

WITAJĆE K NAM DO ŁUŻICY / WELCOME TO LUSATIA !

Travellers and visitors to Lusatia nowadays are first made aware of the individuality of this region by the bilingual names on maps and street-signs or by bilingual notices giving the names of villages, towns, and railway-stations. They may well wonder whether they have stumbled upon some unknown land in the middle of Europe, but that is not the explanation. Nor have they unexpectedly arrived in Poland. This part of Germany is the home of a Slavonic people, citizens of Germany but with a Slavonic mother-tongue.

Lusatia (in German die Lausitz) is the geographical term for the area between the rivulets of the River Spree (the Spree Forest) in the north and the Mittelgebirge (Lusatian Mountains) in the south. You can find it on the map in south-eastern Brandenburg and eastern Saxony. The name Lusatia is of Slavonic origin. It means "water-hole or pool" and refers to a watery region. In the 6th century AD a tribe of the West Slavs known as the Lusici settled in present-day Lusatia. At the same time the entire territory between the rivers Saale and Elbe in the west and the rivers Queis, Neisse, and Oder in the east were settled and cultivated by Slavonic tribes. In Upper Lusatia it was the tribe of the Milzeni that settled around the point of intersection between the Spree and the ancient trade-route from Cologne to Kiev. Many castle mounds are witnesses of this epoch.

Centuries of volatile history followed, leading to the surprising outcome that descendants of these Slavonic tribes are still living in and, to a greater extent, in the vicinity of the towns of Bautzen, Kamenz, Hoyerswerda, Weisswasser, Spremberg, Cottbus, Lübbenau, and Guben in Upper and Lower Lusatia. They have kept their language, individuality, and culture, and constitute the little nation of the Lusatian Sorbs, also known as Wends. The name Wends comes from the Latin and was in the Middle Ages the term used by outsiders to refer to various Slavonic tribes and peoples. Their existence is all the more surprising when we consider that they have never had the protection that would have resulted from having their own state. And so their numbers and their territory gradually dwindled until today there are about 60,000 of them. Their status is that of a minority in their own country. Other forces have had a lasting influence in the history of the Sorbs. These have included the Frankish (Germanic) tribes which denied them political independence in the 10th-11th centuries and sealed their fate as a subject nation, the conversion to Christianity which (perhaps as compensation) allowed them to share in the cultural development of Central-European civilization, and the immigration at the end of the 12th century of Franconian, Flemish, Thuringian, and Saxon peasants. These forces established the constant juxtaposition and combination of western (German) culture, on the one hand, and eastern (Slavonic) culture, on the other. There has also been industrialization since the middle of the 19th century, which began the dissolution of the traditional, rural and agricultural structures and led to the modern monsters of steel which came to plough the homeland in order to find what the devil had buried, as Sorbian young people sing in a song about brown coal. This gave a new stimulus to the history of colonization.

In the course of time various developments have led to regional peculiarities in Lusatia. At present we may distinguish five Sorbian regions: the flat country between the northern edge of the Lusatian Mountains and the pond-filled landscape of Central Lusatia is the region of the Protestant Sorbs of the Bautzen area; westwards to the Elstra Mountains and north to the neighbourhood of the farming town of Wittichenau, enclosing fertile fields and hills, is the region of the Catholic Sorbs; the Hoyerswerda heath and forest region takes its name from the town of Hoyerswerda; similarly the Schleife region is named after the village and parish of

Schleife. In both of the last-named regions, and also in Lower Lusatia (the fifth and largest region), slag-heaps and open-cast mining disfigure what was once a compact landscape of heath and forest. Probably the best known area is the Spree Forest, which is part of Lower Lusatia and consists of an especially charming landscape of meadows formed by hundreds of rivulets, ditches, and tributaries of the River Spree.

Among the external distinguishing characteristics of the regions are, on the one hand, the natural conditions (whether rich arable land or sandy soil, forest or wetlands, hills or plains) and, on the other, the traditional building methods affecting the forms of houses and estates. In 19th-century Lusatia four building styles predominated and examples of them can still be found everywhere. The log-house style was used to build not only thatched farm-houses, but also churches. The landscape is also dotted with single-storeyed houses built in rows, three- and four-sided yards made by houses with walls divided into panels (Fachwerk), sometimes with massive ground-floors. In the Lusatian Mountains there are also Umgebände houses and Fachwerk houses, which came in with the Franconian and Saxon peasants. The clinker buildings in Central Lusatia, where whole villages were rebuilt in this manner following fires, date from the end of the 19th century.

