

# The Wends of Texas: A German Minority Group Finds Independence Complicated

## Abstract

An ethnic minority group numbering approximately 600 Prussians and Saxons from a region between Berlin and Dresden immigrated to Texas in 1854. In their native region they knew themselves to be residents of Lužyca (Wendish), Lausitz (German) or Lusatia (English). Most spoke German, many were bi-lingual (German and Wendish) and some spoke only their native Slavic tongue. Together with 250,000 Germans immigrating to the U.S. in 1854 for political and economic reasons, some Wends had an additional reason. They were conservative Lutherans who felt oppressed because of a State-imposed denominational merger (Lutheran/Reformed) in Prussia and a State-supported religious rationalism in Saxony. Somewhat naively, they thought they would be able to maintain their identity as “Old Lutherans” in a Wendish-speaking community in the State of Texas. A song written by their spiritual leader, the Rev. Jan Kilian, was sung by the immigrants during the first decades of their settlement: “Wendish people, keep the witness, of our parents hope and language.”<sup>1</sup> Within several decades, however, they discontinued the exclusive use of Wendish in the parochial elementary school and in the church, speaking increasingly the Texas German (TxG) used in the State and, ultimately, the English that was given official mandate in public documents and schools. Some descendants of the Wends still speak TxG, but the Wendish language is extinct in the U.S. Cultural traditions are maintained at an annual Wendish Fest and musical groups are sometimes brought from Lusatia to entertain the many hundreds who gather. Younger generations are encouraged to appreciate their heritage, but time will tell whether language decline will be followed by cultural indifference, a process fairly common among immigrant ethnic groups in the U.S.

## Introduction

A number of years ago my wife and I invited some faculty at Concordia University at Austin to join us around the campfire on a fall evening in Austin, Texas. As a newcomer from the northern U.S., knowing there was a fairly strong heritage of Wendish<sup>2</sup> students and faculty at the University, maybe twenty percent in those days, I thought I’d break the ice with the man sitting next to me with a Slavic surname on his nametag, and I asked, “What really is a Wend?” “Well,” he replied slowly, “it’s something like a German.” Even as a novice on the campus, I knew he was wrong. I was glad I wasn’t giving a test because he would have failed. With time, as I discovered varying degrees of ethnic awareness among students and faculty, as the new president I took it as a personal challenge to help the campus community appreciate heritage, especially when it was a minority heritage. I hoped, as a beginning, to encourage campus ethnic backgrounds at the institution to approximate similar percentages in Austin. That meant in those days a Black student population of at least ten percent, a Hispanic student population of twenty percent and equivalent percentages for other minority groups.

Of course, the Wendish student/faculty population at Concordia was much higher than the Wendish population in Austin—largely because its students and faculty tended to come from

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<sup>1</sup> David Zersen, ed., *The Poems and Music of Jan Kilian* (Austin: Concordia University Texas, 2011), 22. (The translation of the Wendish hymn was done by the Rev. Martin Doering.)

<sup>2</sup> For various reasons the term “Sorb” is used in scholarly literature in Europe and increasingly in the U.S., but the ethnic term used at the 1854 immigration to Texas was “Wend” and it continues to be the best understood term in Texas today. Therefore, it is used exclusively throughout this article. The word for “Sorb” in Sorbian is “Serb”—hence the name given to the community in Texas, Serbin.

the smaller towns of Central Texas where Wends came to approximate many thousands since their initial arrival in 1854. Despite their growing percentages in Texas, the Wendish-Americans had often forgotten the interesting and challenging story of their emigration and settlement. One of the most unique aspects of their challenge in the U.S. was that the majority language group they left in Germany would surprisingly become the majority language surrounding them in the new world! Their planning and their scouting parties sent ahead to Texas had not prepared them for this. Never having been a nation and often having experienced significant discrimination, they may have been naive about their pioneering prospects. Increasingly today, however, many with Wendish heritage are learning that their ancestors always had to struggle to preserve their Slavic identity. Today, some may still think that a Wend is “something like a German,” but many are learning to understand their ties to Western Slavs, to the Wends of Lusatia, and to the Wends of Texas. It is this important process and understanding that this article will seek to explore.

