

*The life of JOSEPH MOHR*  
*& the story of the origin of the world-famous*  
*Christmas carol*  
*“SILENT NIGHT! HOLY*  
*NIGHT!”*

*Hanno Schilf*



Silent Night Museum, Steingasse 9, Salzburg



Reconstructed birthplace, Silent Night Museum, Salzburg



Kitchen, Silent Night Museum, Salzburg

We are back in the Salzburg of 1792. Near the river Salzach there is a little street called the Steingasse where Anna Schoiber, Joseph Mohr's mother, lived at Nr. 9. She shared her living quarters with her mother Maria, her two daughters (Joseph's half-sisters) and in the wintertime with her niece Theresia. These five people had to share a single room. There was no heating and the landlord imposed strict rules on how often the tiny kitchen could be used. Anna would heat large stones in the kitchen hearth and carry them to an iron bowl in the living room to provide at least a little warmth.

The family earned their living by spinning and knitting, but as this was not enough to live on they had to take in a soldier from the fortress as a lodger. He was the 28-year-old Franz Joseph Mohr from the village of Mariapfarr. As he was in financial straits, Mohr had committed himself to six years of military service. Soldiers were relatively well-paid and could supplement their wages with night duty. In the morning, at the end of his shift as watchman at one of the city gates he would come to sleep in one of the Schoiber's two beds. In wintertime he was entitled to a warm bed, which meant that someone had to stay under the covers and wait for the soldier to arrive. We can only assume that on one cold March morning, Anna Schoiber got up too late or the soldier got into bed too early! Either way, on the 11 December 1792, nine months later, Joseph Mohr was born.

On hearing that Anna was expecting his child, soldier Mohr fled. He deserted the army too. When he reappeared 19 years later in 1811, he was readmitted without punishment and became a watchman at the Klausentor but died in 1814, only a few days after completing his original six years of service. Joseph's mother already had two illegitimate children, so this was her third "carnal offence" and she was sentenced to a fine of nine florins. This was as much as Anna Schoiber earned in a whole year but failure to pay would have meant incarceration in the workhouse.



Gatekeepers at *Steintor*, Salzburg



A way out of this dire situation came in the unlikely form of the town executioner. Franz Joseph Wohlmuth had beheaded more than 50 people and tortured confessions out of another 100. He was a despised and frightening figure. No one looked him in the eye or made any physical contact with him. But he was rich and he offered to pay Anna Schoiber's fine in return for becoming the child's godfather. With this gesture of benevolence, Wohlmuth hoped to gain a slightly better reputation. He arranged an elaborate cathedral christening but did not attend in person. He sent his cook, Franziska Zachim, instead, presumably to avoid the embarrassment of not being allowed to lift the child out of the font in the traditional way.

For Joseph this was a socially crippling start to life. Not only was he illegitimate, he was also the executioner's godson. No school would accept such a child nor would he be able to find a position as an apprentice. He spent his childhood playing on the riverbank and watching the boatmen pass by on their barges. Salt was transported by river from the mines in Hallein through Salzburg and on to Unterlaufen, later known as Oberndorf. Here the cargo was loaded onto larger boats to be taken down the Inn and the Danube as far as Vienna or even Budapest. Sometimes Joseph would hitch a ride on one of the barges, jump off again a few miles from Salzburg and walk back to town. This innocent childhood game was to cause him unexpected difficulties later.



Executioner  
Franz Joseph Wohlmuth

Another playground of his must have been the Imbergstiege, the steep stone steps behind Steingasse 9. They formed part of one of the favourite Sunday and holiday walks of the people of Salzburg: setting out from the Linzergasse they would walk up past the Stations of the Cross to the top of the Kapuzinerberg. From here there is a beautiful view over the city and the fortress with the mountains in the background. The Imbergstiege leads back down to the Steingasse and it was here the finely dressed strollers would have passed young Joseph.

