

Sorbian territory showing ecclesiastical boundaries

Addresses for contact

Sorbischer Superintendent Jan Malink
Wendischer Kirchhof 1, 02625 Bautzen, Germany
E-mail: Jan.Malink@gmx.de

Pfarrer Hans-Christoph Schütt
Hauptstraße 27, 03096 Dissen, Germany
E-Mail: ev.pfarramt.dissenspreew@t-online.de

Förderverein für den Gebrauch der wendischen Sprache
in der Kirche e. V.
Gertraudenstraße 1, 03046 Cottbus, Germany

Sorbischer evangelischer Verein e. V.
Privatweg 21, 02625 Bautzen, Germany
E-Mail: wirth@sorbischer-evangelischer-verein.de
Homepage: www.sorbischer-evangelischer-verein.de

Frontispiece: Luther monument in Niedergurig / Delnja Hörka from 1883

Photos: Tereza Bejmakowa, Gerald Große, Andreas Kirschke,
Trudla Malinkowa, Jürgen Matschie, Joachim Rehle

Map: Iris Brankačkowa

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THE PROTESTANT SORBS (WENDS) IN GERMANY





Easter Singers in Rohne/Rowno 2009

The Sorbs (Wends)

are the smallest Slavonic nation. They are descendants of the Slavonic tribes who around 600 AD during the migration of peoples settled in the territory between the Rivers Oder/Neiße and Elbe/Saale, and between the Baltic Sea and the east German secondary mountain chains. These tribes were not able to establish state structures of their own. Their territories became part of the Holy Roman Empire during the High Middle Ages. For hundreds of years the Sorbs have lived under German statehood. There is no „Mother State“ beyond the German borders.

Sorbian territory

has been shrinking for about 1000 years. The remains of it in Lusatia began to break up when industrialization began. The growing domination of the German language and culture in all spheres of life, sometimes aided by the suppression of Sorbian activities in the church, the schools, and in public life, led to the loss of the language and culture of the Sorbs. They became a minority in their own country. Only a small area populated by Catholic Sorbs has managed to survive as a result of being a kind of „religious island“ and because of its distinct agricultural structure. Here the Sorbian language and culture have been preserved until the twenty-first century. At the end of the nineteenth century there were approximately 160 000 Sorbs. Today there are about 40 000 – 60 000.

The terms „Wends“ or „Sorbs“

are, generally speaking, interchangeable. For centuries the term „Wends“ was widely used. The term „Sorbs“ is derived from the

Sorbian word „Serb“ and became the official term after World War II. In Lower Lusatia the term „Sorbs/Wends“ is now preferred.

The Lower Sorbian and Upper Sorbian languages

are of Slavonic origin and in them quite a number of Old Slavonic characteristics are to be found. In Lower Lusatia, in the southern parts of Brandenburg, the people speak Lower Sorbian, which is quite close to Polish. In Saxony, in Upper Lusatia, the people speak Upper Sorbian, a language quite similar to Czech. There are some transitional dialects in the Hoyerswerda and Weißwasser areas in Central Lusatia.

With the Reformation

the Sorbian people became Protestants, though some communities near Kamenz and Bautzen remained Catholic. Luther's mother-tongue principle led to the development of the Lower Sorbian and Upper Sorbian literary languages. As early as 1548 his version of the New Testament was translated into Lower Sorbian, but this remained in manuscript. It was followed by Luther's catechism, which was printed first in Lower Sorbian in 1574 and later in 1595 in Upper Sorbian. By educating and training pastors as well as teachers the Sorbian people for the first time acquired an intellectual leadership.

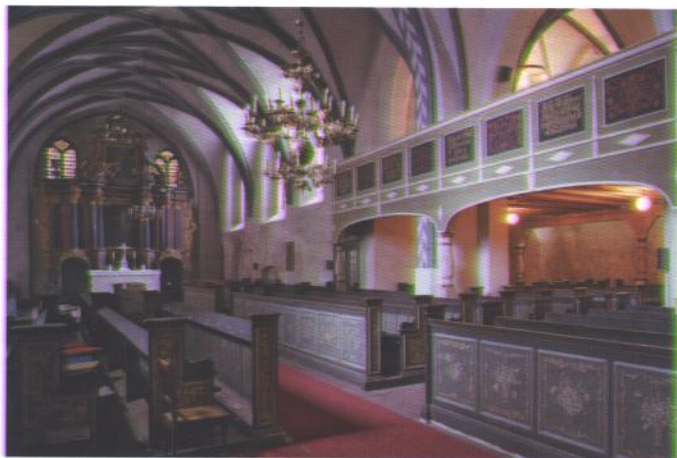
Wendish churches

following the Reformation were established in the towns of Lusatia for the spiritual care of the Sorbian population. They were sometimes church buildings which were no longer needed for their original purpose, such as monastery churches (Cott-



Altar-cloth from 1840 in Purschwitz/Porsitz

bus, Guben, Kamenz, Löbau) or suburban churches (Bautzen, Forst). Sometimes leading town churches were designated as Wendish churches (Hoyerswerda, Muskau, Vetschau) or new churches were built (Senftenberg, Spremberg). In this way, for the first time, public institutions were created which were devoted exclusively to the use of the Sorbian language. Most Wendish churches today no longer serve their original purpose, though preaching in Sorbian still takes place, regularly or occasionally, in Bautzen, Cottbus, Hoyerswerda, and Vetschau.



