

THE IMPACT IN AMERICA OF THE SMALLEST SLAVONIC NATION

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Most Lutherans immigrated to the United States as individuals or within a family group.

However, there were interesting immigrations that arrived as large groups. Among the least known are the Wends or Sorbs, sometimes referred to as members of the smallest Slavonic nation.¹ All too easily assimilated over time because of their diminutive numbers, the Lutheran Sorbs nevertheless had their impact and deserve to be recognized. Their heritage in Europe and their place in American history are the subject of this article.

Sorbs/Wends take pride in their heritage

The Sorbs, one of the defended minority groups in modern Europe, have lived in a compact area between what is today Dresden and Berlin for over 1,500 years. Descended from ancient West Slavic tribes, the Luzici and the Milceni, they struggle to maintain their cultural heritage and their correspondingly Lower Sorbian and Upper Sorbian languages even today.² Perhaps only 50,000 people still speak these languages in Lusatia, the name for their homeland.³

It is important to understand the difficulty the Sorbs experienced in maintaining their languages and heritage, their cultural identity. Ruled in varying eras by Germans, Hungarians, Poles and Bohemians their identity was often challenged. Under German rule beginning in the Middle Ages, they were allowed to be active in society only if they used the German language. Many were thereby encouraged to change their Slavic names and relinquish their Slavic language and traditions.⁴

The Reformation introduced an exciting possibility, not only that of a revitalized Christian consciousness, but also a new appreciation for a literate religious and cultural life. The

first book translated into Sorbian was Luther's Small Catechism (1574). Although early Lower Sorbian Bibles and hymnals were published in the late 16th century, complete access to Bibles and hymnals in both dialects never occurred until the last 18th century.

Still, the emphasis on the importance of the mother tongue as a written language grew and in the absence of a national structure it provided the basis for the emergence of a literature, an intelligentsia and a national consciousness. Varying negative attitudes about ethnic minorities in more recent times under the Weimar Republic, National Socialism, and the German Democratic Republic produced new fears about losing all they had come to prize. This is important because, as will be seen, when the Sorbs came to America, they brought with them a passion for their written heritage, specifically as expressed in their Lutheran tradition.⁵

The Lusatian Sorbs refer to themselves as *Srbi* in their own language, but the Germans called them *Wenden*, a term with Latin roots (*Veneti*) that they used to refer to all West Slavs and which appellation was used for a thousand years and more. When the nineteenth century immigrations left for the United States (and for other countries as well), these West Slavs impacted by German imposition had come to know themselves as Wends. Typically, this is their self-designation in the United States today. However, in Europe, given the impact from German nationalist oppression, in scholarly and political writing, the term Sorb, the original Slavic designation, reflects both national pride and ethnic consciousness. Through the remainder of this article, this term now used in contemporary scholarship will be employed.

Immigration fever grips the Lutheran Sorbs

It's hard to appreciate the fact that more than five million Germans were recorded as immigrating across the Atlantic during the nineteenth century. The diverse reasons for this mass exodus included high population growth, social problems due to inheritance and the economic

consequences of various wars. The Saxons and more specifically the Lusatians were impacted by a crisis in the textile industry, largely brought on by industrialization. Equally important were the promises of receiving countries that included new freedoms and privileges and a better legal status. The recruitment campaigns from clever marketers advertised free land and boundless opportunity. A feverish pitch was reached by many who had lost hope in Saxony and Lusatia so much so that they began to live in America, already in spirit, even though they had never left the Fatherland.⁶

In addition to the economic and political problems in Saxony, some Lutheran communities experienced spiritual crises. Under the leadership of the Rev. Martin Stephan, a group of around 650 Lutherans, influenced by the Lutheran Awakening movement, a combination of Pietism and Lutheran orthodoxy, sailed to New Orleans, and then up the Mississippi River to St. Louis, in 1838-39. About fifteen years later, in 1854, another Lutheran group of around 564 with similar concerns, the Lusatian Sorbs whose homeland was part of Saxony, immigrated to Galveston, Texas. Their spiritual leader was the Rev. Jan Kilian, whose role will be discussed shortly.⁷

Sorbs in new homes abroad

The departure of the Lutheran Sorbs to numerous foreign countries, motivated by their discontent in the homeland and by the promise of new opportunities abroad, is meaningfully documented in Trudla Malinkowa's *Shores of Hope: Wends Go Overseas*.⁸ They settled in Australia, Canada, South Africa and South America, as well as to Nebraska and Iowa in the United States. The most significant immigration, however, was to Texas in 1854 when the Ben Nevis, a ship sailing from Liverpool, transported a band of Sorbs to Galveston. This was the second largest Slavic group and the second largest Lutheran group to arrive at one time in the

United States. The impact of the various Sorbian settlements in the United States and their individual leaders are important stories in Lutheran immigration history.