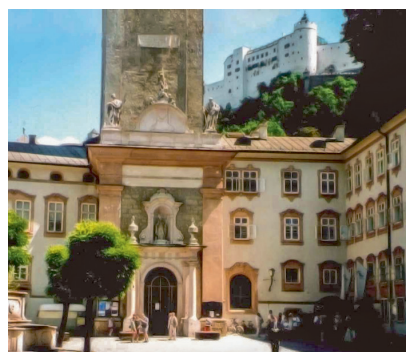


Kapuzinerberg, Salzburg

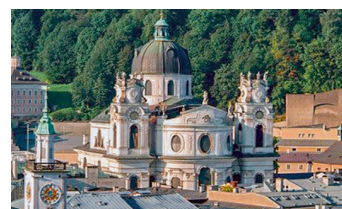
One day Johann Nepomuk Hiernle, a Benedictine monk and cathedral choirmaster was coming down the steps and happened to hear Joseph singing. He was so enchanted by his voice that he immediately went in search of the boy's mother and told her that such musical talent had to be trained or it would go to waste.

He left deeply moved by the story of Joseph's plight and arranged for the boy to attend the St. Peter Stift School, an establishment of the elite. The school records show that Joseph was always among the top six out of the class of 24 pupils. He sang in the choir of St. Peter's Church and at twelve he was already accomplished at the guitar, the organ and the violin. Interestingly, he is also scolded in the records for his repeated late arrival for choir practices, "probably because he is fond of attending the German singing in the Collegiate Church". This was the only church where Mass was already being held in German rather than in Latin, which 95% of the population could not understand.

The Archbishop of Salzburg at the time was Hieronymus von Colloredo. Although he is now mainly remembered for his harsh treatment of Mozart, he was liberal in many ways and had been advocating the use of German in some of the simpler Masses since 1787. But his proposals had been strongly resisted by the majority of priests, who accused him of being in league with the Protestants.



*St. Peter's Benedictine Abbey & College, Salzburg*



Collegiate Church, Salzburg

The Archbishop reacted by introducing German Masses in the Collegiate Church and with a decree granting musically gifted young men the right to attend university and the priests' seminary regardless of their social status. Thus it became possible for Joseph, a typical example of someone who would previously have been excluded, to continue his education.



Archbishop of Salzburg,  
Hieronymus von Colloredo

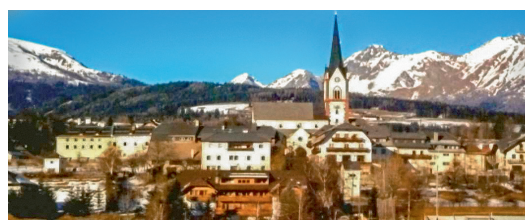
However, in 1808 the Bavarians invaded and Joseph left the upheavals in Salzburg to continue his studies in philosophy, theology and rhetoric at the Benedictine university in Kremsmünster. He returned to Salzburg in 1811, was admitted to the priests' seminary and was ordained in Salzburg Cathedral in the year 1815. After the ceremony he went to Berchtesgaden to celebrate his ordination. His journey home took him through the town of Ramsau. The local priest was Severin Wallner, and it so happened that his assistant priest had run away that very day. Wallner took an immediate liking to Joseph and took him on as his assistant. But soon after, the archiepiscopal consistory ordered him to Mariapfarr.

The village of Mariapfarr lies 80 miles south of Salzburg on a 1200m high plateau called the Lungau. The journey cannot have been an easy one for Joseph. He was on his way to live in the village his father came from, the soldier he had never met. After three days he reached Radstadt, from where he had to follow the Roman road over the Tauern Pass at 2000m. Joseph arrived just in time to join the convoy of travellers who had gathered to make the crossing together. When they reached the pass it was already deeply covered in snow and the 50 oxen heading the procession of horse-wagons could barely plough their way through. This was to be the last crossing of the year; from now until mid-April, the Lungau would be cut off from the rest of the world.

