St. Nikola Church in Oberndorf. On Christmas 1818, Joseph Mohr asked his friend Gruber to create a fitting melody for a poem that he had written in Mariapfarr in 1816. After the Christmas mass of 1818, "Silent Night" resounded for the very first time, performed by the two friends and accompanied by Mohr's guitar. By September 1819, Joseph Mohr had already left Oberndorf again. The friendship between Mohr and Gruber, however, would last a lifetime.

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5. ...Oberndorf near Salzburg is considered the song's "birthplace"?

On Christmas 1818, "Silent Night" resounded for the very first time at the St. Nikola Church in Oberndorf near Salzburg. The church was under constant threat from flooding and ended up being damaged so badly that it was closed toward the end of the 19th century. In 1906, the old church was demolished and a new parish church was built in its place. Instead of the St. Nikola Church, the Silent Night Chapel was erected. Franz Xaver Gruber's grandson Felix Gruber was present during its inauguration in 1937. Since 1953, the Silent Night Memorial Celebration has been taking place every year on Christmas Eve at around 17:00 in front of the chapel, to which thousands of people arrive from all over the world in order to sing "Silent Night" together.

6. ...the days of the creation of the song were shaped by hunger, misery and war?

By Christmas in 1818, Europe had been in crisis for decades: Political upheavals, war and economic misery had bled and traumatised the populations of the Archbishopric of Salzburg, the Habsburg Monarchy and Bavaria. Napoleon had ousted, ransacked and destroyed much of Europe. The Congress of Vienna of 1814/1815 marked the end of the Napoleonic era. On 1 May, the Treaty of Munich led to Salzburg finally being handed over to Austria: Long-established structures, cities and families were separated. On top of that, a natural catastrophe ravaged Europe in the year 1816: Crop failures and debt led to hunger and even more misery.

7. ...1816 came to be known as the "Year without a Summer"?

In 1816, the Austrian and Bavarian populations became the victims of a natural catastrophe of never-before-seen proportions. The outbreak of Mount Tambora on the Indonesian island of Subawa triggered dramatic climate changes all over Europe a year later: Around the world, average temperatures sank by one to two degrees. Entire harvests failed as a result of the never-ending rain and the summerly snowfall. Farmers in Salzburg, Tyrol, Upper Austria and Bavaria were among those that were hit the hardest. In the face of the failed harvests and the widespread hunger, they fell into despair and apathy: People saw the catastrophe as "punishment from God". The year 1816 has gone down in history as the "Year without a Summer".

8. ...Franz Xaver Gruber was married three times?

Franz Xaver Gruber had to conform to several of the community's requests before assuming his teaching position in Arnsdorf in 1807. One of them was to marry his predecessor's widow who lived with her two children in the teacher's residence on the first floor of the school building. Two more children resulted from the marriage with Maria Elisabeth Engelsberger, who was 13 years older, although both died. After the death of his first wife, Gruber married Maria Breitfuß in 1826, a former pupil of his, who was only 18 years old at the time. Gruber had ten children with her, four of which survived. She died in 1841. Gruber married his third wife one year later, the shoemaker's widow Katharina Rieser (widowed Wimmer) from Böckstein.

9. ...Joseph Mohr clashed several times with the authorities when he was an assistant pastor and vicar?

Throughout his life, Joseph Mohr had a mind of his own: Helping others was of more importance to him than advancing in his career. His superiors complained over and over again about his lack of subordination and his supposed improper behaviour. He was accused of singing “songs which weren’t uplifting enough” and “joking around with persons of the opposite sex”. It was said that he bought meat from poachers in Hintersee in order to give it away to families in need. But Mohr was also known to be extremely eloquent and theologically well-versed, which saved him from more serious sanctions. Nevertheless, he remained a simple pastor throughout his life and his burial took place in very modest circumstances.

10. ...“Silent Night” was sung in the trenches of the First World War?

Around five months after the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, a uniquely pacifist miracle of fraternity between thousands of soldiers from various nations took place on the Western Front, where more than a million soldiers had already died or been wounded. On 24 December, Christmas Eve, peace returned to the trenches. A number of soldiers placed small, illuminated Christmas trees on the upper edge of their trench — like a sign of peace. On both sides of the approximately 50-kilometre-long Front in Flanders, the fighters put down their weapons and helmets and sang Christmas songs from home. “Silent Night” was heard too — in various different mother tongues. The peaceful, solidary night was treated as a state of emergency: Following the event, fraternisation became punishable by death.

11. ...Franz Xaver Gruber certified the song’s authorship while he was still alive?

