

## Easter with the Sorbs

Like other nations the Sorbs have traditions which are an expression of their culture and their way of life, their desires and their hopes, their joys and their sense of humour. These traditions, which have developed out of the social environment of the rural population, are closely related to the agricultural working year and the church calendar.

They form the high points of family life. We invite you to participate in this celebration with us. Use it as an opportunity to visit our bilingual Lusatia. We promise you an eventful and unforgettable time.

## Easter in the Slepó / Schleife Parish

Lenka Nowak from Rohne near Schleife tells us: "I have seven grandchildren, but when I compare Lent today with the Lent of my childhood, I see very little difference in the way the traditions are kept.

Sundays in Lent. We are thinking of Easter in the preceding four weeks. The Sundays in Lent, known to us Lutherans as Oculi, Laetare (Mothering Sunday), Judica, and Palm Sunday, point the way. The house is turned upside down with spring-cleaning until it shines. When we go shopping, we take care to put every new 10 or 20-mark note on one side, as we shall need them to include with the presents for our god-children.

Good Friday. Good Friday for us Lutheran Sorbs in the Parish of Schleife is a solemn Christian day of rest. No work may be done outside the house and garden, and we are most careful that there should be no banging, sawing, or shouting. There is an unwritten law that at least one member of the family must go the Good Friday church service. After breakfast we begin decorating Easter Eggs by means of a technique using wax. Often there are five or six people sitting round the table in our kitchen until midday, decorating Easter Eggs to the best of their ability until each has in his hands a true work of art. We know who they are for - our god-children. Our feelings for them are expressed in the beauty of the eggs.

Easter Saturday. On Easter Saturday I bake the Easter cake and collect the Easter rolls and gingerbread cakes from the baker. Then I assemble an Easter present for each godchild. It consists of an interwoven Easter roll, a large gingerbread cake, and a small sum of money for the child's savings book. Then I lay out my national costume, ready for going to church, and we each take a bath, for everyone should be nice and clean to celebrate Easter.

In the evening we must bolt the doors of the stables, barns, outhouses, and garages, as well as the gates to the yard and garden. For in the night before Easter the local lads play tricks. They take gates off their hinges and remove fences, block up chimneys and drains, and hide car wheels and other vehicle parts. The ones who suffer most are those who are thought to have been mean during the recent collections for local activities.

Apart from the lads, the women and girls in choirs are active in the night before Easter. Dressed as in semi-mourning, we meet at the choir leader's house (she is known as the kantorka). We go singing from house to house and finish at sunrise, sitting on the special singers' benches, with a hymn of praise to God. We occasionally meet old Sorbian women who, believing in the healing powers of Easter water, are on their way to the spring.

Easter Sunday. On Easter Sunday I go to church with my family. Then at last the children receive their gifts. Dressed in their best Easter clothes, my godchildren come to visit me, and they are then given their presents. With modest decorum they thank me and wish me, on entry and on leaving, a happy Easter. They have a busy day, visiting their god-parents in the villages and in Weisswasser.

Easter Monday. Easter Monday too is a special day. It is the day for egg-rolling. In our village directly behind the Easter Singers' special benches a shallow trench has been dug with a sloping surface. That is where the children will be today. At the lowest point they lay a brightly coloured egg and each child attempts to roll his or her egg down the slope so that it hits the other one. Whoever is successful is allowed to take out two eggs, but the eggs nearly always roll in the wrong direction. Only experts leave the game with more eggs than they brought with them.

Obviously this is a day for receiving guests from far and near. Following tradition we offer them hospitality in the form of cake or delicacies made with eggs, and we pass happy hours with many rounds of drinks. Among the Schleife Sorbs there is no other festival whose rituals and traditions are so faithfully kept as Easter.

#### Easter Fire in the Villages round Chošebuz / Cottbus

Easter Saturday. One of the traditions observed in Lower Lusatia is called Easter Fire. The fires burn in some 100 Sorbian and German villages. Its significance stems from the widespread popular belief that fire contains a purifying force. And so before Easter the young men of Dissenchen, for example, gather dry wood and all kinds of combustible rubbish. On Easter Saturday at a traditional place they build a bonfire. The best place is a hill, because there is a saying that the further the fire is visible, the more fertile the land will be in the coming year.

