

A Texan Learns Sorbian in Bautzen

Weldon Mersiovsky is one of 52 participants in an international course in Bautzen. Why the 73-year-old made the long journey.

Weldon Mersiovsky sits in front of a blackboard with a few sentences in Sorbian. At first glance, it looks like he's the teacher. But it is not like that. Mersiovsky is currently a student in Bautzen - at the age of 73. He comes from Walburg in Texas and is currently taking part in the international Sorbian summer course, which the Sorbian Institute organizes every two years in Bautzen. By the end of the week, 52 women and men from Benin, France, Japan, Czech Republic, Ukraine, Poland and Germany, among others, will learn Sorbian vocabulary and grammar - but also get to know the culture of the minority.

Weldon Mersiovsky told *Sächsische Zeitung* why he made the long journey "across the pond". His ancestors were part of the Sorbian emigration movement to America at the end of the 19th century. At the age of ten, his grandfather came to the USA - that was in 1880. Later he married a Sorbian woman.

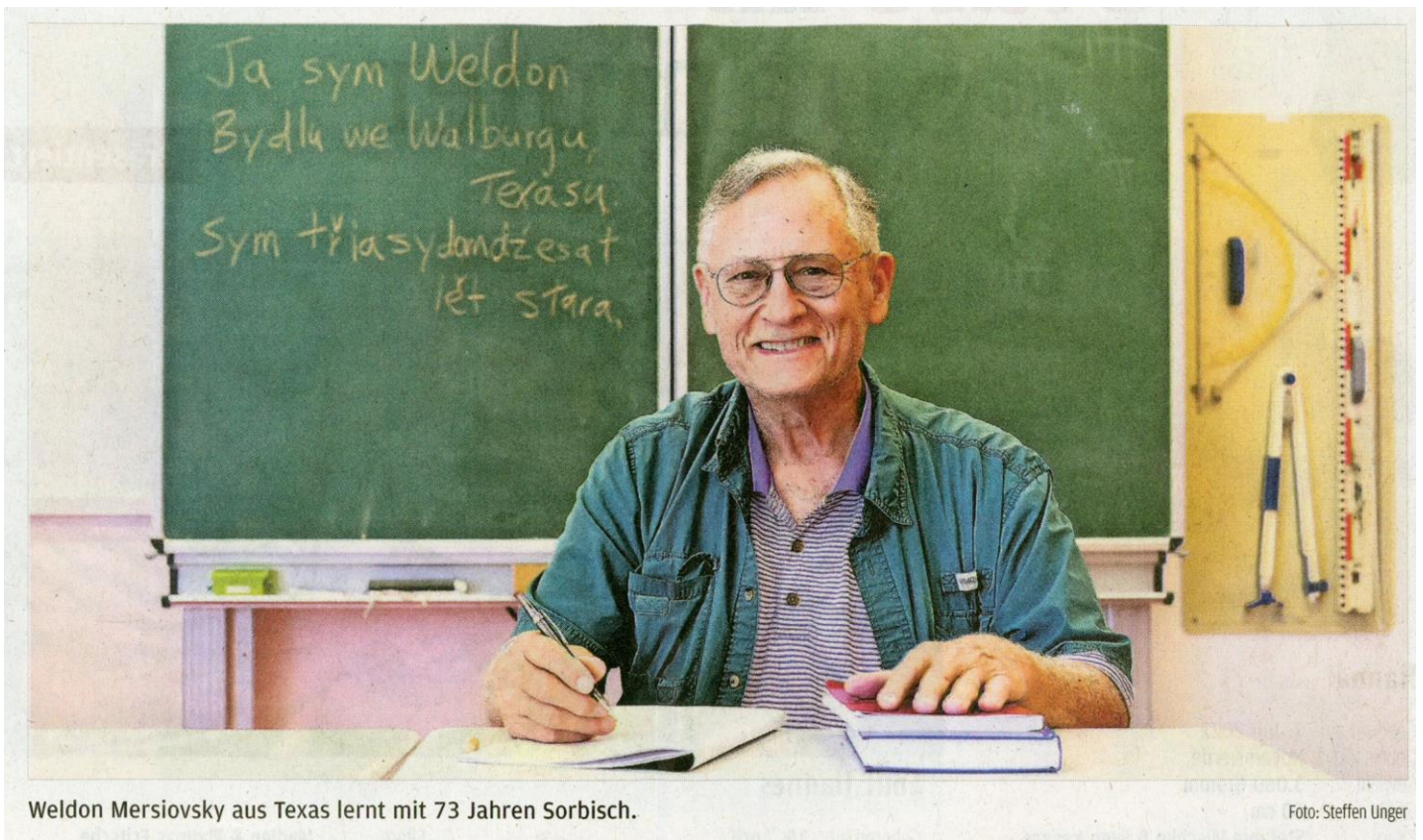
But over time, says Mersiovsky, the Sorbs who emigrated lost more and more of their cultural background: "The Sorbs quickly became Americans." Their language was often the first thing they discarded. His father only spoke a few words of Sorbian. The German language, which had been passed down through the generations in the family, also disappeared in America. At some point the Mersiovsks moved to Houston - they no longer spoke German there either. Weldon Mersiovsky still remembers speaking German as a child, but in the big city his parents didn't speak the language anymore, if at all they only spoke it when they didn't want the children to know what they were talking about.

The Texan also explains why he is now learning Sorbian by referring to the family research he is doing: "Some people like to put together jigsaw puzzles with thousands of pieces. Family research is like a jigsaw puzzle with millions of pieces, only it's not flat, it's three-dimensional." The pensioner reports that he traced the life of his ancestors back to the 17th century - and points out that his family name is right there in the region. Some people are interested in the lives of royals and celebrities - he is curious to know how the people in his family used to live.

His research often becomes unmanageably complex: his mother had 36 cousins and knew the names and birthdays of all of them. Today, Mersiovsky has trouble remembering the birthdays of his seven grandchildren. But he is the first in his family to learn the forgotten mother tongue again, says the pensioner. In Texas, some wouldn't even have heard of it. Many would also ask who he wants to speak Sorbian with when he comes back. I want to encourage people in Texas to explore the language. In the library in Serbin we have many books in Sorbian, but nobody is able to understand them," explains Mersiovsky, who worked as an insurance salesman until he retired. He has started to translate these books. Now he hopes that what he is now learning in the Sorbian course can help him. He is sure that he still has a lot to learn: "I might speak Sorbian as well as a newborn baby", he says with a smile and corrects himself, "maybe like a three or four-year-old child." Nevertheless, you can feel the passion he shows for this topic.

He is particularly fascinated by Sorbian folklore, which also makes up part of the summer course. Bautzen is a fantastic place for coming into contact with the Sorbian language and culture, and Lusatia has a special place in his heart, says Weldon Mersiovsky. But getting there wasn't easy: by plane from Austin to Europe, then from Great Britain to Germany and by rental car to Bautzen.

Mersiovsky says he is committed to his family's historical identity: "We haven't yet defined what makes a Sorb. Maybe it's the language, a certain way of dressing, a certain way of dancing, a certain way of eating. But even though I don't dress in Sorbian or dance in Sorbian, I see myself as a Sorb."



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