Major Sorbian names with lasting impact

Jan Kilian

Perhaps the most significant Sorbian identification in the United States is provided by two men, both Lutheran pastors with a scholarly bent, who immigrated for totally different reasons, but within twenty-nine years of one another. Jan Kilian (1811-1884), who emigrated from Lusatia in 1854, was a pastor, a scholar, a poet, a musician, and a champion of his Lutheran and his ethnic heritage. Mato Kosyk (1853-1940), who emigrated from Lusatia in 1883, was a pastor, poet, author and church leader who also treasured his own ethnic heritage while living in America. Their stories are important legacies in Lutheran history.⁹

Jan Kilian, born March 22, 1811 in Döhlen, Lusatia, was orphaned at the age of ten and cared for by his uncle. Because rental from the farm he inherited from his parents provided an income, he was able to attend the Gymnasium in Bautzen and to study theology at the University in Leipzig. Impacted by the immigration fever of his day, he considered becoming a missionary in Australia. He chose instead to become a pastor, serving ultimately in Kotitz in Saxony (1837-1848) and Weigersdorf/Klitten, a joint parish in Prussia (1848-1854). During these years, Kilian developed a penchant for translating and writing both poetry and theological articles. He translated the *Book of Concord* in Upper Sorbian and wrote more than 100 hymns, often providing his own tunes. He joined the Upper Lusatian Scholars in 1841 and regularly defended the importance, in the midst of either rationalism or secularism, of maintaining a confessional Lutheran position. For Kilian, Sorbian nationality and Lutheranism were inseparable, a position

that led to his isolation from Sorbian intellectuals and ultimately placed him with those who considered emigration a solution to economic and ecclesiastical problems.¹⁰

A group of almost 600 Sorbs which had invited Kilian to serve as their pastor set sail from Liverpool on the ship Ben Nevis in 1854. By the time they arrived, their numbers were diminished by about 50, mostly due to cholera. Arriving in Galveston, the lay-led group purchased 4,250 acres of poorly-chosen lowland in Lee County and struggled to develop a colony. Kilian himself gave the name Serbin, meaning “place of the Sorbs,” to the settlement. During the next seventy-five years, the Lutheran community experienced many conflicts due to droughts, illness, language issues and differing theologies. Through it all, Kilian attempted to serve as a faithful pastor, resolving debates about conventicles and the continuing use of the native Sorbian tongue in the school and in worship.¹¹

Kilian joined the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in 1855, and his parish joined ten years later, making it the first Missouri-Synod congregation in Texas. Over time, members of the parish moved to other locations in Texas and occasional new immigrants settled outside Serbin, leading ultimately to the founding of twelve additional Texas parishes with largely Sorbian roots. They include Warda, Winchester, Giddings, Fedor, Mannheim, Walburg, Thorndale, Lincoln, Loebau, The Grove, Bishop, and Vernon.¹² From these congregations came the initiative to found a college which ultimately became Lutheran Concordia College of Texas (now Concordia University Texas).

Although George Nielsen accurately states that Kilian’s letters don’t “reflect any satisfaction in his work, nor did he reveal any pride in his accomplishments,”¹³ during his twenty nine years in Texas “he entered into agreements, made purchases, wrote documents, modeled a lifestyle, fathered children, entered debates, served as a homeopathic physician, and preached

thousands of homilies and sermons in three languages.”¹⁴ Significant documents from his hand remain for researchers including 200 drafts of letters to colleagues, 260 homilies delivered at funerals, outlines of theological treatises, a few poetic texts and the Sorbian Lutheran Agenda, the only book ever published in the U.S. in the Sorbian language.¹⁵ What he hoped for, most of all, was to preserve the faith and the language of his heritage. On a monument erected to him in Kotiz, his first parish, his words of admonishment are inscribed: “Preserve good Wends your father’s ways, the tongue and faith of ancient days.”¹⁶

In general, what Kilian modeled as a pioneer Lutheran pastor in the United States is significant for researchers and for future generations. One can learn from his pastoral styles, his organizational skill, his attempts to reduce conflict, his interest in independent learning, his openness to new polity and to theological interpretation, his ability as an intellectual to communicate well with children, his commitment to Word and Sacrament and his attempt to communicate in several languages.¹⁷ Although his setting in Texas was far removed from Lutheranism’s bastions in the Midwest or even its earlier dominance in Eastern seaboard states, and therefore he is lesser known than some others, his courage and commitment to a developing Lutheran stronghold should be remembered.