When he arrived in Mariapfarr he was met by Father Joseph Stoff who took him to the large parsonage. There were two other assistant priests working here besides Joseph. A few days later, Stoff took Joseph to meet his grandfather, who lived and worked on a farm estate two miles from Mariapfarr. He was also in charge of the bathhouse there and was widely known as a healer, which was exceptional in those days as medicine was generally the domain of midwives and woman healers.

At this time there were 7,000 people living on the Mariapfarr side of the Lungau and they had just one doctor between them. The fact that Grandfather Mohr was 86 years old, an exceptional age to reach in those days, was itself the best evidence for the effectiveness of his herbs, infusions and tinctures.

Joseph, who had received an orthodox training, was now introduced by his grandfather to the traditions of the Lungau. These were distinctly pre-Christian in their origin but in this region had blended peacefully with the Christian way of life. The fact that the Lungau was inaccessible for many months of the year was certainly one reason why the old traditions thrived here for so long. Another was that the priests of Mariapfarr usually came from the area themselves, so they had grown up among these customs. When they later returned to the village as ordained priests they had a fairly tolerant attitude to pre-Christian traditions. Rather than trying to stamp out pagan festivals, for example, they would encourage the people to celebrate them in the church and in the name of God.



Mariapfarr



Grandfather's house, Mariapfarr





“Samson“ pageant, Mariapfarr

This state of happy compromise had been disrupted around the year 1600 when a priest who was not born locally was sent to Mariapfarr. He was horrified with what he regarded as the habits of heathens and immediately imposed all sorts of bans. His demands were ignored so he threatened to raise the tithes if the people did not comply. One year later, 2,800 of the 3,500 inhabitants of Mariapfarr had converted to the Protestant faith! When the consistory in Salzburg realized what a disaster they had provoked by sending this man to Mariapfarr they appointed a new priest – this time a local.

The traditional way of life was no longer under threat and less than two years later all but 50 families were back in the Catholic fold. During their time as Protestants the villagers had been banned from the churches, but as faithful Christians, they still gathered on Sundays to read the Bible in large farmhouses or stables. They continued to celebrate Easter, Whitsun and Christmas and when they couldn't remember all the Latin verses of the conventional ceremonies they sang German songs instead and improvised the organ music with violins, guitars, flutes and horns. When they were allowed back into the churches, Catholic once more, they brought their instruments and their German songs with them. By the time Joseph came to Mariapfarr, the festival masses had already been held in this unusual way for two hundred years, but Joseph had never experienced anything like it. We can imagine the young priest's astonishment to find flutes and violins being played in church. And not only did they sing German songs, but the priest included a German sermon in the middle of the Latin litany.

The Mass made a deep impression on Joseph and inspired him to write his own Christmas carol, known in English as “Silent Night, Holy Night” one year later. He wrote it with a guitar accompaniment so that it could be performed at any time and in any place. In keeping with his motto, “Whatever you did for one of the least of my brethren, you did for me”, he may also have been thinking of the people who could not come to church as the snow was too deep or because they were ill, or those who were not allowed to enter the church such as Protestants, divorcees, and other marginalised groups.

At the beginning of the new year, 1816, old Mohr died. Joseph buried him himself. He had known his grandfather for only four months. Soon afterwards, the village was thrown into turmoil due to political changes.



Joseph Mohr's guitar

At this time Salzburg was the last mid-European region still to be occupied after the Napoleonic wars. In April 1816 the peace treaty was signed in Munich, committing the Bavarians to withdrawing their troops from Salzburg within a month. The occupying forces left, stealing and plundering as they went. Mariapfarr was robbed of one of its treasures, the Grillinger Bible. Together with a small silver altar and a beautiful chalice, this Bible had been donated to the village by Father Grillinger around 1420 and had made the village a place of pilgrimage.

But nonetheless, the people were overjoyed at being free at last. Joseph too seems to have been deeply affected. In verses four and five of the carol he departs from the nativity scene to speak of Jesus bringing together all the different peoples in his embrace and of forgiveness for all the world.\* Perhaps these words are an expression of the new feeling of liberation.