### Western Slavs Struggle for Survival

In what follows, two significant periods in Wendish history will be discussed in order to demonstrate how the ancestors of the Wends always found it necessary to defend themselves against their majority rulers. Going back as far as written history will allow, the Wends have always had to struggle to maintain an identity either with respect to a name or ethnicity. Historians typically trace the roots of Slavic tribes in Western Europe as far back as the mid eighth century. Germanic tribes left the Trans-Elbian region around 500 AD and Slavic tribes moved into the deserted swampy, forested region with the Oder River in the East and the Elbe in the West between 600 and 700 AD.<sup>3</sup> Then facing the menace of the Franks, they held their ground and became the furthest Western outpost achieved by the Slavic tribes.

Slavs are generally divided by historians and linguists into three groups: the Southern branch (Serbs, Croats, Slovenians, Macedonians and Bulgarians), the Eastern branch (Russia, Belarus and Ukraine) and the geographical focus in this article, the Western branch (Poles, Czechs, Slovaks and Wends). All formed a group within Indo-European languages, thus making them distantly related to German and English.<sup>4</sup>

Within the settled Western branch there were twelve tribes of Wends, two of whose development will be discussed in this article: the northernmost or *Lusici* and the southernmost or *Milceni*. These two are the only Wendish tribes that have maintained their identity to the present time. The *Luzici* populate the lowland area known in German as the *Niederlausitz* (Lower Lusatia in English) and the *Milceni* populate the highland area known in German as the *Oberlausitz* (Upper Lusatia in English).<sup>5</sup>

Often the two tribes of Wends could guard their mutually indistinguishable languages and try to maintain their cultural customs. However, from recorded history in the 900s, beginning with Henry I, the Wends were dominated by Germans, Poles, and then Bohemians for almost 300 years (1376-1675). The use of Wendish in courts and legal documents was forbidden beginning in 1327, although in families and local business transactions it was retained. In 1675,

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<sup>3</sup> Gerald Stone, *Slav Outposts in Central European History* (London: Bloomsbury), 2016, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Wukasch, *A Rock Against Alien Waves* (Austin: Concordia University Press), 2008, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Stone, 8.

Lusatia became a fiefdom of Saxony which led to further German colonization and Germanization. In 1667, the destruction of all Wendish printed materials in Lusatia was ordered by the Duke of Brandenburg and all worship in Sorbian was forbidden.<sup>6</sup> Throughout their history in the Early, High and Late Middle Ages and in the Early Modern Period as well, the Wends never were a national group, never had their own country. All these realities provided painful content to a phrase like “oppressed minority group”.

### Lusatians Struggle to Become a Nation

In 1815, after the Napoleonic wars, the Congress of Vienna created a major challenge to Lusatia by giving part of Upper Lusatia to Saxony and the remainder of Lusatia to Prussia. Increasingly the use of Wendish was forbidden. In 1848, 5000 Wends signed a petition to demand the use of the Wendish language in churches, schools, courts and government departments. In the same year, immigration to the U.S. and to Australia was considered as a solution to growing discrimination. Ultimately, the crisis was complicated when after 1871 not only did industrialization impact the rural Wendish cottage industries, but also Germany became a united country and the whole of Lusatia became a part of the German nation, part of it belonging to Saxony and part to Prussia.<sup>7</sup>

Although Wendish immigration to Texas began in 1849, some review of the subsequent discrimination against the Wends in Europe is helpful to appreciate the ongoing burden for the Western Slavic minority, the descendants of the *milceni* in Lusatia, now a part of the German nation. Under National Socialism, Wends were discriminated against because they were condescended to by those who prized Aryan identity.<sup>8</sup> In the German Democratic Republic, Wends were to some degree supported to demonstrate that the regime respected diversity. No matter what the political circumstance, the Wends always had to struggle to maintain their language and culture. After both World War I and World War II, attempts were made by the Wends to create the possibility of an independent nation, but the decisions at Paris and Yalta never allowed it.<sup>9</sup> The current struggle to retain their language and culture as a minority group with 30,000 speakers supported by the German government is not without its challenges, but it not part of the concern of this article.

### Wends struggle to establish a home in the new world

During the mid-nineteenth century, substantial emigration took place from much of Europe and the Wends participated in this process. Some said the exodus demonstrated an “emigration fever”.<sup>10</sup> From 1815 to 1914, 5.5 million people left the German empire. Five thousand of them were Wends who chose as their new homes Australia, the U.S., Canada, South Africa and South America. Most left for economic reasons, but some left for religious reasons. Already mentioned were problems associated with industrialization and the restriction of the usage of the native

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<sup>6</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sorbs>, last edited April 14, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sorbs>.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Richter, *Die Oberlausiz im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Bautzen: Domowina Verlag, 2022), 43.