A further external distinguishing characteristic may be seen in the folk-costumes, which, among other things, indicate the wearer's religious denomination. It is known that in the heyday of the folk-costume at the beginning of the 19th century there were eleven different costumes, whose use was partly locally determined. After the beginnings of industrialization costumes were used less and less as everyday wear, but in four of the five Sorbian regions folk-costumes are still worn and take their names from the corresponding regions. If you are lucky, you may still see here and there elderly women dressed in the timeless fashions of these locally distinct costumes. This will probably be the last generation to wear them as everyday attire, but on special occasions the younger generation are appearing in these costumes with increasing frequency.

Many roads lead to Lusatia.

The medieval "Via regia" (also known as the Salzstrasse or Salt Road) takes us to Bautzen (in Sorbian Budyšin), a thousand-year-old town with many towers. This is the place where most Sorbian cultural institutions are today to be found. Following the River Spree downstream we pass through the furrowed Lusatian Heath until we come to Cottbus, where the Lower Sorbs in the surrounding villages today still call themselves Wends.

The visitor intent on getting to know the land and its people will have little trouble in finding original Sorbian life, which on examination will be found to be quite distinct from that of other parts of Germany and Central Europe. Since industrialization it has, it is true, been pushed more and more into the private sphere, but, mainly in the cultural domain, it may still also be seen in public. Especially in this domain the Sorbian people by their own efforts have been able to keep up with general developments. Sorbian and bilingual play-groups and schools as well as higher education and mass media in Sorbian are, together with the parental home, important means of maintaining and developing the Sorbian language and Sorbian culture. Sorbian-language Catholic and Protestant church services with spirited singing - pointing to the close link between religiosity and nationality - are just as much proof of vigour as the abundant cultural activities of professional artists and institutions, of voluntary activists in clubs or groups, and of village communities and individuals; it is much more than mere spare-time activity or the representation of individual interests. They all have

one thing in common - they are important builders and protectors of Sorbian national consciousness and of the Sorbian identity.

The question whether our grandchildren will still regard the Sorbian language and Sorbian culture as their own will be decided by the question whether society regards their Sorbian parents and grandparents as an enrichment or a burden and whether these parents grandparents consciously intend to continue to live as a minority.

The Protestant Sorbs of the Budyšin / Bautzen Region

With the Reformation the Bautzen region, with minor exceptions, became Protestant. Luther's teaching on the word of God in the mother-tongue was the starting-point for an enormous cultural achievement: the smallest Slavonic nation developed its own literary language. This led to an age of cultural prosperity such as has been rarely experienced by small nations of similar size. The villages around Bautzen were almost exclusively Sorbian-speaking until far into the 19th century.

Jakub Bart-Ćišinski
My Sorbian Creed

My friend, the Sorbian land is small
And small the Sorbian nation,
Like a tiny island amid a huge sea.
Yet I believe, resolutely,
That its great waves will never swallow
Our fields, villages, and farms.

Oh, may every Sorbian heart be
A rock against those alien waves.
And every hand a defence. And every breath
Be drawn in love for the Sorbian land
Then for ever the Sorbian land will remain
Sorbian

The beginning of the industrial age brought radical changes: industrialization, the collapse of rural structures, greater mobility of the population, and German mass media and schools.

At the end of the 19th century the Protestant Sorbs of the Bautzen region gave up wearing national costumes. Traditional customs fell into disuse. The Protestant Sorbs first became bilingual, and then, a generation or two later, they went over to speaking German exclusively. Nowadays in the Protestant villages of the Bautzen region the Sorbian language is only seldom to be heard. It is used mainly among the older generation; Sorbian-speaking families are rare exceptions. In some parishes church services in Sorbian are held once a month. Three Lutheran clergymen (one of whom is the Sorbian superintendent), in addition to caring for their own parishes, put in extra hoursholding Sorbian services, organizing the annual Sorbian Protestant church day, arranging parish afternoons, editing the monthly Protestant magazine "Pomhaj Boh" (God Speed), and giving Sorbian religious broadcasts.

Work with children and young people is possible only to a limited degree. There is only one Protestant parish (St Michael's in Bautzen) in which services for Sorbian children are held and Christian teaching is given in the Sorbian language.

Slavonic surnames and place-names today still attest the Sorbian past of the Bautzen region. In many churches there are Sorbian inscriptions, books, banners, and ornaments.

The relatively close contact between the church and the people, which prevails here to this day, is due to the loyalty of formerly Sorbian inhabitants.

The Sorbs in the Wojerecy / Hoyerswerda Region

The Hoyerswerda region is an example of how human activity is capable in a short time, within one man's lifetime, of changing the character of the landscape. Where eighty years ago there stretched endless pine-forests, in which were embedded numerous ponds, man with powerful excavators has dug huge trenches to claim the brown-coal. Where once the Sorbian peasants of the heath lived in their low thatched cottages, wresting a scanty living from the sandy soil by working from dawn to dusk, the chains of gigantic excavators rattle and the signals of long freight trains are heard taking the raw, excavated coal to the briquette factory. In places where the brown coal mining has finished there stretch mountainous slag-heaps, now made green once more by young pines and new stocks of birch-trees. But in many places there are huge, yawning cavities, which gradually fill with water. In the mining areas in the last years of the GDR the brown-coal workings left utter devastation behind them.

