

Joseph Mohr and his song “Silent Night”

The life and work of the priest from Salzburg

His high level of intelligence and musical talent pulled the author of the lyrics of “Silent Night” out of a poverty-stricken childhood and into the arms of the church and the priestly profession. Joseph Mohr’s life (1792 – 1848) was dedicated to those in need. His words about Jesus as a comforter and saviour have been traversing the world in 300 languages and dialects in the form of festive peace messages for more than 200 years.

Childhood and adolescence from 1792 to 1815 in the city of Salzburg

Joseph Franz Mohr was born a child out of wedlock in Salzburg on 11 December 1792. His mother was the knitter Anna Schoiber, born in Hallein. His father, whose family was from Mariapfarr in Lungau, was named Franz Mohr and was a deserted musketeer. At this time, children out of wedlock could keep the name of their father, but were stigmatised from birth. And thus, Joseph Wohlmüt, Salzburg’s last executioner, became Mohr’s godfather as he was trying to improve his bad reputation by serving as a godfather to illegitimate children. With three additional siblings who were also born out of wedlock, Joseph Mohr grew up at Steingasse 31, a miserable place — so cold, bleak and damp that Mohr would suffer from a lung disease for the rest of his life. But the boy was very talented and the Salzburg choir vicar recognised this. He made it possible for Mohr to visit the Academic Gymnasium. At the same time, Mohr was a singer and violinist at the university choir and at the St. Peter Benedictine monastery. After completing school in 1811, he joined the priestly seminary. Having been born an illegitimate child, he required special permission from the church to do so. In 1815, the only 23-year-old was ordained as a priest. But even this required special permission: He hadn’t yet reached the mandatory age of 25.

Eloquent, caring, unconventional: years of travel from 1815 to 1827

For 12 years, until 1827, the young clergyman from Salzburg lived an unsteady life in service of the church. As a coadjutor, in other words, an assistant to a more highly positioned priest, he worked in places such as Anthering, Golling, Kuchl, Eugendorf, Oberndorf and Bad Vigaun. When he was promoted to provisional vicar, he worked in Hof and Hintersee. There, he received his first position as a vicar. For the first time in his life, he remained at his post for nearly nine years until he was moved to be the vicar in Wagrain: his final location before his early death in 1848.

Having grown up in abject poverty himself, Joseph Mohr dedicated his priestly life to those in need. During his younger years, he apparently did so quite nonchalantly, which led his senior priests to accuse him of neglecting his service and visiting taverns, joking with women or singing “prohibited songs” instead. Higher up in the church hierarchy, these accusations were rejected as unfounded. In the city of Salzburg, Mohr was considered to be so eloquent and theologically well-versed that he was invited to the Salzburg Cathedral as a Lenten preacher in 1819 — a great honour for the just 27-year-old assistant priest.

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The famous poem was created in the Mariapfarr pilgrimage town in 1816

In 1815, Joseph Mohr began his service as an assistant priest in Mariapfarr in Lungau, the hometown of his family on his father's side. The building where his father was born, the ancient "Scharglerkeusche" remains here to this very day. The 12th-century church called "Zu unserer Lieben Frau" (To our beloved woman) in Mariapfarr has been one of the best-known pilgrimage sites in SalzburgerLand for ages. The shrine painting of the beautiful Madonna and the adoration of the three kings has led contemporary "Silent Night" researchers to suspect that it may have been Mohr's inspiration for the six-verse Christmas song that the young priest wrote in Mariapfarr in 1816: The line "Holy infant, so tender and mild" does remind the curly blonde Baby Jesus on the painting. However, Mohr could not cope with the rough climate in Lungau and became ill in 1817, forcing him to move to the much milder parts of Salzburg — to Oberndorf at the Salzach river.

"Silent Night" is performed for the first time in Oberndorf in 1818

Beginning in summer 1817, Joseph Mohr worked as a coadjutor in Oberndorf. The new parish, separated from Laufen by the Salzach river, did not have a vicarage. Thus, Mohr lived in a room in the sacristan house and ate at the village taverns. In Oberndorf, he became friends with the teacher Franz Xaver Gruber, who was five years older than him and came from the nearby located Arnsdorf and oversaw the choir and the organ at the St. Nikola church in Oberndorf. During Christmas in 1818, Joseph Mohr asked his friend Gruber for a fitting melody for his song that he had composed in 1816 in Mariapfarr. After the Christmas mass, "Silent Night" was performed for the very first time, sung by the two friends and accompanied by Joseph Mohr at the guitar. For the longest time, it was assumed that the guitar was merely a replacement for the defective organ: However, it is much more likely that Mohr had always intended to use the guitar as the accompanying instrument, as the song was sung in the church room in front of the nativity scene after mass had been completed.

From 1837, Joseph Mohr completed his life's work as a social reformer in Wagrain

In September 1819, Joseph Mohr had already left Oberndorf again. He spent several years at various parishes in today's Tennengau and Flachgau. After almost nine years in Hintersee, he was moved to the position of vicar in Wagrain in 1837. There, a school was built for more than a hundred children thanks to him where there had previously been just a single classroom. Mohr also founded a compensation fund in order to enable children of impoverished parents to go to school. The later created home for poor and elderly people is also a result of his efforts. On 4 December 1848, nearly 30 years after the first performance of his song, the lyricist died from his lung problems — he died as poor as he was when he was born. His only material remnant was his guitar, which later came to be owned by Franz Xaver Gruber's family. The "Priest of the Poor" never experienced the success that his Christmas song would have throughout the world.