Mato Kosyk

A Sorbian even less well-known than Jan Kilian in Lutheran circles in the United States is the pastor and poet, Mato (Matthew) Kosyk. Born in 1853 in Werben, Lower Sorbia, a part of Prussia, he showed an early facility for writing. Most of all, he wanted to be a Lutheran pastor, but because he dropped out of the Gymnasium in Cottbus in 1883 before graduating, he was not allowed to study theology at a German university. He worked for the railroad, as a free-lance writer, as a newspaper editor and was a co-founder the Lower Sorbian *Mašica Serbska*, the most

important organization of Lower Sorbian culture. Further, he served as an editor of the Lower Sorbian Lutheran hymnal, personally editing one-third of the 600 hymns. However, in 1883 he immigrated to the U.S. where he studied theology at Concordia Seminary in Springfield, Illinois and at the German Lutheran Seminary in Chicago. After ordination, he served German-speaking congregations in Iowa, Nebraska and Oklahoma. He was also the co-founder of the German Nebraska Synod. He retired in 1913 because of growing deafness and settled in Albion, Oklahoma.¹⁸

Surprisingly, however, during his forty-eight years in America, he continued his poetic interests and abilities and regularly sent back to Lusatia his drafts of poems, many of which expressed his understanding of life in the United States. Kosyk's parishioners may have known that their pastor wrote some poetry in his native tongue, but they could never have dreamed that in the 150th anniversary of his birth, in 2003, his collected works would be published in six volumes and he would be regarded by scholars as the greatest Lower Sorbian poet who ever lived!¹⁹ His literary output including a historical trilogy, dramas, and 600 poems is divided into four phases. The first phase took place in Europe, but the next three phases all took place in America.

All of his poetry was written in Lower Sorbian because Kosyk felt that neither German nor English were suited for his Slavic voice.²⁰ Today, precious few of his poems have been translated into English, but from those that are, at least one should be shared here. Kosyk's poems often reflect that he sang like a caged bird because he was out of his native element in America, and this poem provides that element.

The Indian Maiden

Who's singing there on that green hill
Such happy songs by the sugar tree still?

Couldn't this voice, this tongue be Lusatian, say?
Deep into my heart it probes its way.

“Oh, a foreign tongue it is you hear,
Intelligible to no one of those here.
Trust me, the youthful singer there
Knows not those Sorbian hymns so fair.”

But still her dress where colors unfurl
Resembles that of a Sorbian girl.
Behold the pearls adorning her dress.
She might indeed be Sorbian, I guess.

“Oh no, for from that colorful dress you see
A dark brown face smiles back at me.
An Indian maiden it is, I submit,
The chief's praiseworthy daughter, to wit.

She's wrapping a flowering garland around
Her famous father's arrows she found.
And singing and smiling she's looking at you,
This well might pierce your heart right through.”

Still I gazed at that dark brown face
And deep into her black eyes' grace.
I'd rather she were a Sorb girl, alas,
That charming, enchanting Indian lass.²¹

Major influences of Sorbs in U.S.

In addition to pioneering Sorbs like Kilian and Kosyk, there are many among the thousands of descendants from the earlier immigrants who have had an impact in their own ways in the United States. In Texas alone, where tens of thousands of descendants live, the Sorbs are remembered for their contributions. The first LCMS church building in Texas no longer stands, but the congregation, St. Paul's in Serbin, is still a vital congregation that was a mother to numerous other congregations in Central Texas founded or largely populated by Sorbs. Those congregations in 1926 with the financial help of the Missouri Synod founded Lutheran Concordia College of Texas (now Concordia University Texas). Even as recently as the 1990s,

approximately ten percent of the faculty and staff had Sorbian origins.²² This led to the reflection that this Concordia is the only university in the world founded largely by Lutherans of Sorbian descent.²³ For many years, at least between the 1920 and the 1950s, thirty-five to forty percent of the hundreds who entered church work in Texas were of Sorbian heritage. Their surnames, whether Sorbian in origin or having lost Slavic identification through marital name changes, still remind those who know that the descendants of the early Texas settlers live on.²⁴ Many of these graduates became principals, education executives, circuit counselors, vice presidents and presidents of their synodical Districts. It would be fair to say that they provided the largest Sorbian impact on Lutheranism in the United States. Among those with recent name recognition are the Rev. Dr. Gerald Kieschnick, immediate past President of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and Vern Wuensche, a current candidate for U.S. President in 2016.