Grillinger Bible

By late autumn, the euphoria had turned to bitter hunger, and the strain of working to relieve the distress of the villagers had taken its toll on Joseph too. The long walks from one Alpine farm to another proved too much for his lungs, which were already weakened by a childhood spent in the cold damp rooms in the Steingasse.

Like all the other members of his family he suffered from consumption, or tuberculosis as we would call it today. When Joseph's condition had still not improved by the next July, Stoff took him to Salzburg where he spent six weeks recovering in hospital.



Silent Night manuscript entitled "Weyhnachtslied", 1816

Meanwhile Stoff arranged for Joseph to be transferred to Oberndorf, where the climate would be kinder to his health. The priest in Oberndorf at the time was Joseph Kessler. He originally came from Mariapfarr and was a close friend of Stoff's. Thus, when Joseph wanted to introduce Masses of the kind he had encountered in Mariapfarr to Oberndorf, he found the priest open to his ideas. He also had the support of the teacher and organist, Franz Xaver Gruber. Together they arranged mixed German-Latin Masses and German sermons. The news spread quickly, and people from all the surrounding villages flocked to attend their Masses. For the first time they could understand what was being said in church.

*\*The German original of the song has six verses, but the English version most frequently sung today is a translation by John Freeman Young from 1859 and only has three verses.*



But the reforms lasted for only three months. Then the consistory in Salzburg stepped in and Kessler was removed and replaced by Father Georg Heinrich Nöstler, an older man, and staunch traditionalist. He banned German from his church. In his opinion, German was quite out of place in church, as only Latin could effectively convey the religious message. Joseph contradicted by arguing that Jesus preached in Aramaic, not in Latin, and that he could not imagine that the use of an unknown language could encourage a higher state of reflection among the congregation.



Oberndorf near Salzburg

Nöstler took this as insolence and tried to silence Joseph with scornful reminders of his background. In his opinion an illegitimate child who owed everything he was to the Church should be grateful and do as he was told, not be filling people's heads with nonsense about German Masses.

When Joseph refused to change his views the two generations of priests fell into a conflict which was to escalate over the months to come. Nöstler altogether did not like the way the younger priest interpreted his pastoral role. For Joseph it meant living as a follower of Jesus, open to the world and available to everyone in the community, even those who did not come to church. Not surprisingly Joseph became by far the more popular of the two. Eventually Nöstler appealed to the consistory, accusing Joseph of disobedience to the church and of childish behaviour. He gave the following examples: "Joseph rides about on boats on the Salzach like a barge boy. Guitar playing and the singing of unedifying songs in public.



Boats on the Salzach

Joking with women in the street. And most reprehensible of all: his uncouth manner of walking about with a pipe and with a tobacco pouch hanging from his belt. All these are habits unworthy of a man of the church and this community needs a serious assistant priest." When the consistory asked Nöstler's superior, the dean of St. Georgen, to give his opinion on the matter, they received a surprising reply. The dean wrote that Nöstler's letter must have been written with a bilious pen, most probably caused by the older priest's envy of the younger man's popularity. Further, that Joseph was an extremely popular priest, who had gained a good reputation with his efforts to reform church music in Oberndorf and with his commitment to the surrounding communities. Attendance at his Masses was unusually high and he was regarded as a good preacher.

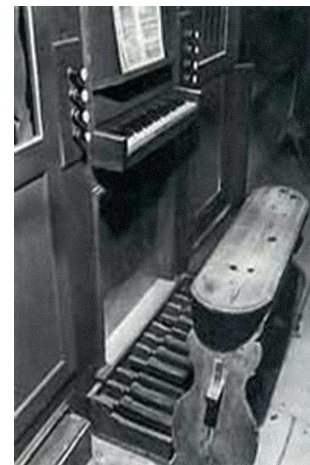
Nöstler was furious, and he was ready to resort to any means to rid himself of the man he now saw as his rival. He decided to ruin Joseph's reputation by spreading rumours about his illegitimacy and his adoption by the executioner, casting the story in the worst possible light. He succeeded, as for the majority of the villagers this was too much to accept and they distanced themselves from the younger priest. Even Gruber, who had been Joseph's closest friend until now, feared it would hinder his career if he openly continued to support him.