With the arrival of the monoculture of brown-coal mining, briquette factories, and their associated activities, the structure of the population altered. To a large extent the Sorbian peasants of this region sold their land to the mining industry and moved elsewhere. Many of them became workers in the brown-coal mines and briquette factories. Despite many efforts the Sorbian language in these undertakings lost its function as a means of communication in the production process.

The construction of the gigantic brown-coal refinement plant named 'Schwarze Pumpe' (The Black Pump), with about 16,000 workers, and the building of what was called the 'Second Socialist Residential Town' in Hoyerswerda caused the influx of workers from all parts of the GDR, resulting in a permanent change in the make-up of the population.

At the beginning of the 20th century the nucleus of the Hoyerswerda region was populated almost exclusively by Sorbs. Hoyerswerda has many traditions which originate in the history of the Sorbian people. Of great importance were the activities of the clergyman and poet Handrij Zejler in Lohsa, whose popular songs and poems became part of the life of the Sorbian people, wakening and strengthening their national feeling. Also from the Hoyerswerda region came the Sorbian writers Křesćan Kulman (1805-69) and Jan Bohumiř Nyčka (1825-1904), as well as Jan Arnořt Smoler, the prominent scholar, writer, and publisher.

It was in Hoyerswerda on 7 October 1846 and 8 October 1851, respectively, that the third and tenth Sorbian song festivals took place under the direction of the Sorbian composer Korla Awgust Kocor. On 1 February 1885 a Sorbian peasants' league was formed in Hoyerswerda, and it was here too on 13 October 1912 that the foundation of the Domowina, the Union of the Lusatian Sorbs, took place. It was in accordance with these Sorbian traditions that it was originally intended to erect in Hoyerswerda buildings for central Sorbian institutions. In 1956

it was even planned to establish in Hoyerswerda the home of the Sorbian People's Theatre, the Sorbian Folk Ensemble, and many other Sorbian organizations. Thus it was intended to resist the extinction of the Sorbian language and Sorbian culture being caused by industry. In the end these organizations were based in Bautzen simply because Bautzen has since time immemorial functioned as the capital of Upper Lusatia.

Nevertheless, much was done (and is still being done) in Hoyerswerda to ensure a healthy association of the Sorbian and German populations. Evidence of this is provided by the Handrij Zejler bilingual secondary school, Jatzwauk's traditional national costumes house in Senftenberger Strasse, and a permanent exhibition of Sorbian culture in the Hoyerswerda Town Museum. An inscribed ceramic slab in the Old Town commemorates the foundation of the Domowina.

Particularly symptomatic of our present-day social problems, especially in the Hoyerswerda region, is the rapid decline of brown-coal mining and the consequently high rate of unemployment. Nevertheless, the regional authorities and the town of Hoyerswerda, in collaboration with newly founded associations, are striving to protect and foster the Sorbian language and Sorbian culture. Visible signs of this in our region are the Easter Riders in Wittichenau (in Sorbian Kulow), the Easter egg market in Bergen-Neuwiese (Hory-Nowa Łuka), the village festival in Bröthen-Michalken (Brětnjo-Michałki), and the harvest festival in Hoyerswerda. Making common cause, the Sorbian and German citizens of our region, despite all the problems and adversities in the region and in the town of Hoyerswerda, will have a good, secure future.

The Sorbs in the Slepó / Schleife Region

Witajće k nam!

'Welcome' is the greeting extended to guests in the parish of Schleife. The precise location of the Schleife region is in the north-west part of the Muskau Heath, in the north-easternmost part of the Free State of Saxony. In this part of Central Lusatia the originality and individuality of Sorbian folklore have survived to the present day. The region consists of seven villages: Schleife (in Sorbian Slepó), Rohne (Rowno), Mulchwitz (Mulkecy), Mühlrose (Miłoraz), Trebendorf (Trjebin), Halbendorf (Brězowka), and Groß-Düben (Džěwin).

Owing to its sandy soil this was always the poorest part of Lusatia. Here the Sorbian national costume has survived in its purest form and colour. It is the most harmonic and individual of the four costumes still worn today. But the Schleife region is also in folk-music, traditions, dialect, village architecture, and austere landscape one of the most original Sorbian regions. Especially attractive are the traditional songs and dances played by the Schleife musicians on the bagpipes (in Sorbian dudy, kozoł, or měchawa), the three-stringed little fiddle and the Sorbian big fiddle (in Sorbian huslički, fidle, or husle).