<sup>9</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sorbs>.

<sup>10</sup> Trudla Malinkowa, “Lutheran Wends in Australia and Texas,” Jan Malink, ed., *Five Centuries: The Wends and the Reformation* (Austin: Concordia University Press, 2017), 47.

tongue. A group of conservative “Old Lutherans” from a joint parish in Weigersdorf/Klitten had a sympathetic pastor who with many of the parishioners felt that emigration was the best solution for their predicaments. Planning began in earnest.

Among the areas bidding for the arrival of new workers was the State of Texas. Thirty Wends travelled there in 1853, followed by a group of 600 leaving in 1854 from Liverpool on the “Ben Nevis”. It was the largest group of Wends (most from Upper Lusatia) to travel together and the last group of Old Lutherans to emigrate. The trip was challenging and eighty-one of the 600 died in route either from cholera or other diseases. While the group had lay leaders responsible for the various financial and organizational details, Jan Kilian served as the legendary pastor whose leadership is remembered to this day. His ability to help the group maintain their vision and focus was demonstrated in his many gifts as a writer, translator, poet, composer, preacher, teacher and homeopath. While he was still a pastor in Klitten, Germany, he had written a song that became the Wendish Anthem. In it is the chorus: “Wendish people keep the witness, of our parents’ hope and language.”<sup>11</sup> Carved in granite on a monument to Kilian in Kotitz, these words symbolize the hope of a minority leader and an immigration visionary. And as many a saying suggests, “As the leader goes, so go the people”.

When the Wends arrived in the new world, many plans were yet uncertain. Their charter stated an intent to establish a “pure evangelical Lutheran congregation” and a “community in keeping with civic regulations”.<sup>12</sup> No formal document exists to prove that maintaining their Wendish language was a priority although this may have been self-understood.<sup>13</sup> However, the difficulties of the first years were so challenging that there wasn’t much time to evaluate original intentions. The transportation by oxcart, the pouring rains, the poor quality of land purchased, the desperate situation with log cabins hastily built—all were disillusioning. The prospect of a golden future seemed far away. It is known, however, that although the majority spoke Wendish and German, Wendish was the common tongue that united them on the farms and in the villages.<sup>14</sup> Fourteen years into the community’s settlement, by Pastor Kilian’s count, there were still 493 Wendish-speakers and eighty-eight German-speakers.<sup>15</sup> It is also known that for sixty-six years there were worship services held in Wendish in Texas! There were even Wendish-speaking pastors until 1947!<sup>16</sup>

Available confirmation records are perhaps the only statistics that show how language use in Serbin declined over the years. From 1856 to 1861, all children were confirmed in Wendish. Wendish continued as the language of choice from 1868-1877 when 122 were confirmed in Wendish and twenty-five in German. From 1878 to 1902 there was somewhat of a balance between the choice of languages, probably on the part of the parents, when 209 were confirmed in Wendish and 183 in German. From 1902 to 1905 the balance changed dramatically and by 1905 no one was confirmed in Wendish at all!<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> David Zersen, ed., *The Poems and Music of Jan Kilian* (Austin: Concordia University Texas, 2011), 22.

<sup>12</sup> George Nielsen, email to author, April 5, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> George R. Nielsen, *A Wendish Reader: Essays and Articles on Wends in America* (Giddings, 2021), 40

<sup>14</sup> George R. Nielsen, 12.

<sup>15</sup> George R. Nielsen, 150.

<sup>16</sup> Malinkowa, 50.

<sup>17</sup> George R. Nielsen, 246-248.

Various factors were involved in the gradual decline in Wendish language usage. New immigrants came from Lusatia and settled with others from the Serbin area in numerous communities: Fedor, Giddings, Warda, Swiss Alp, Walburg, Winchester, Thorndale, Noack and Lobau. However, these communities did not have the same Wendish-speaking density that Serbin had, so the so-called Wendish diaspora in central Texas did not maintain a strong linguistic and cultural heritage.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally challenging to the maintenance of the Wendish language, non-Wendish ethnic groups settling in the surrounding areas of central Texas brought their mother tongues with them. If they settled near others who shared their native tongue, language islands were often formed. In Texas, these included Anglo-Americans, Afro-Americans, Spanish, American Indians, Swedes, Norwegians, Danes, Czechs, Slovaks, Poles and Italians.<sup>19</sup> The German immigrants to Texas, however, represented by far the largest numbers of settlers. Beginning in the 1840s, they came largely from Nassau, Alsace, Hesse, Lower Saxony and Thuringia. Their numbers, approaching 100,000 by the early 1900s, had such an impact on Texas as a whole that two trends resulted. TxG, a unique speech form that developed from the many German dialects in use by the immigrants from Germany, became the dominant language in all public and private domains in the State! Secondly, newcomers were assimilated into the TxG language-speakers because TxG speakers did not know English or the other languages spoken in speech islands in Texas.<sup>20</sup> These two issues had an enormous effect on the Wends—something they could never have imagined when they considered leaving a German majority language situation and immigrating to Texas.