The Night before Easter Sunday. The young people of the neighbouring parish often attempt to light the fire before midnight, so it must be carefully guarded until the proper moment arrives. Exactly at midnight the Easter Fire is lit. Boisterously the boys jump over the flames. High spirits are let loose and, in the same way as in the Schleife region, this leads to all kinds of pranks, such as doors being taken off their hinges and hidden or chimneys being covered over.

If you would like to see the Easter Fire in Lower Lusatia, the Sorbian Cultural Information Office "Lodka" in Cottbus will be glad to tell you the right places and give you further information:

Sorbian Cultural Information Office "LODKA"  
Augusta-Bebelowa droga 82  
D-03046 Chošebuz/Cottbus  
Lužyca

#### Easter in the Catholic Parishes

Maundy Thursday. Good Friday. Easter Saturday. On Maundy Thursday we Christians commemorate Jesus's last supper with his disciples, and on Good Friday the death of Christ on the Cross. Therefore on Good Friday and Easter Saturday the church bells are silent. On both these days in several villages early in the morning, at midday, and in the evening boys with

rattles are out and about; rattling loudly, they move from one crucifix to another, stopping and praying together before each one. The rattling replaces the otherwise customary bell-ringing at the beginning of the day, at noon, and in the evening.

Easter Night. Easter is for us the greatest festival. On this day we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the message that is proclaimed in all the churches in the Easter night. In the Sorbian Catholic parishes of Upper Lusatia we mark this church festival in a special way.

Easter Sunday. For centuries it has been the tradition that the Easter Riders in processions carry the news of Christ's resurrection to the neighbouring parish. We know that as early as the end of the 15th century these processions were taking place between Hoyerswerda and Wittichenau. The roots of this church custom probably go back to pre-Christian times. It was once believed that riding round the fields would defend the young seeds from the malice of the Devil. Under the influence of Christianity this was changed into the Christian processions which today represent a public declaration of the Christian faith. In recent years the number of Easter Riders has always totalled about 1,200 despite the fact that considerable sacrifices are demanded of them. Their free time is devoted to preparations for the great festival. The number of horses in the Sorbian region is not sufficient, so many Easter Riders have to hire their horses, often from far distant places. Only in this way can the tradition be kept alive. It also involves ecumenical co-operation; Protestant Christians help their Catholic brothers in acquiring horses. And what was once unthinkable is now possible - occasionally a Protestant may be riding in the procession and joining in the proclamation of Christ's resurrection.

#### A Few Facts about the Easter Riders

In the Sorbian Catholic parishes of Upper Lusatia there are nine Easter processions and it is predominantly Sorbs who ride in them. Only in the Wittichenau procession has there been, since the beginning of last century, a German-speaking section. The Easter Riders sing hymns proclaiming the resurrection of Christ. Between villages they say the Rosary or the Litany. In the procession they carry the Cross, church banners, and a statue of the Risen Christ.

The Riders are in celebratory attire and the horses too are dressed in a special way. They wear their Easter harness and a brightly embroidered bow on the tail. If the bow is black, it signifies mourning in the rider's family. The Easter Riders ride round their church and their churchyard, where they proclaim the resurrection and pray for the souls of the departed. A rider who is taking part for the first time wears a little garland of myrtle. On silver and golden jubilees the rider may wear a silver >>25<< or a golden >>50<<. In 1995 a total of 1,398 Easter Riders rode in the processions.

#### The Individual Processions

Ralbicy - Kulow / Ralbitz - Wittichenau. These two parishes produce the largest processions. The riders assemble early in the morning, for they have the longest ride before them. In recent years Ralbitz has mustered between 200 and 300 riders, Wittichenau as many as 300 to 400. The two linguistically distinct sections of the Wittichenau procession are of approximately equal size. Before 1541 the Wittichenau riders (who in German prefer to be called Kreuzreiter - "Riders of the Cross") used to ride to Hoyerswerda. Then the Hoyerswerda parish became Protestant and prohibited the processions, so ever since Wittichenau and Ralbitz have visited each other. Ralbitz is also interesting for reasons other than its large number of Easter Riders. The churchyard with its plain white wooden crosses - said to be the only one of its kind in Europe - has many visitors throughout the year. The uniformity of the crosses symbolizes the

equality of all human beings before God. Everyone buried here, whether highly regarded or a simple person, gets a plain white wooden cross.