Shrove Tuesday without the traditional dressing up as bears (symbol of the winter), storks, horses (symbol of the spring), chimney-sweeps (who drive out the spirits of winter), policemen (symbolizing the authorities), and the famous egg-woman (standing for the gifts of the shrove-tide banquet) would be unthinkable. Similarly essential to Easter observances are the Easter singing in Rohne and the artistic decoration of easter eggs, which in recent years has experienced a real renaissance.

But also witch-burning, erecting may-trees, summer village festivals with processions, church-fair cakes, roast geese, and in Advent the masked girl, known in Sorbian as the džěćetko, enrich the local folklore throughout the year. The Schleife region offers interesting destinations for excursions. The Sorbian Room (serbska špa) in Rohne, a typical Schleife peasant room, is known far and wide. The high tip (Hochkippe) with its area of recultivation near Mulkwitz, the zoo at Trebendorf, and the Halbendorf lake offer good opportunities for relaxation.

The Sorbs (Wends) of Lower Lusatia

The Sorbs(Wends) living in Lower Lusatia are the descendants of the Lusici tribe, who gave their name to the once very marshy landscape of Lusatia (Luzyca). Their language, Lower Sorbian, has many similarities to Polish, whereas Upper Sorbian has many similarities to Czech (e. g. gora 'mountain' in Lower Sorbian and Polish, hora in Upper Sorbian and Czech).

The Lower Sorbian word for 'a Sorb' is Serb (as in Upper Sorbian), but the Lower Sorbs (Dolne Serby) often prefer in German to be called Wenden, rather than Sorben. Apart from tradition, the period of the GDR may have something to do with this, because the SED used the Sorbs as a sign-board for the allegedly exemplary Leninist nationality policy. Yet the experiences of the Lower Sorbs with the 'dictatorship of the working class' were distinctly worse than those of the Sorbs in Upper Lusatia. For example, the Domowina of Lower Lusatia, founded in September 1946 in the village of Werben (Sorbian Wjerbno) in the Spree Forest, was soon disbanded by the authorities and permitted again only in 1949. The executive committee of the SED of the Cottbus region took pains to ruin all efforts for the equal treatment of the remains of the Sorbian nation in Lower Lusatia. For example, on 5 August 1946 in the run-up to the local elections they prevented the Domowina from putting up Sorbian candidates and declared that in our region there is no question of a separate popular movement among the 'Sorbs'. And this despite the fact that until the end of the war the Sorbian inhabitants had constituted a majority of the population of the region.

Whereas the Upper Lusatian Sorbs were treated with sympathy and were supported by the Russian occupying forces, these 'Slavonic brothers' were reserved in their behaviour towards the Lower Sorbs. Possibly this can be blamed on the regional SED functionaries, who considered the little nation reactionary owing to its firm attachment to Christian values and its lack of enthusiasm for Communist aims. It was only under the pressure of the Saxon Law for the Protection of the Rights of the Sorbian Population' (1948) that the Brandenburg regional assembly belatedly in 1950 passed a 'Government Regulation for the Promotion and Development of Sorbian Cultural Efforts', which in practice, however, effected little change in the unfriendly attitude of the regional authorities.

It was not until 1952 that a Sorbian high school (later a Sorbian extended high school and today a Lower Sorbian high school) was founded. Yet there were and are in Lower Sorbian territory neither Sorbian pre-school facilities nor Sorbian primary schools; only a few schools with Sorbian as an optional subject. The number of these schools, as well as the number of participants, decreased as a result of measures taken in the GDR's education system. To this day most Sorbs here are illiterate in their own language, unless they learn it in the Lower Sorbian high school, where they can begin it only in the 7th class. As a result of policies earlier this century directed towards Germanizing them, the Lower Sorbs have passed through a stage of German-Sorbian bilingualism until now the younger generation know only German. Yet a surprisingly large number of Lower Sorbs affirm their Wendish origin and are true to the traditions they have inherited. This is seen above all in the maintenance of ancient

customs, which at the present time are undergoing a certain renaissance. The roots of these customs date back to pre-Christian times. The first Sorbian book was printed in 1574. It was a Lower Sorbian hymn-book. Somewhat later the shorter catechism appeared. Since 1848, without interruption except in the Nazi period and the first years after the War, there have been Lower Sorbian newspapers.

In 1956 the first Lower Sorbian radio broadcasts were transmitted. Since Easter 1992 the television company Ostdeutscher Rundfunk Brandenburg (ORB) has been transmitting half-hour television programmes in Lower Sorbian once a month.

A hundred years ago there were more than 70,000 Wends in Lower Lusatia. Now their numbers are estimated at 20,000 at the most. There is a danger that they may disappear from the ethnographic map of Europe altogether, unless suitable methods of advancement are adopted to rescue the language and culture of this little nation.