The Wendish Church (Monastery Church) in Cottbus/Chóšebuc.

The Church history

of the Protestant Sorbs has been influenced by two movements of more than regional significance: In the mid eighteenth century by the development of the „Brüdergemeine“ („Moravian Brethren“) of Baron Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf at Herrnhut and in the mid nineteenth century by the separatist movement of Old Lutherans in Prussia. Today's „Brüdergemeine“ at Kleinwelka, founded in 1751 as a Sorbian colony, and certain parishes in Upper and Lower Lusatia belonging to the Independent Protestant Lutheran Church are evidence of this process. These independent Lutheran parishes left the united state church in the 1840s.

Emigration

affected the Protestant Sorbs from the 1850s till the end of the nineteenth century. The USA and Australia were the main destinations, followed by Canada, South Africa, and South America. The largest group of emigrants founded in 1855 the colony Serbin in Texas. Here the settlers most clearly showed their intention to

preserve Protestant Sorbian traditions. In Texas and in Australia societies and parishes can still be found today which keep alive the cultural and religious heritage of their Sorbian ancestors.

The cultural development

of the Sorbian people was, until the end of the nineteenth century, mainly in the hands of the Protestant educated class. The birth of Sorbian middle-class culture was more or less the result of their work. The achievements of the Sorbian people in the arts, in culture, and in the sciences can scarcely be paralleled among other nations of comparable size. Owing to the intensified assimilation process among the Protestant Sorbs, however, the intellectual leadership of the Sorbian people was taken over in the twentieth century by the Catholics.

The Bible and hymn-books

have existed in both Sorbian languages since the eighteenth century. The New Testament was first published in Lower Sorbian in 1709, the Old Testament in 1796, and the complete Bible in 1824 and 1868. The first Lower Sorbian hymn-book appeared in 1574, the latest in 2007. An Upper Sorbian version of the New Testament came out in 1706, followed by the whole bible in 1728. The latest of its eleven editions appeared in 1905. The Upper Sorbian hymn-book of 1710 appeared in its most recent edition in 1955. Since 1854 there has also been an Upper Sorbian edition of the Lutheran confessions.



The first Sorbian printed book, a Lower Sorbian hymn-book from 1574.

„Pomhaj Bóh“ and „Pomogaj Bog“

are journals published for the Sorbian Protestants and named after the Protestant greeting (in German: „Gott helfe dir“; English equivalent: „God speed“). Founded in 1891 the Upper Sorbian „Pomhaj Bóh“ is an independent monthly, whereas „Pomogaj Bog“, first published in 1988, is a part of the Lower Sorbian weekly newspaper.

The national costumes

of the Sorbian people are of an astonishing variety and beauty. They are still worn today in the regions of Hoyerswerda, Weiß-



Confirmation in Neschwitz/Njeswačidlo c. 1930

wasser (Central Lusatia) and Cottbus (Lower Lusatia) by women of the older generation. The younger generation put them on for special occasions and festivals. More and more „Costume Societies“ have been founded in recent years.

Sorbian customs

are widely followed in all regions of Lusatia. Among them are the winter and spring customs „Birds' Wedding“, the „Wendish Carnival“, „Witch Burning“, „Felling the May Pole“, and „Mid-Summer Day's Riding“. Around harvest-time there are „Plucking the Cock“, „Beating the Cock“, „Stubble Riding“, and „Moving the Frog on a Wheelbarrow“. Important church festivals too are sometimes combined with special customs. At Christmas there is the Žišetko (Child of God) and at Easter there are Easter Fires, girls fetch „Easter water“, eggs are decorated, and Easter hymns are sung in the night. Often the colourful national costumes are also to be seen.