The Christmas song became known across the world and, in the 1830s, started being performed at the Royal Prussian Court every year for Christmas. In 1854, the Royal Court Orchestra approached St Peter’s Abbey in Salzburg in order to find out additional information about Michael Haydn, who was considered to be the song’s author. Gruber’s son Franz, however, worked at the Abbey at the time and forwarded the request to his father. As a result, Franz Xaver Gruber drafted a document in 1854 that explained the song’s origin and thereby also clarified its authorship.

12. ...an organ builder from the Zillertal valley contributed to the dissemination of the song?

The story of the song’s dissemination is tightly interwoven with that of organ builder Carl Mauracher from Fügen in the Tyrolean Zillertal valley. It is said that Mauracher worked on the reconstruction of the organ of the St. Nikola Church in Oberndorf in 1824/25. There, he met Franz Xaver Gruber and first heard “Silent Night”. He took the song with him on his homeward journey to the Zillertal valley. There, it quickly gained traction, as it became popular to perform it on festive Christmas occasions.

13. ...“Silent Night” was considered a Tyrolean song for a long time?

The myth of the song being of Tyrolean origin goes back to the Tyrolean national singers. It was proven that the Strasser Siblings from Hippach in the Zillertal valley had already performed the song in 1831 at a Christmas market in the German city of Leipzig. Like many other Tyrolean farmers, the Strassers used to work as travelling salesmen during the winter, selling goods from back home. To boost their sales, these families often performed songs at the markets to attract customers. This included “Silent Night”. The organist of the Catholic Community in Leipzig, Franz Alscher, was at the market on that day and invited the siblings to perform the song during the Royal Saxon Court Orchestra’s Christmas mass at the Pleissenburg. Just before their departure in January 1832, the four siblings performed once more and then returned to Leipzig again in December of 1832. For the concert on 15 December 1832 at the Hotel de Pologne, they received the specific request to sing “Silent Night”. It is said that publisher August Robert Friese also attended that concert. He published (probably in 1833) the “Four Tyrolean Songs”, whose number four was “Silent Night”. A number of additional publications followed suit. Although the song was originally from Salzburg, it was considered a Tyrolean or Zillertal valley folk song for many years after. Another reason for this is the fact that the Strasser Siblings had adapted the original melody to their own liking and had also changed the lyrics. And thus, the song began developing into a folk song that would spread all over the world through various prints, as well as through the many other Tyrolean singing groups.

14. ...The Rainer Family popularised the song in the USA and in Russia?

In the year 1839, the 18-year-old Ludwig Rainer, son of Maria Rainer (“Ur-Rainers”), embarked on a concert tour to America together with three friends. The members of the quartet, named “The Rainer Family”, were “cast” by an American entrepreneur in order to be as close to the original Rainer Siblings as possible. Then, on Christmas Eve of 1839, “Silent Night” is said to have been performed before the Hamilton Monument for the first time. What followed was a several-years-long “tour” as the very respected “Rainer Family”, which brought the group to New Orleans, St. Louis, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.

Encouraged by their success in the USA, Ludwig Rainer founded another Rainer group in 1851 with up to 15 singers that would perform for royal families across Europe. Their journeys brought them to England, Scotland and Ireland, as well as to Italy, France, Denmark, Sweden and Norway. In 1858, they arrived in Russia and remained there for ten more years.

15. ...the only thing Joseph Mohr owned before he died was his guitar?

The life of Joseph Mohr was marked by his modesty: There are many reports that he gave his entire income away to those in need or used it to finance institutions. It is said that he only purchased a new robe three times in his life. He founded a school in Wagrain in SalzburgerLand and reformed the relief system for the poor. When he died, he owned nothing except for his guitar, which he had used in 1818 to accompany “Silent Night”.

16. ...the first known print of the song was made and sold in Steyr?

Joseph Greis, book printer and salesman in Steyr, published a flyer between 1827 and 1832 (the exact date is not known) with the title “Four Beautiful New Christmas Songs”: “Silent Night” was also listed on the cover. This proves that the first written version of the song was printed in Steyr. Since Greis was a bookseller too, people could also purchase the print from him directly. The printed song included all six verses, albeit with a few textual irregularities: Josef Greis likely had a badly legible copy at his disposal, or errors may have occurred during typesetting. How exactly he acquired a copy of the song remains unknown.

17. ...the song is sung in more than 300 languages and dialects today?

With the help of the Tyrolean national singers — especially the Strasser siblings and Ludwig Rainer’s “Rainer Family” — the song had already spread through much of Europe, America and Russia by the first half of the 19th century. Ludwig Rainer always brought the song along on his tours. The dissemination across the rest of the world is the result of the work of various missionaries; of particular importance was the social reformer Johann Hinrich Wichern, a social reformer from Hamburg and founder of the “Rauhes Haus” foundation, as well as his daughter Caroline. They sent missionaries and pastors on journeys to accompany emigrants. Their baggage included the songbook “Our Songs”, which Wichern had published in 1844. Among other songs, the book also contained “Silent Night”.

