

The next time you travel to Berlin you should also visit the surrounding state of Brandenburg. In an area south of Berlin, Lower Lusatia, the visitor will soon discover street signs written in two languages. This is the home of the Lower Sorbs who have been living here since the 6th century AD. The Sorbs is a small group of Slavonic people who have maintained their language and culture. They practice their own customs and traditions and are also known as Wends. The term Wends comes from Latin and was used in the Middle Ages to refer to various West Slavonic tribes and peoples settling in all Lusatia. One of these tribes, the Lusici, is the ancestors of the Lower Sorbs. Thus it is no coincidence that today the Lower Sorbs practice a great variety of customs and traditions that differ slightly from village to village.

Most of the customs practiced throughout the year originate from pre-Christian times. It is said, for example, that the Easter fire has a purifying effect. The cock is in the center of some customs and symbolizes fertility. That is why it was believed that the extinction of a cock brings about new power for growing and prospering. A look back into history reveals that the practicing of customs and traditions in the villages was crucial in the process of self-preservation of the national individuality. Scarcely anywhere else in Lusatia were Sorbs treated so badly as in the southern part of Brandenburg under the King of Prussia's rule. Innumerable bans were placed on the Lower Sorbs' mother tongue and decisive Germanization took place in schools and churches. Prussian marching music was played at festive events and the German choir societies were ordered to discontinue their use of a variety of Sorbian folksongs. This all hurt the Lower Sorbian culture immensely.

Under the ruling of the margravate Lower Lusatia and later Brandenburg-Prussia, the "Wendish national character" was strongly repelled. In the year 1667 the founding of the Oberkonsistorium in Lübben, a church authority responsible for all parishes in the southern part of Brandenburg, marked the beginning of another Germanization period. This was the same year the national royal church started to intensively promote Germanization in all spheres of life. In the middle of the 17th century a step-by-step plan was approved to abolish the Lower Sorbian language by order of Duke Christian I. In the following centuries this plan was executed with Prussian severity and persistence. In 1728 priests in Lower Lusatia were instructed that no child was to participate in communion without sufficient knowledge of the German language.

The state of Saxony is home of the Upper Sorbs. Compared to Upper Lusatia it is no surprise that the conditions were different. In Lower Lusatia it was much harder to preserve the national individuality. In the 17th and 18th century alone, nearly 300 Sorbian villages in Lower Lusatia were lost due to the politics of Germanization.

During the 19th century there were only a few times when rigorous anti-Sorbian language politics was less effective. The Sorbian middle-class organized a national movement in the name of enlightenment. It never became strong enough to have an enduring effect. Most of the time organized struggles for nationalistic rights were quickly disbanded.

The founding of the German Reich in 1871 aggravated an already tense situation. A German National atmosphere intensified the anti-Sorbian course of politics especially in Lower Lusatia. In 1896 the president of the province of Brandenburg urged state authorities, the church, and the public to continue Germanizing "the leftovers of the Wendish".

Even after the founding of the Domowina in 1912, the umbrella organization of all Sorbian associations in Upper and Lower Lusatia, the Prussian administration still did not reduce the

pressure on priests and teachers. On the contrary, contacts between Lower Sorbs and representatives of the national movement in Upper Lusatia were considered pan-slavistic efforts. Therefore, any political endeavor was regarded as treason. Thus the effectiveness of the Domowina in Lower Lusatia was limited.

Nevertheless, the people in the village communities made use of the remaining possibilities determined to preserve the cultural Sorbian identity. The spinning-room in each village functioned as the core of many Sorbian customs and tradition. It was here where the people organized and planned all youth festivities throughout the year. It was also a place where youth learnt Sorbian folksongs passed down from generation to generation. Every year about three new songs were introduced in the communities. In the middle of the 19th century Smoler and Haupt published nearly 500 Sorbian songs in the book "Folksongs of Upper and Lower Sorbs". Since then more than 1000 folksongs have been collected and published.

While you are visiting South Brandenburg you may often encounter women dressed in the traditional Sorbian everyday wear. On certain weekends you will also see many children and young women in festive dresses portraying and preserving old Sorbian customs.

Although, from generation to generation, there were some who renounced their Slavonic heritage many more have continued the fostering of traditions and customs in Lower Lusatia. One may wonder whether it is the appreciation of the beauty and the diversity of this culture itself, the defiance against ridicule of one's culture, or the strong intention to preserve one's Slavonic identity that has helped keep the Sorbian culture alive. These as well as many others are reasons for the uniqueness of traditions and customs you can still find in this part of Germany.