Protestant parishes

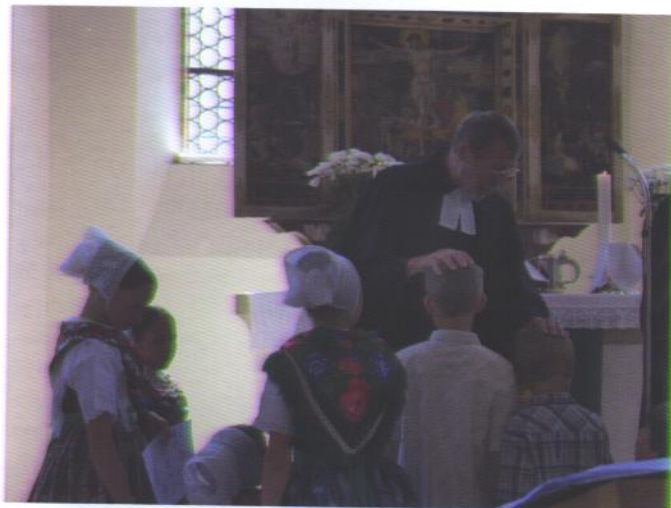
with a Sorbian majority are a thing of the past. Almost all the pastors now are German. But there are still many Sorbian-speaking parishioners, most of whom are senior citizens. Sorbian-speaking families are a rarity. For a few years there have been attempts in kindergartens and schools to give the Sorbian language a new chance and to revive it in the younger generation.

The two districts of the Protestant church

where Sorbs live today are:

The Protestant Lutheran Church of Saxony: It includes some parishes of the Upper Lusatian region. Sorbian religious life here continues well-tried traditions and, to a certain extent, develops in autonomous structures. Church life here is regulated by a canon law which was passed in 1949 and rewritten in 2003. It prescribes the existence of such bodies as the „Sorbian Parishes Association“ as the leading organ, the appointment of a Sorbian superintendent, and the membership of one Sorbian representative in the Saxon synod. In about 10 Saxon parishes, at irregular intervals, Sorbian and Sorbian-German services or similar meetings are held. The high-point of the year is the Sorbian Synod (Kirchentag). Since 1988 services have been broadcast on the radio. Sometimes there are groups of children and young people who receive religious instruction in preparation for confirmation in the Sorbian language.

The Protestant Church of Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia: In this large church, founded in 2004 by the unification of two district churches, there has been a „Sorbian Law“ since 2005. Lower Lusatia and part of Upper Lusatia are included. In the **Lower Lusatian region** around Cottbus after World War II the development of active Sorbian parish life became impossible. Attempts to start it were either turned down or stopped. After decades and thanks to private initiative it again became possible in 1987 to hold services in the Lower Sorbian language. The foundation of „Serbska namša“ („Wendish Church Service“),



The Blessing at a children's service in Hoyerswerda/Wojerjecy 2007

The will of God endures forever

There is much sadness in Lower Wendish church history. Following the Reformation the centre of Wendish literary activity was in Lower Lusatia. It was here that part of the Bible was first translated into Wendish and here the faithful for the first time sang their hymns from printed hymnals. There were great clergymen like Jakubica, Moller, Fabricius, and Fryco. In 1668 the Elector of Brandenburg banned Wendish in the church. Wendish books were burned. In the course of the centuries the greater part of Wendish territory was Germanized. Only around Cottbus Wendish books continued to be printed and church services to be held. A Wendish trinity emerged: the pastor, the parish, and faith in God were a unit. In 1888 Prussia prohibited the teaching of Wendish at the Cottbus grammar school. There was a shortage of Wendish pastors in the parishes and this caused further Germanization of Wendish villages. In 1941 Pastor Bogumil Šwjela was forbidden to continue preaching in Wendish. That was the end of formal Wendish church life. Only here and there people continued to sing Wendish hymns and to pray in Wendish. After 1945 Pastor Herbert Nowak tried to revive Wendish in the church, but without success, because the local church authorities were against it and no parishes demanded it.



Gallery inscription in Lohsa/Laz



Good Friday in Dissen/Dešno 2007

In the 1980s a movement for Wendish church services grew up and in 1987 the first Wendish service of the new period was held in Dissen. Pastor Nowak was again able to preach in Wendish. In the 1990s a grass-roots Wendish church movement was organized as the „Serbske namša“ group and the Society for the Promotion of Wendish in the Church. Today sermons are preached by Pastors Hans-Christoph Schütt of Dissen and Helmut Hupac of Kahren, as well as by three further preachers who are in retirement: Juro Frahnow, Cyril Pjech, and Dieter Schütt. They work in collaboration with many lay members for the strengthening of the Wendish parish.

