

# WENDS

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The Wends, a little-known immigrant group, settled in Texas among the Germans in the mid-19th century. An ancient Slavic people also known as Lusatian Sorbs, they had resisted assimilation in Europe for over 1,000 years, preserving their own language and customs though not their political independence.

## BACKGROUND

The ancestors of the Wends were West Slavs called the Milceni and Luzici who occupied an area east of the Oder River in the early Middle Ages. The Wendish homeland is part of the territory known as Lusatia in East Germany. Approximately 50 miles southeast of Berlin, it is about 1,800 square miles in area and is bordered by Czechoslovakia on the south and Poland on the east. The Spree River flows through its two major towns, Bautzen and Cottbus. The Wends have managed to maintain their identity although they have been ruled at various times by Germans, Hungarians, Poles, and Bohemians. In both world wars they unsuccessfully sought recognition by the major powers as a nation-state.

The first of their foreign conquerors was Charles, one of Charlemagne's sons, who defeated the Wends and burned Bautzen in 806; by the year 1100 the Wends had been subjugated. German nobles dominated the Wendish peasants and relegated the urban Wends to homes outside the walls or to restricted sections of the city. They could become active in society only through German institutions and the German language. The guilds were German, and the mercantile activity was conducted in the German manner. Under pressure, especially in the part of Lusatia under Prussian control, many Wends adopted German names and relinquished their Slavic traditions.

The Christianization of the Wends began prior to the German conquest, but it was vigorously promoted by the Germans. They also followed the Germans in the Reformation; most Wends converted to Lutheranism in 1530 after the Council of Augsburg. Martin Luther's emphasis on the vernacular encouraged the Wends to devise a written language, and in 1574 Luther's Small Catechism became the first work to be published in it.

There are two versions of Sorbian, also called Sorbic, Wendish or Lusatian, corresponding to the divisions of the Lusatian region. Both versions belong to the Western Slavic group. The southern area called Upper Lusatia speaks a dialect nearer to Czech (Luther's Catechism was translated into Upper Sorbian); the northern area, or Lower Lusatia, a dialect nearer to Polish. Traditionally the Wends call themselves Srbi in their own language, but the Germans call them Wenden, a term widely used both by others and by many of the Slavic Lusatians themselves, including those who migrated to foreign lands in the 19th century. In the Middle Ages, Wend was the German name for all West Slavs, however, and as a result it came to symbolize the Germanization of the Wends that began in the 9th century with the Carolingians and continued through the Weimar Republic and the Nazi period.

Although Lusatia was also ruled at times by non-German princes, it has remained under German control since the Peace of Prague in 1635. Prior to German unification in 1871 it comprised parts of the kingdoms of Prussia and Saxony-Lower Lusatia being Under Prussian administration and Upper Lusatia under that of Saxony. Since World War II it has been part of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and divided administratively between the districts of Dresden and Cottbus. Wendish ethnic awareness has been encouraged under the German Democratic Republic, and the term Sorb has been adopted for the Slavs of Lusatia. The name is meant to reflect their Slavic heritage and at the same time to distinguish them from the Serbs of southern Europe. At present approximately 60,000 people in Lusatia call themselves Sorbs. They are served by a Sorbian cultural center (the Domowina) and a Sorbian-language newspaper, radio station, theater, folk ensemble, and publishing house. The Sorbian language is also taught in the schools.

## **MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT**

The Wendish migration to the United States was closely associated with that of the Germans. In 1849 some Wends settled in Austin County, Tex.; in 1853 a party of 35 Wends sailed for Texas, and the next year Pastor Jan Kilian (1811- 1884) and 500 Wends landed at Galveston. Although some of the Wends had been driven there by economic hardship, especially crop failures in the 1840s and a land shortage resulting from population growth in Lusatia, the Kilian group were religious dissenters: some of them had lived under Prussian administration and left in reaction to government attempts to force the Lutherans and Calvinists to worship in a single state church; others had lived under Saxon administration and were unhappy over the doctrinal laxity in the Lutheran Church of Saxony and the impact of rationalism on the clergy. A citizen of Saxony during his early life, Kilian denounced both administrations and in 1845 contemplated emigrating to Australia. In 1848 he resigned his position in the Saxon state church and became the pastor of several small clusters of independent Lutherans who refused to worship in the Prussian church.

Although Kilian exercised religious leadership, the migration to Texas was directed by laymen living along the Prussian-Saxon border who had formed an organization to manage the emigrants and then asked Kilian to be their pastor and to serve the Wendish congregation they hoped to establish in Texas. Wends from both Saxony and Prussia joined the group, along with members of Kilian's own congregations. A few more Wends migrated before the Civil War broke out in the United States; altogether approximately 600 had arrived by 1860. Between 1865 and the end of the century another 600 came, followed by a few in the early 20th century. But of all the groups to migrate, Kilian's remained the largest and most significant.

The Kilian party first traveled to Hamburg, from where they sailed to Hull, England. They took the railroad to Liverpool where they waited for a ship that was scheduled to return to Texas for another cargo of cotton. Before this ship, the *Ben Nevis*, could be boarded, however, several Wends were exposed to cholera, and 73 eventually succumbed to it or to other sicknesses.

The survivors arrived at Galveston in December 1854. Most of them traveled by wagon to join the earlier Wendish immigrants at New Ulm. During the winter months their leaders purchased the

Delaplain League (4354 acres) in present-day Lee County, and there built a church and a town called Serbin. A few built homes in the village, but most of the Wends were farmers, and, like other Texans, settled on isolated farms.

