

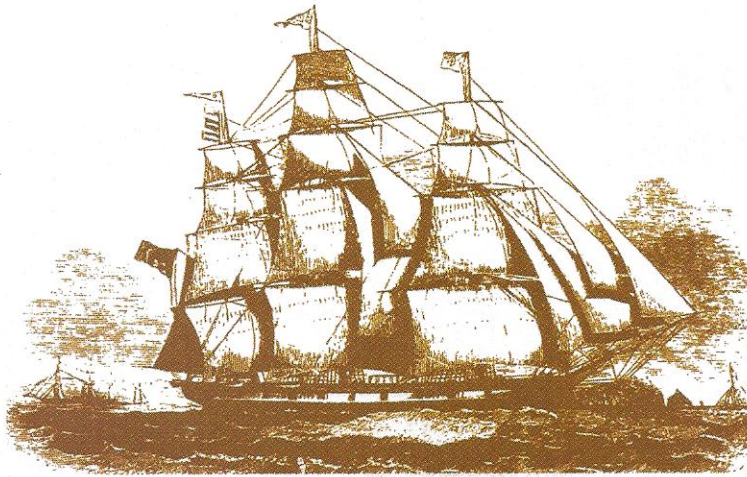
The Lutherans Time (almost) Forgot

by Mary Agria

It was only two years ago that Dr. David Zersen took to the Internet exploring Lutheran church body Web sites in Europe. Tucked away in an eastern German site, he came across news that a Wendish junior college was being built on the border near the Czech Republic.

St. John's Lutheran Junior College in Hoyerswerda and Concordia University in Austin (CUA) had found each other: They are the only two Lutheran educational institutions in the world that share direct Wendish roots.

A confirmation certificate signed by church leader Johann Kilian in 1876 shows that the Wendish language and customs carried over into the United States.

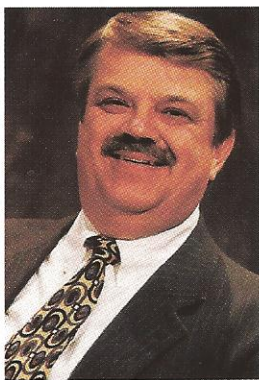


The Ben Nevis carried some 575 Wendish pioneers from Germany to Texas in the 19th century.

But who are the Wends? Even many Wends in the U.S. today would find it hard to explain their unique background, says Dr. Gerald Kieschnick, part Wendish himself and president of the Missouri Synod's Texas District. Only an estimated 60,000 Wends (also known as Sorbs) speak the language worldwide. This is why making connections is so important. As a result of that first on-line contact in the fall of 1997, six teachers from *Evangelisches Gymnasium Johanneum* in Hoyerswerda traveled to Austin in the spring of 1998 to celebrate their people's common identity.

A Saga of Survival

"The Wends never had a defined homeland," President Zersen explains. "They never had a nation. They never had a government, which is one of the reasons why they were persecuted."



"Just as St. Olaf College is Norwegian, so we are Wendish," says Dr. David Zersen, president of Concordia University in Austin, Texas.

Zersen is helping give voice to a Lutheran ethnic group facing the loss of its unique cultural and religious heritage.

For centuries, these Slavs or Slavonic peoples migrated gypsy-like between Poland and Czechoslovakia on the east and various boundaries within Germany on the west. They were given the name "Wends" in early Latin histories (possibly from the Gothic "vinja" meaning "wandering about").

Around the sixth century, a group settled in the Lusatian Mountains and river-laced heaths and meadowlands of Brandenburg and Saxony (south of Berlin and northeast of Dresden). Denied independence by the increasingly dominant Germanic (Frankish) tribes, for the next 1,400 years the Wends resisted ongoing attempts to wipe out their culture.

During the Reformation, most Wends became Protestants. Some speculate that Martin Luther's wife, Katarina von Bora, may have shared this heritage. Her father, Hans, came from Lippendorf (at the time a Wendish town); the name von Bora itself may have Wendish roots.

The Wends had to fight ongoing persecution and prejudice as they practiced their Lutheran faith. Martin Luther himself was once quoted as saying, "The Wends are thieves and a very bad sort of people!" Still, it was Luther's stress on teaching Biblical truths in the mother tongue that in part inspired the Wends to develop their own literary language using the Cyrillic alphabet—a powerful force in retaining their identity.

Under Prussian rule in 1817, the Wends were ordered to combine Lutheran and Reformed traditions and give up their language. They refused, and a new wave of persecution began.

Life in a New Land

In 1854, mainly to seek religious freedom but also to preserve their language and customs, some 575 Wends boarded the sailing ship *Ben Nevis* to emigrate to the New World, 16 years after the Saxons from Germany had settled

in Missouri with the help of C. F. W. Walther. Wendish leader Johann (Jan) Kilian—a classmate of Walther’s at the University of Leipzig—may have been intending to join his friend along the Mississippi.