Gradually, the minority Wendish community assimilated into the dominant German community, something that may have been more emotionally difficult than linguistically. More complicated for the Wends was the gradual adoption of English because that language was unknown to them. Psychological pressure was placed on the Wendish leadership to move in language directions introduced by secular authorities. A tension occurred when a substantial segment of the Wendish Lutheran Church wanted its services to be conducted entirely in the dominant language in Texas, German. Because Pastor Kilian was unwilling to do this, a split occurred and lasted for forty-four years as St. Peter's Lutheran Church.<sup>21</sup> The elementary school classes that had been taught in Wendish by Pastor Kilian were, beginning in 1872, taught primarily in German by the pastor's son, Gerhardt Kilian. Beginning in 1867, services were held in the original church in Wendish and German every Sunday.<sup>22</sup> It was the beginning of a new era, the impact of which was not yet even glimpsed. In the 1940s, German was still used as the language of instruction for religion in the school, and it was the language of worship in the

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<sup>18</sup> Malinkowa, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Hans Boas, "A Dialect in Search of its Place—The Use of Texas German in the Public Domain," *Transcendental Encounters: Central Europe Meets the American Heartland*, David Zersen & Craig Cravens, eds. (Austin: Concordia University Press, 2005), 79.

<sup>20</sup> Boas, 80.

<sup>21</sup> George R. Nielsen, 147.

<sup>22</sup> George R. Nielsen, 248.

church. As a result of WWII, however, English replaced German as the congregation's primary language.<sup>23</sup>

Changes continued over the years. In 1929, Johann Proske wrote that the parents were to blame for the loss of the Wendish tongue because they did not speak Wendish with their children.<sup>24</sup> Subsequently, a significant reason for the decline of the resulting TxG *lingua franca* was the two world wars in which Germans were the enemy. English came to replace it in the public and parochial schools in Texas. In the 1940s parents and children still spoke TxG together at home and by the 1950s the new generations no longer spoke it at all. Yet it was estimated that by 2005, 10,000 speakers of some competence remained, all in their 60s or older.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

No survey has ever been conducted of the current number of living descendants of the original Wendish settlers, but numbers around 10,000 in Texas and elsewhere in the U.S. have been suggested.<sup>26</sup> The annual Wendish Fest held on the third Sunday of September in every year brings together many hundreds of people, some gathering for a family reunion and others to remember the good old days when people of Wendish heritage still knew a unifying language and culture that made them distinct. Here and there, articles appear about Wendish cuisine, workshops are offered on painting Easter eggs, trips are organized to Lusatia, and concerts celebrate the liturgical and song heritage of the Wends.<sup>27</sup> Few, however, mourn the fact that their language is gone and the cultural heritage is disappearing. They are, after all, realists, and they appreciate the values and benefits available in their twenty-first-century American homeland. Many are still members of Lutheran churches and many still attend Concordia University Texas, founded in 1926 by representatives of thirteen congregations with Wendish heritage. The original dream of the settlers has taken on dimensions very different from those voiced in 1854. Who could have imagined that Wends would find the German language a challenge for a second time—and of all places in the haven provided by the new world! Increasingly, some Texans may find a mere generic American identity somewhat boring when, after all, one might be able to have one like “Wendish-American”, a curious identity that may beg for explanation.

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<sup>23</sup> George R. Nielsen, 132.

<sup>24</sup> Trudla Malinkowa, *Ufer der Hoffnung* (Bautzen: Domowina Verlag, 1999), 194.

<sup>25</sup> Boas, 81.

<sup>26</sup> David Zersen, “The Impact in America of the Smallest Slavonic Nation,” *The Lutheran Forum*, Summer, 2015, 18-21

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin A. Kolodziej, “Lutheran Sacred Music in the Heart of Texas,” *Joyful Singing: A Story of Lutheran Sacred Music in Texas* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), Chapter 5.