18. ...there are 13 Silent Night Municipalities in total in SalzburgerLand, Upper Austria and Tyrol?

There are seven Silent Night Municipalities in SalzburgerLand, namely Oberndorf near Salzburg (cradle of the song’s creation), the City of Salzburg (birthplace of Joseph Mohr), Mariapfarr (where Joseph Mohr took on his first position/where the poem was created), Arnsdorf (where Franz Xaver Gruber took on his first position/where the composition was created), Hintersee (Joseph Mohr’s first independent position as a vicar), Wagrain (where Joseph Mohr assumed his final position) and Hallein (where Franz Xaver Gruber assumed his final position). There are three additional municipalities in Upper Austria: Hochburg-Ach (birthplace of Franz Xaver Gruber), Ried im Innkreis (Franz Xaver Gruber’s teaching examination) and Steyr (first known printed version of “Silent Night”). And three more in Tyrol: Fügen (home of organ builder Carl Mauracher and the Rainer singing family), Hippach (home of the Strasser Siblings) and the Achensee region (residence of Ludwig Rainer).

19. ...Joseph Mohr’s six verses were later complemented by a seventh?

In 1816, Joseph Mohr first wrote “Silent Night” as a poem consisting of six stanzas. But a year after the song was performed for the first time in 1818, a teacher from Waidring added a seventh verse to it. Blasius Wimmer probably found out about the song from the organ builder Carl Mauracher, included it in his hand-written church songbook and added the seventh verse. More than 130 years later, a pastor from Lungau, Valentin Pfeifenberger, also wrote a seventh verse: It is very similar to that of Blasius Wimmer, which makes it likely that Pfeifenberger knew his original seventh verse.

20. ...Hamburg was an important station in the dissemination of the song?

The theologian, social reformer and founder of the Evangelical Deaconry, Johann Hinrich Wichern, led the "Rauhe Haus" foundation in Hamburg. It was a training institution for future missionaries and pastors. At the time, Hamburg was one of Europe's biggest emigration harbours. The songbook "Our Songs", published by Wichern in 1844, also contained "Silent Night". Following the completion of the training, every pupil received a personal copy of the songbook. Many of them accompanied emigrants into the New World as missionaries and carried little other than their songbook with them. This sealed the dissemination of the song in America, as it was an important memory of home for the emigrants.

21. ...the legend around Oberndorf's hungry mice first began with a woman from Vienna?

The wide dissemination of the song in the USA has led many Americans to believe "Silent Night" to be an American folk song. The writer, actress and journalist Herta Pauli (1906–1973) recounted the origin of the song in her 1943-released book "Silent Night. The Story of a Song.". Whilst she got a number of things right, Pauli, originally from Vienna, also released a myth into the world that would continue to linger with us until this very day: Supposedly, hungry mice had chewed on the bellows of the church organ in Oberndorf, which made the instrument unplayable. Herta Ernestine Pauli was born in Vienna and emigrated to France following the Anschluss of Austria and then fled to America. Her brother Wolfgang Ernst Pauli is considered among the most important physicists of the 20th century and was awarded the Nobel Prize. In 1954, Hertha Pauli's book was released in German under the title "Das Lied vom Himmel. Die Geschichte von Stille Nacht."

22. ..."Silent Night" became an overseas best-seller early on?

In the middle of the 19th century, "Silent Night" had already become the best-selling piece of sheet music in the USA. For a long time, John Freeman Young's (1820-1885) American English version was considered the oldest known American version. Today, however, we know that the oldest version came from James Franklin Warner and was written by him in 1849 and then printed in New York in 1851 as part of the songbook "The Devotional Harmonist". Since the song's first recording by the American "Haydn Quartet" in October 1905, the Christmas song has been among the best-selling in the world. Bing Crosby's recording from 1935 alone is estimated to have sold 10 million copies by 2003.

23. ...the song appeared in a small music book at the Vienna World Fair in 1873?

In 1873, the fifth World Fair took place in Vienna, the first in the German-speaking region. It lasted for half a year and was a brilliant spectacle in the Prater park. Here, "Silent Night" made an appearance as the "Choral of Salzburg". The World Fair included 200 architectural setups, among them pavilions, as well as typical farmer's and school buildings. The US pavilion was designed as a North American school building and was also where the opera singer Joseph Bletzacher from Schwoich discovered the little music book which mentioned the "Choral of Salzburg". He published an article on the matter in the magazine "Die Gartenlaube".