“Some say that the winds blew them all the way to Galveston,” Zersen says with a chuckle. “But the truth is they had contact with an earlier clan of Wends who had settled near Austin.” Other Wends took refuge in southern Australia, Nebraska and the Ottawa River Valley in Ontario, Canada. The largest population of Wendish

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descendants today outside of Europe is located in Texas.

Both in Texas and Australia the Wend language fell silent. For Texas Wends, the relative size of German populations near their settlement at Serbin contributed to that assimilation. Even the gravestone of pioneer pastor Jan Kilian is carved in German, not Wendish. The last Wendish Lutheran service was held in 1919.

Dr. Gerald Kieschnick, a Lutheran Brotherhood member, says many U.S. Wends might describe their heritage as something like German. “They do not realize they are a Slavic people or that they have a totally different language and culture.”

To preserve some of those customs, Concordia University in Austin in recent years founded a Wendish Council, and for three years now, the school has sponsored a traditional “Wedding of the Birds” (*Ptaci Kwas*) festival, complete with ethnic costumes, dances, folk art and traditional foods. The event is part of the Austin Ethnic Fair held in late January. CUA’s Old Main building is named Kilian Hall, and the ornate bell the Wends brought with them as well as the model of the *Ben Nevis*, are on display on campus.

Last fall’s visit by the *Sorbische Volkstanzgruppe Schmerlitz* was an emotional moment for everyone, especially older Wends in the Austin area. For one of the few times in nearly 50 years, people once again heard Wendish shouted and sung publicly in their community.

The quest to preserve this heritage strikes a chord across the campus. Roughly 10 percent of the student body, faculty and staff today are of Wendish origins. “It is one of the really interesting Lutheran stories,” CUA Wendish pre-seminary student Paul Goeke says, “but it’s about to be forgotten. Their Slavic catechisms and hymnals are now just historic records. I’d like to be one of those who helps to keep their memory and contribution alive.”

Paul’s father, David Goeke, lives in San Antonio, and like many people of Wendish origin, he only came to appreciate the rich folklore in adulthood. As he remembers his childhood, one gets a sense of how perilously close these traditions came to extinction in the United States.

“A lot of traditions, like the Easter ‘pouring out of the water,’ or *Osterwassergiessen*, had died out in my parents’ generation. It was really a half dozen older women in the Wendish community who got things started around 25 years ago,” David Goeke



First New-World Church

As the original church in the New World, St. Paul’s Lutheran Church in Serbin, Texas, is an important link among Wends. The current pastor of St. Paul’s, the Rev. Michael Buchhorn, is of Wendish background. He preaches to some 450 congregants every Sunday. Although he is part Wendish, Buchhorn says, “Growing up, I didn’t recognize some things as Wendish—like those wonderful noodle dishes at my grandmother’s house. It is literally like a taste of home coming back here to serve this church.”



Georgie Boyce, president of the Texas Wendish Historical Society, says: "I went to a Sorb Festival in Germany in 1994 and am about to go again. My only regret on these trips is not having more time to look up some of the specific places my family probably lived."

explains. "One of the ways they built more awareness was representing Wendish culture at the annual Folk Life Festival in San Antonio."

Some 35 members of a brass choir from Kilian's original congregation (St. Johannes Lutheran in Klittern, Germany) performed at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Serbin in 1996, where they were hosted by local families. The next year 50 members from St. Paul's formed a bell

choir and went to Klitten. Other visitors in recent months included a group of Australian Wends who came to Serbin to learn more about the Texas immigrants' experience.

President Zersen's on-line contacts have blossomed into a program that this fall will bring some 18 Wendish young people from Germany to study on the campus at CUA. Next year, a famous Wendish organist from Berlin will be coming to give a concert series. Still other educational programs are being developed between CUA and the Domowina, the cultural center of the Wends in Bautzen, Germany.

"We have a lot to learn from the courage and faith of those Lutheran Wendish pioneers," Dr. Kieschnick concludes. "They left their homeland for uncharted territory because their faith and their heritage were so important to them. That's an exciting legacy—risk-taking for one's faith. That is also what the church is all about today!"



History to Go

Georgie Boyce, president of the Texas Wendish Heritage Society, says this group now maintains the only Wendish museum in the United States. It is located on the grounds of Jan Kilian's original church in the New World, St. Paul's Lutheran in Serbin, Texas, where the Wends first settled. The Heritage complex includes exhibit buildings, an interpretive center, research library and archives. It also hosts an annual Wendish Fest every fourth Sunday in September—now in its 11th year—featuring folk art, folk dancing, music and typical Wendish food. (As a fund-raiser, every year volunteers make and sell more than 4,000 pounds of their famous noodles.)

To learn more about the Wends, read *In Search of a Home: Nineteenth-Century Wendish Immigration* by George Nielsen, published by Texas A & M University. It and other publications, bibliographies and brochures on the Wends are available through the Texas Wendish Heritage Museum, Rte. 2, Box 155, Giddings, TX 78942. Phone: 409-366-2441.

For information via the Internet, go to the Concordia University in Austin Wendish heritage home page: www.concordia.edu/ethn.htm