

The story of "Silent Night, Holy Night"

In last month's newsletter I wrote a little about my father-in-law's years in the POW camp in Poland. I don't know for sure, but it's possible that at Christmas the prison bands played carols, and they may have played the much-loved carol, *Silent Night*.

There are varying legends of the origin of this carol... One is that on Christmas Eve 1818, Josef Franz Mohr, the pastor of St. Nicholas' church in the Austrian village of Oberndorf, wanted his congregation to sing a poem he had written two years previously, but it had not been set to music and now the church organ was broken - some versions of the story say flooding had caused the organ to rust, others that mice had been nibbling at the bellows.

But musical accompaniment of some sort was imperative, so pastor Mohr took his poem to the church's organist, Franz Xaver Gruber, who within an hour or two penned the music for it on his guitar, and the new carol, *Stille Nacht*, was born.

The story goes that when the organ was repaired sometime later, the organ-builder took copies of the carol away with him, whence it was passed to various travelling folk singers who subsequently performed it many times as they traversed Europe, including before Franz I of Austria, Alexander I of Russia, and Frederick William IV of Prussia, and so *Stille Nacht* was published far and wide.

In 1863, the carol was translated into English, and entered Charles Hutchins' *Sunday School Hymnal*.

But there is a second and very poignant part to the story of *Stille Nacht* / *Silent Night*, which brings us back to my introduction...

"So beloved and so well-known is the carol, in fact, that according to accounts by soldiers who fought in the First World War, Silent Night was sung – in English, French, and German together – across No Man's Land during the Christmas Truce of 1914" [Introduction to YouTube: *Silent Night – Choir of St John's College, Cambridge*].

"On more than one occasion in both World Wars, fighting at Christmas was brought to a temporary close by troops singing their native versions of Silent Night to one another across the front line" [Peter Tregear, *The Story of Silent Night*].

Below are some beautiful renditions of this carol, sung in both German and English...

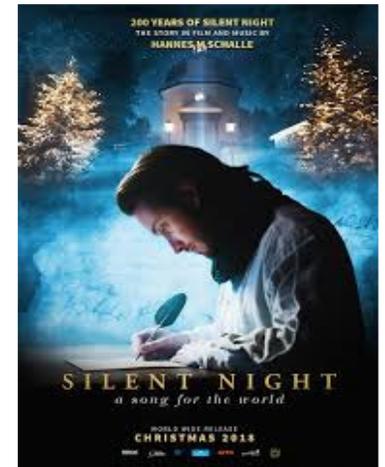
Stille Nacht: The Vienna Boys Choir: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dG-62zBnKkQ>

Silent Night: Kaoma Chenda (a fabulous *a cappella* rendition; all four parts are sung by one man!): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VE1KLLFWF-0>

Stille Nacht / Silent Night in German and English Sung Together - In memory of the brave soldiers of WW1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uu-US5flswW>

Silent Night: Choir of St John's College, Cambridge: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pY3LIB7Pxc>

"Each of the verses captures a foundational element of the Christian faith, from the miracle of the incarnation (Jesus, Lord at thy birth), to the hope of redemption (Christ the Saviour is born) ... We now lack for truly silent nights ... Christian or not, we all wish for moments of tranquillity, and we all sense in the birth of a child possibilities for a better future..." [The Story of Silent Night].



**May God bless you and yours with His silent night this Christmas,
Elizabeth McDonald,
December 2019**

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