The first few years in Texas were difficult for the Wends. Delays in purchasing the Delaplain League prevented early planting the first year, and two years of drought followed. Inadequate shelter and diet resulted in more sickness and death. The familiar crops of Lusatia, such as rye, wheat, and flax, did not grow well in Texas, and the Wends had to adopt the local cotton and corn economy. The Civil War brought some prosperity, when the prices for cotton rose in both the Houston and Mexican market, and many Wends turned to carting cotton across the Rio Grande. But the Wends were also confronted with the conscription laws. Not owning slaves and not interested in fighting for the Confederacy, as many as possible evaded military service, but nonetheless several of their young men lost their lives in the war.

Even in those more profitable years the Wends did not achieve the prosperity of their Texas neighbors. The agricultural censuses of 1870 and 1880 show that their farms were smaller and the productivity lower than those of the more established population. Handicapped by the low fertility of the Delaplain League, the Wends became prosperous farmers only through frugality, self-denial, and hard work.

The local German community played a significant role in Serbin's development. Many of the Wends who migrated to Texas were equally fluent in German and Sorbian, and Kilian, trained in German schools and at the University of Leipzig, preached in both languages. The church records of births, marriages, and deaths he kept in German, but the congregational minutes and obituaries he recorded in Sorbian. Some Germans had accompanied Kilian's migration, and several families had German spouses. Initially the church services were conducted in Sorbian, as was the language of the Lutheran school, taught by Kilian. However, German Lutherans also settled in the Serbin area and joined the Wendish congregation; by 1862 Kilian was preaching in German every sixth Sunday. Eventually tensions in the congregation arose over a variety of problems, and most often they were expressed in controversy about which language to use. Because of the conflict over the use of Sorbian, some Germans and "progressive" Wends left Kilian's congregation in 1870 and formed their own fellowship. Though weakened by the schism, Kilian's congregation continued construction of a larger sanctuary begun in 1866. The most significant monument to the Texas Wends, the building was dedicated in 1871 and is still in use.

The two congregations existed side by side. In the period after the congregational division, more and more of the Wends began speaking German, and Kilian increased the use of German in his church services. Shortly before his death in 1884, Kilian began to receive assistance from his son Herman, who had graduated from the Lutheran Seminary in St. Louis. Through the diplomatic activities of the younger Kilian, the two groups renewed their friendship and, because German now predominated in the entire community, the two churches merged in 1914. Sorbian was taught in the school until 1916 and used in the pulpit from time to time until 1920, when Herman Kilian died and a replacement willing to preach in Sorbian could not be found. The new pastor, Herman Schmidt, although a Wend, used Sorbian only in private devotions and in pastoral visits. Ironically, the German culture and language that the Wends had resisted for so long in Europe finally became theirs in the United States, just as they had made the

transition, however, World War I broke out, and widespread anti-German sentiment induced the Wends to shift to English. At the end of the 1970s some older people continued to speak Sorbian, but German remained the more common second language.

The group that accompanied Kilian was interested in forming a single congregation, but the Wends who had settled earlier in Austin County did not join the settlement, and those whose occupations were suited to urban life remained in Houston. Establishing a tight, cohesive colony was complicated further by the low productivity of the land of the Delaplain League. As a result some of the Wends moved on, establishing settlements in Swiss Alp, Fedor, Warda, Manheim, and other places. Most of the Wendish immigrants who arrived after 1865 stopped at Serbin first and then continued on to one of these other Texas settlements. In more recent years the Wends have followed the general pattern of rural to urban migration by moving to Austin, Houston, Port Arthur, Corpus Christi, and San Antonio. In spite of this dispersion, however, unity among the Wends and recognition of their common heritage remain. This fellowship is maintained to an extent through membership in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and also, at least during the early decades of the 20th century, through the pages of the Giddings Deutsches Volksblatt (Giddings, Tex., 1899-1949). The Wendish Culture Club was founded in Serbin in 1971. In 1976 it was renamed the Texas Wendish Heritage Society and is now engaged in perpetuating Wendish tradition.

The folkways of the Wends are tied closely to the church calendar, especially the major festivals of Easter and Christmas, and to the personal milestones of birth, death, and marriage that are also sanctified in the church. Easter is celebrated with both religious services in church and the coloring of eggs. A particular custom observed in both Texas and Europe, and also found among other Slavic groups, is the use of "Easter water." The water dipped from a brook early on Easter morning supposedly stimulates health and beauty; in Texas it was sprinkled on sleepers' faces to awaken them. Of the personal observances, the most elaborate is the wedding, which involves both a church service and an elaborate celebration. In Europe a professional wedding manager called a braska supervised practically all aspects of the celebration, but in Texas his role was limited to calling at the bride's home, leading the wedding party in songs and prayers, and directing the procession to church and back to the home. Some social gatherings in the earlier years also reflected the Wendish heritage. Feather-stripping parties, accompanied by dancing and singing, required each person to remove the soft part of the goose feathers until a cup was filled with feathers; then followed the merrymaking. In more recent years the Wendish customs have been neglected, and the celebrations of personal observances no longer reflect the Wendish heritage, but simply follow the practices of the larger Texas community.

In addition to the Texas settlement and the Wends who migrated elsewhere in the world - to Australia, Canada, South Africa - a small number went to Nebraska. Although there was some communication between a few Texas and Australian families, there was apparently none between the Texans and the small group in Sterling, Nebraska, which was closely tied to the German community; at least no record of any correspondence between the Nebraska and Texas Wends remains. The Wendish poet Mato Kossyk (1853-1940), who migrated to the United States and became a Lutheran pastor, visited the Sterling group in the 1880s and communicated with them in Sorbian. But by now awareness of the Wendish heritage of some Sterling families is only a dim memory in the minds of a few of the old people.

## **Bibliography**

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