Franz Xaver Gruber

But he showed his friendship in another way: The day before Christmas Eve in 1818, the church organ broke down. Officially Gruber held the mice responsible, claiming they had gnawed holes in the bellows. But in all likelihood he created the problem himself to give Joseph an opportunity to win back Nöstler's approval. In any case Father Nöstler was beside himself – without an organ he could not celebrate Mass; Gruber and Mohr were now in a position to save the day and provide music for Nöstler. They arranged a ceremony in the style of Mariapfarr with traditional instruments and a mix of German and Latin singing and at the end performed the Christmas carol Joseph had written in the mountains and for which Gruber had arranged a second part and choral accompaniment. The congregation was deeply moved by the mass and especially by the simple beauty of Joseph's song. Even Father Nöstler's heart was touched and the two priests were temporarily reconciled.

By July of the next year, disagreements had flared up again and Joseph applied to the consistory for a transferral. In October 1819 he left Oberndorf for Kuchl. This little village in the foothills of the Alps is renowned for its ornate church and for the miracle performed here by St. Severin in the fifth century: every member of the community was given a candle and the candles of those whose faith and heart were pure came alight while the remainder stayed unlit. It is a place of high mystical energy and gave Joseph new strength. There now followed several years of travel for Joseph. Within nine years he moved through eleven parishes, Golling, Vigaun, Hallein, Krispl, Adnet, Anthering, Koppl, Anthering again, Eugendorf and Hof. In 1827 his mother died in Salzburg. He had often brought her to his current parish to care for her when she was ill, but she had always wanted to return to the city when she was better. In her last years she had lived with her former employers, the Laubacher family, for whom she used to knit. Six months later Joseph was given care of his own parish for the first time in Hintersee, a pleasant village of only a few farms and an inn.



Organ in Oberndorf

With the limited means he had, he set up a school fund to enable poor children to go to school. When the dilapidated schoolhouse had been restored, the Archbishop Friedrich Count Schwarzenberg personally inaugurated the building. This was seen as a great honour by the villagers and they were more than satisfied with their Father Mohr. He was a welcome guest at the inn, where he would drink a beer and after the second glass sometimes reach for the guitar and play a song or two of his own. The one thing he could not abide was vanity, and he once dismissed one of his assistants, who was more concerned with the care of his shoes and his clothes than with the spiritual care of the people.

Joseph Mohr died in Wagrain on the 4 December 1848. He left the world as poor as he had entered it. There wasn't even enough money for a proper funeral as he had given it all away to his fellow human beings, especially to children who would otherwise never have had the chance of an education. He left something for us too, a Christmas carol which celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ and of every other child in a simple and beautiful way that everyone could understand.

For 141 years we believed the version of events as officially told by Franz Xaver Gruber in 1854. He said that the organ in Oberndorf had broken down the day before Christmas Eve in 1818 and as a result, he and Joseph Mohr had written the carol that night, with Mohr writing the words and Gruber composing the tune. The discovery in 1995 of the only manuscript written in the hand of Joseph Mohr and dated 1816, led to a new interpretation of the story behind the song that is known all over the world and began in Salzburg's Steingasse 9 so many years ago.



Grave of Joseph Mohr



Chapel in Wagrain



#### About the author

Hanno Schilf has spent many years reseaching the origin of the Christmas carol *Stille Nacht! Heil'ge Nacht!* and the life of Joseph Mohr. He was the founder of the Silent Night Musuem in Salzburg where he reconstructed the birthplace of Joseph Mohr. He is also the author of two historical novels on the Silent Night story.

- I. The story of the origin of the song /Die Entstehungsgeschichte des Liedes
- II. The story of its premiere /Die Geschichte seiner Uraufführung