A unique remembrance of the impact that Sorbs had in Texas was provided by a bronze plaque erected in the gymnasium of Concordia University which recalls all the men from the Texas District of the LCMS who had fought in World War II. Fully a third of these were of Sorbian extraction proving that although eighty-six years had passed since the immigration, new times called for new patriotism and the Lutheran Sorbs were as committed to their new homeland as their grandparents had been to the old.²⁵

In Serbin, the original settlement of the Texas Sorbs, the Texas Wendish Heritage Society maintains a museum, a bookstore, a library/archive and a reception center where traditional meals with locally made “Wendish noodles” are served and sold. Courses in traditional egg painting are taught and workshops on Sorbian culture are held. Annually, a Wendish Fest on the fourth Sunday of September attracts thousands of visitors. The highpoint of the day is the Lutheran worship service in German, an interesting story of its own.²⁶

In Iowa, where settlers around Zearing came from Drachhausen, Germany, genealogical studies document that that 14,000 people have descended from those original immigrants to Iowa. Most of them became local farmers and some moved to other states. Annually a Wenden Fest is held in Zearing to which descendants return to celebrate heritage.²⁷

Individuals and small family groups from Lusatia have also settled in various locations around the United States and distinguished their heritage. Consider the example of Kurt and Helga Krügermann who left Lübbenau in Lusatia in 1965 when the German Democratic Republic government placed pressure on private enterprise and closed the family's pickle factory that had operated since 1896. With the help of the Lutheran World Federation they were resettled in Los Angeles where they established Krügermann's Pickles, a large firm that markets Sorbian-style pickles all over the U.S. Another example is Anne Muschick who emigrated from Lusatia and ultimately settled in Rochester, New York. She initially imported VWs and sold them to friends, but later came to own VW, Mercedes, Audi and Saab dealerships and also became the first female Board member of CITIBANK. As a Sorbian immigrant who escaped Berlin during the time of the DDR at 20 years of age, she became a testimony in the United States for what a woman with courage and nothing to lose can do.²⁸

Although significant research has been done on Lusatian Sorbs, the research on their legacy and contributions in the United States is in its infancy. Some of the more recent researchers and writers are mentioned in the Bibliography. Students of all ages and interests are encouraged to make this field of interest a focus for their own research.

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https://www.academia.edu/26145690/The_Impact_in_America_of_the_Smallest_Slavonic_Nation?email_work_card=view-paper