In 1997 there were 302 riders from Rabitz and 430 from Wittichenau.

Chróscicy - Pančicy-Kukow / Crostwitz - Panschwitz-Kuckau. the village of Panschwitz-Kuckau. In 1790 the parish priest prohibited the procession and would not hand over the church banners, but that did deter the Easter Riders, who had their own banners made specially, and the procession took place. Later the old church banners were used again, in addition to those that had been specially made, and since then the Crostwitz riders have two pairs of banners. At that time the riders from Panschwitz used to ride in the Crostwitz procession. It is only since 1894 that they have had their own procession, which rides to Crostwitz. Another feature in Panschwitz, which attracts many visitors, is the St. Marienstern Nunnery with its beautiful courtyard and garden.

In 1997 there were 187 Easter Riders from Crostwitz and 82 from Panschwitz-Kuckau.

The Easter Riders have two requests: Please remember that a horse is not a machine, but a living creature. Please, in your own interest and ours, keep well away from the horses to avoid accidents. We would take it as a sign of your respect for our activities, if you would maintain silence and decorum, while we are praying and singing.

Njebjelčicy - Wotrow / Nebelschütz - Ostro. In area Nebelschütz is the smallest Sorbian parish. It consists of only three villages. The Baroque church, built in 1741-1743, was completely restored in 1993 and is now once more a remarkable house of God. The Easter Ride in Nebelschütz was revived in 1769 after an interval brought about by the Thirty Years War. The parish of Ostro was founded in 1758; but it was not until 1814 that Bishop Franc Jurij Lok, himself a Sorb, granted this parish the right to have its own procession of Easter Riders. And so its partnership with Nebelschütz was established.

A special feature in Ostro is that early in the morning of Easter Day men ride round the fields of the parish and pray for God's blessing and a good harvest. The Easter Ride then begins at noon.

In 1997 there were 106 Easter Riders from Nebelschütz and 112 from Ostro.

Radwor - Baćoń / Radibor - Storcha. On Easter Sunday 1623 Christoph von Minkwitz, lord of the manor of Radibor, prohibited the Easter Riders from entering the churchyard. With the intention of establishing the Lutheran doctrine in the parish, he had banned Catholic processions. This was not to the liking of the Radibor villagers. There were scuffles between the riders and the landowner's representatives. Later, for unknown reasons, the Easter Ride was in abeyance in Radibor for 120 years, but in 1882 it was revived. For ten years the procession rode to Sdier. But in 1892 a procession was formed in Storcha, and since then the Easter Riders of Radibor and Storcha ride to each other's villages.

After the compulsory collectivization of agriculture had severely reduced the number of local horses, there was a period from 1973 to 1977 when the Storcha procession had to be abandoned. But since 1978 the men of Storcha ride again. These two processions meet in Strohschütz. The churches of Radibor and Storcha are both worth seeing. The church in Radibor, built in 1896, is unusually large for a small village. The Storcha church was consecrated in 1887, after 13 years of effort collecting funds for its construction.

In 1997 there were 112 Easter Riders from Radibor and 73 from Storcha.

Budyšin / Bautzen. Until the end of the 18th century there was a continuous tradition of Easter Riders from Bautzen, riding to Radibor to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus Christ. After a long break the procession was revived in 1927, when seven riders rode to the neighbouring parish of Radibor. A year later the procession from Bautzen was officially reinstated, but in 1969 it was abandoned again owing to lack of interest and a shortage of horses. After a further break of 23 years, however, in November 1992 at a meeting of Easter Riders it was decided to revive the Bautzen procession for the second time in the twentieth century, and since 1993 Easter Riders have once again ridden from Bautzen to Radibor.

In 1997 there were 68 riders from Bautzen.