Uwe Gutsmidt

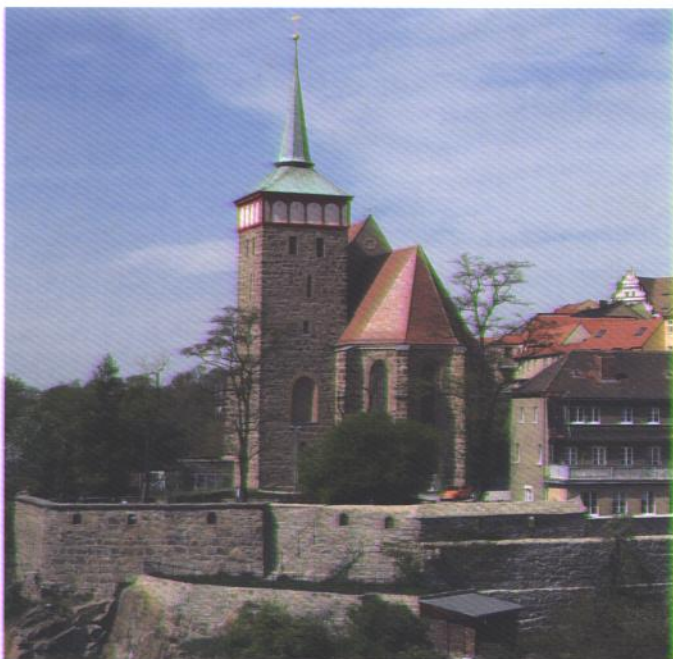
*Chairman of the Society for the Promotion
of the Wendish Language in the Church*

The Lord's Prayer in Upper Sorbian

Wótče naš, kiž sy w njebjesach.
Swjećene budź twoje mjeno.
Přińdź k nam twoje kralestwo.
Twoja wola so stań
kaž na njebju tak tež na zemi.
Naš wšedny chlěb daj nam džensa.
A wodaj nam naše winy,
jako my wodawamy našim winikam.
A njewjedź nas do spytowanja,
ale wumóż nas wot złeho.
Přetož twoje je kralestwo a móc a česć
hač do wěčnosće.
Hamjeń.

The Lord's Prayer in Lower Sorbian

Wóšce naš na njebju.
Wuswěšone buź twójo mě.
Pšiz k nam twójo kralejstwo.
Twója wóla se stań
ako na njebju tak teke na zemi.
Naš wšedny klěb daj nam žinsa.
A wódaj nam naše winy,
ako my wódawamy našym winikam.
A njewjež nas do spytowanja,
ale wumóż nas wót wšogo złego.
Pšeto twójo jo to kralejstwo a ta móc a ta česć
do nimjernosći.
Amen.



The Sorbian Church of St. Michael in Bautzen/Budyšin

an activity group of the church, took place in 1988. Since then they have been able to hold between six and eight services a year in approximately fifteen parishes. Services or devotional items on the radio in the Lower Sorbian language started in 1989. Since 2002 there has been a pastor responsible for Sorbian affairs in all Lower Lusatian parishes. In the **Upper Lusatian region** around Weißwasser, Hoyerswerda, and Niesky there are no longer any Sorbian-speaking pastors. Every now and then bilingual services and meetings take place in some parishes, organized mostly by the Sorbian superintendent from Saxony.

Sorbian Protestant social life

flourished in the nineteenth century. Under National-Socialist rule it came to a complete standstill. A real new beginning became possible only after the reunification of Germany in 1990. In Lower Lusatia the „Spěchowanske towaristwo za serbsku rěc w cerkwi z. t.“ („Society for the Promotion of the Wendish Language in the Church“) was founded in 1994, corresponding to the „Serbske ewangelske towarstwo z. t.“ („Sorbian Protestant Society“) in Upper Lusatia. The aim of both is to promote and continue the nearly 500-years-old tradition of Protestant services, ecclesiastical events, and church publications in the mother tongues of the Sorbian people.

Trudla Malinkowa

Dear brothers and sisters!

As Protestant Sorbs we can look back on centuries of illustrious history. We have produced from our ranks many fighters for faith and nation. In the past Sorbian Protestant societies and individual parishioners performed great works for our Sorbian people. For them faith and nation formed an indestructible unity and their efforts were inspired by the age-old maxim: „For the honour of God and the good of the Sorbs“.

Today being a Protestant Sorb is not always easy. We are in a minority in our parishes and villages, and sometimes even in our families. Even so, we shall not forget our heritage and we shall meet to act in the best traditions of our ancestors. For this reason on 18 June 1994 at the Sorbian Synod in Neschwitz we



Summer party in Wuischke/Wużezk 2007

founded the Sorbian Protestant Society. The purpose of the Society is to promote Sorbian Protestant life. It organizes annual Sorbian Synods. It supports Sorbian parish life and works with children and young people. With the Sorbian Parish Federation we are responsible for publishing the journal „Pomhaj Bóh“. We have also taken care of the Sorbian Lectionary, a song-book for children, and other publications. We support the renovation of monuments which testify to the Sorbian Protestant tradition. Everyone who feels connected to Sorbian Protestant life and wishes to support it is welcome in our organization. Further information may be obtained from the address published here or on the internet: www.sorbischer-evangelischer-verein.de. With good wishes and „Pomhaj Bóh“.

Měrćin Wirth

Chairman of the Sorbian Protestant Society