

“Stille Nacht” History



The origins of this song go back to the time when the Napoleonic wars were over and Europe was being reorganized at the congress of Vienna. When this song first resounded in 1818 during the Christmas Mass in the Saint Nicholas Church at Oberndorf near Salzburg, the decades long wars among the European powers had come to an end; yet, the great many wounds caused by the battles, foreign occupations, and boundary changes resulting from peace negotiations were far from healed. The ecclesiastical principality of Salzburg also had to accept drastic changes. After being secularized in 1803, Salzburg lost its sovereignty in the Peace of Pressburg and became an Austrian province. In 1809 it fell under French domination, in 1810 it was annexed to Bavaria, and in 1816, through the Treaty of Munich, Salzburg definitely became a part of Austria; however, it had lost its most remunerative agricultural areas of the so-called Rupertiwinkel on the left bank of the River Salzach which remained with Bavaria.

This newly-drawn boundary had a particularly strong effect on the old Salzburgian town of Laufen. This town had lost its districts of Altach and Oberndorf on the right bank of Salzach which contained the beautiful Rococo Church of St. Nicholas, rebuilt after the great fire of 1757. Altach and Oberndorf had to be reconstituted as a parish community. The St. Nicholas Church became the new parish church, with Joseph Kessler as the first pastor and Joseph Mohr, the write of the carol, as his curate (1817-1819). Franz Xaver Gruber, the composer, since 1807 a teacher in the neighboring village of Arnsdorf, often assisted as organist and choir master. Similar interest, especially a love for music, led to a close friendship between the gentle, pious and sociable young priest and talented musician, respected teacher, F.X. Gruber, who, like Mohr, enjoyed cheerfulness and sociability. Two simple men, who were no different from their fellow-men, would have been long forgotten had they not joined in 1818 to create one little song about the great events of the Holy Night. This song became known as “Austria’s Gift to the World”.

Joseph Mohr was born in Salzburg on December 11, 1792 and died in Wagrain December 4, 1848. He was the son of the impoverished knitter Anna Schoiber and Joseph (Franz) Mohr, a soldier in the Salzburg Militia. The curate of the Cathedral of Salzburg made it possible for the highly gifted boy to attend school in Salzburg and study philosophy and theology.

Mohr was ordained on August 21, 1815, and then worked as a curate in a few parishes of the Salzburg area. He was in Oberndorf from October 18, 1817 until October 19, 1819. He was highly intelligent and artistically and musically talented, kindhearted and generous, raised in poverty, also humorous and cheerful, profoundly religious and innocently pious, all reflected in the verses of the carol.

Franz Xaver Gruber was born in Hochburg (Upper Austria) November 25, 1787 and died in Hallein (Salzburg) June 7, 1863. He, too, was the son of poor parents, weavers Joseph Gruber and Anna Danner. Franz secretly took music lessons. After overcoming the resistance of his father who wanted him to take over the weaving trade, he became a teacher in Arnsdorf. From 1816 to 1829 he was also organist and choir master in the St. Nicholas Church at Oberndorf. He hoped, in vain, to obtain a teaching position in Oberndorf, and when he was denied the position as a sacristan, he left for Berndorf in 1829. In 1833 he was offered the position of choir master and organist at the parish church in Hallein. Although Gruber loved his work as a teacher, he accepted the new post which allowed him to live exclusively for music. After 28 years of dedicated work, he died in Hallein at age 76, an organist full of creativity whose ecclesiastical compositions were often performed by the rural church choirs.

The carol author, Preacher Joseph Mohr, asked teacher F.X. Gruber to compose the song for two soloists and choir with guitar accompaniment. They collaborated closely in the first performance of the song at the 1818 Christmas Eve Mass in St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf. Mohr sang tenor and played the guitar while Gruber sang bass. The choir repeated the final two lines of each verse. St. Nicholas Church was damaged by the annual high waters of the Salzach River that flowed from the Alps in the Salzburg region. The church was rebuilt on higher ground in 1906. The impressive Silent Night Memorial Chapel was erected on a landscaped mound over the original St. Nicholas Church altar site and dedicated in 1937.

The City government and the Visitors’ Bureau of Oberndorf granted Frankenmuth’s Wally and Irene Bronner family permission to simulate the memorial chapel. Bronner’s memorial is a tribute of thankfulness to God from the Bronner family. The chapel, dedicated on November 20, 1992, is open daily for viewing and meditation (it is not intended for services or ceremonies).



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