Notes

- ¹ Gerald Stone, *The Smallest Slavonic Nation: The Sorbs of Lusatia* (London: Athlone Press of the University of London), 1972.
- ² David Zersen, "Sorbs (Wends)," in *Germany and the Americas: Culture, Politics, and History*, ed. Thomas Adam. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1995), Vol. 3, 987.
- ³ Wukasch ??
- ⁴ George Nielsen, "Wends," *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Themstrom. (Cambridge: The President & Fellows of Harvard College, 1980), ?? .
- ⁵ Zersen, 988.
- ⁶ Joachim Bahlke, "In America in Spirit: Emigration from Saxony and Upper Lusatia at the Time of the Sorbian Pastor and Poet Jan Kilian," *Jan Kilian: Pastor, Poet, Emigrant*, ed., Trudla Malinkowa (Bautzen: Domowina-Verlag, 2014), 344-348.
- ⁷ Bahlke, 346-349. Against those who claim that the Sorbian immigration to Texas was motivated largely by a reaction against the 1817 of Lutherans and Reformed required by the Prussian monarch Frederick William III, Nielsen points out that Kilian had tried to create an economic upturn, those improving the lot of impoverished villagers and decreasing the immigration fever. Emigration was considered as an option when this initiative failed. See George Nielsen, *Johann Kilian, Pastor*. (Serbin: Texas Wendish Heritage Society, 2002), 7.
- ⁸ Trudla Malinkowa, *Shores of Hope: Wends Go Overseas* (Austin: Concordia University Press, 2009).
- ⁹ The Sorbian homeland, Lusatia, prior to the unification of Germany in 1871 , was a part of the Kingdom of Saxony. With the end of the Napoleonic wars, the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815) ceded Lower or northern Lusatia (where Lower Sorbian was spoken) to Prussia. Upper or southern Lusatia (where Upper Sorbian was spoken) remained a part of Saxony. As a result, Jan Kilian grew up as a Sorbian citizen of Saxony, speaking Upper Sorbian, and Mato Kosyk grew up as a Sorbian citizen of Prussia, speaking Lower Sorbian. See Nielsen, 2.
- ¹⁰ Malinkowa, 101-112.
- ¹¹ Zersen, 990.
- ¹² David Zersen, *Concordia on the Move* (Austin: Concordia University Press, 2013), 24-25.
- ¹³ Nielsen, 83.
- ¹⁴ David Zersen, "Jan Kilian's Legacy in the United States," *Jan Kilian: Pastor, Poet, Emigrant*, ed., Trudla Malinkowa (Bautzen: Domowina-Verlag, 2014), 458.
- ¹⁵ Malinkowa, 199-201.
- ¹⁶ Trudla Malinkowa, *Jan Kilian Pastor, Poet, Emigrant* (Bautzen: Domowina-Verlag, 2014), 23.
- ¹⁷ Zersen, 465,
- ¹⁸ David Zersen, "Local Lutheran Boy Finally Makes Good Sixty Years Late," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 4/1 (2003): .
- ¹⁹David Zersen, "Der Einfluss der Umgebung auf den künstlerischen Ausdruck. Einblicke in die Poesie von Mato Kosyk aus der Sicht der Neuen Welt," in *Mato Kosyk 1853-1940*, ed., Roland Marti (Bautzen: Domowina-Verlag, 2004), 76-91. See *Mato Kosyk Spise* (Bautzen: Domowina-Verlag, 2000), Volumes 1-6.
- ²⁰ David Zersen, "Mato Kosyk," *Lutheran Quarterly* XVI/3 (2002), 352.
- ²¹ Mato Kosyk, *Basni—Gedichte—Poems*, eds., Pěťš Janaš and Roland Marti. (Chošebuz, Saarbrücken: 2003), 55. Written in 1884, translated by Roland Marti.
- ²² Faculty with Sorbian heritage included Meissner, Zoch, Teinert,
- ²³ David Zersen, *Concordia on the Move*. (Austin: Concordia University Press, 2013), 22-25.
- ²⁴ David Goeke, "Percent of Sorbian graduates in church work." Email, Feb. 10, 2015. Exampels of families with Sorbian backgrounds who served in the Lutheran congregations : Behnken, Biar, Birnbaum, Doering, Domann, Domsch, Dube, Falke, Fritsche, Gersch, Goeke, Graf, Groeschel, Handrick, Hannusch, Heinze, Hohle, Hobratschk, Horn, Jacob, Kappler, Karcher, Kasper, ieschnick, Kilian, Knippa, Kokel, Kurio, Lange, Lammert, Lehmann, Mersiovsky, Neitsch, Michak, Mickan, Moerbe, Miertschin, Mutschink, Pillack, Polnick, Proske, Rathgeber, Noack, Sander, Schatte, Schkade, Schmidt, Symmank, Teiner, Tschatschula, Urban, Weiser, Wuensche, Wukasch, and Zoch.
- ²⁵ David Zersen, "

²⁶ The Wendish language spoken in Texas was absorbed by the surrounding German-speaking culture by xxxx. The language of the dominant German culture came to be called “Texaner Deutsch” or Texas German, a dialect that was formed over a century in Texas by German speaking immigrants from many different German regions. See Hans Boas, *The Life and Death of Texas German* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009). The last Wendish-speaking pastor was xxxx and the last Wendish sermon was preached by the Rev Theodore Schmidt in 19xx. See Trudla Malinkowa, “The Last Wendish Sermon in Serbin, Texas,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, (2015).

²⁷ Cathy Petersen, “Iowa Wends.” Email, Feb. 10, 1015. Many of the same names are found among the Iowa Sorbs as were noted for Texas. Additional typically Slavic names from Iowa include Bartusch, Puckisch, Bohrisch, Chittau, Gullick, Halbasch, Hannusch, Harnasch, Kanzak, Kullowatz, Markusch, Melisch, Mehlow, Muschick, Muglisch, Schenatzk, Schimlick, Schmellick, Tescha, Woito and Zachow. (http://www.european-roots.com/Wendish_Research_List_of_Emigrants_1.htm)

²⁸ Petersen.