A custom is determined by its social dimension. It takes a group of people or the whole village community to preserve a custom. Communal spirit and the sense of a common bond are also characteristics that are decisive in preserving customs of the past and today. Repeating customs leads to tradition. Every custom has its own history and undergoes certain developments. As much as the Sorbian groups have changed, their customs have changed accordingly. Even functions have changed which quite often merge into one another. The world of customs and traditions is not static but dynamic. Only the Sorbian origin will remain to be the background for any developments in Lusatia. That is why the uniqueness of this culture needs to be saved and preserved as much as possible despite other future developments. Thus "old Sorbian customs" embody a particular value and have a specific meaning for the future. It remains the positive realization that the Sorbian folk culture has always been a very significant link between Germans and Sorbians. In the process of building a unified Europe and striving to extend the relations to Slavonic neighboring states Sorbian culture will play a more important role.

#### Ptaškowa swajźba - Birds' Wedding on January 25th

This custom originates from pre-Christian times and is founded on mystic imaginativeness of our ancestors. They considered a sacrificial offering of food to ancestor ghosts as an effective way to win benevolence and affection from natural gods and demons. With the decline in belief of the power of the demons, the sacrificial offerings of our ancestors turned into present-giving to the children. Today children celebrate the Birds' Wedding on January 25 of each year. This custom is closely related to the observation of the animal kingdom and the plant world. At this time various kinds of birds begin to build their nests and lay eggs. After a long hard winter people are anxious for the spring to awake and color the earth green. The

origin of the Sorbian Birds' Wedding is said to be in the area of the Upper Sorbs. Still today this custom is alive in many families. Children feed the birds in winter and as a reward the children are allowed to participate in the Birds' Wedding. They put empty plates and dishes in the open window and birds bring sweets and cookies. This original custom is unknown among Lower Sorbs. Instead, elementary schools and kindergartens celebrate the Bird's Wedding as children's festivity within the groups. The magpie (Sorbian "sroka") and the raven (Sorbian "wron") are bride and groom. The bridal couple is beautifully dressed. Most of the time the bride and groom wear the traditional formal wedding costume of the Sorbs. The other children dress up as various birds and are invited to enjoy the wedding meal. Throughout the day the children show what they have learned by performing dances, singing Sorbian folksongs and reading poems and short stories. The Birds' Wedding is very popular among grownups as well.

At the end of the 19th century Sorbian associations began to organize social evening gatherings. After World War II regional groups began to organize these events again. Later the Sorbian National Ensemble in Budyšin/Bautzen arranged such evening performances on stage and traveled to the villages on an alternating basis. Today children, their parents and grandparents come to enjoy a program filled with singing, dancing and music.

#### Zapust - Lower Sorbian Shrovetide

There is no doubt that "Zapust" is the most popular celebration in Lower Lusatia. Year by year thousands of people in the villages around Cottbus and their guests celebrate this custom between the end of January and the beginning of March that has developed out of the rural working life. The youth planned this event that marked the end of winter time and was the high point of the gatherings in the spinning rooms. Every evening young and old women met in one room in the village. Besides spinning the women exchanged the latest news, told each other stories and tales. The "kantorka" - a female singer with a leading voice - taught all folksongs and hymns known in that particular village. Before the time of the gatherings was over and the work in the fields resumed the men were allowed to come to the room. They invited the women to go with them to the "Zapust" which lasted one week. The otherwise strict village community tolerated this boisterous atmosphere. The form of the "Zapust" as we know it today developed at the end of the 19th century.

#### Camprowanje - Zampern

The historically oldest part of the Sorbian Shrovetide is "Zampern." Roots go back to the pre-Christian forms of believing, fertility rites or protection rites. Elements of magic and cult such as masquerade, dressing up, making loud noises, dancing and caning lead to the assumption that demons and all kinds of danger would keep away. People going from house to house would carry birch rods and touch adults and children with these "rods of life" that symbolized the newly awakening vitality in spring. One of the oldest disguises is the double person who is "the dead person (who) carries the living one." Other disguises included the ghost rider and the stork symbolizing the beginning of spring and fertility, or the "peastrawbear" symbolizing the farewell of the cold winter. These figures were said to have influence on the vital power of nature. Today the different symbols have lost their original meaning and are hard to find in the joyous processions. Instead, you will encounter modern costumes or fantasy outfits. On a particular Saturday young people dress up and make awful noises and play music to scare the winter away. The villagers greet the procession in front of their houses and give them eggs, bacon and money. In return the young people thank them by dancing with the housewife and

offering the men "paleńc," a small glass of vodka. One week later all collected items will be used for a big egg meal in the village's pub.

#### Zapustowy pśešěg - Festive procession

The high point is the festive procession on Sunday. At noon all unmarried girls and boys in the village meet in the pub where the couples assemble for the festive procession. The young women put on their festive dancing costumes with the embroidered silk scarves and the white lace aprons. The "lapa" - an artistically bound bonnet - completes the costume. Unfortunately, in some villages the women do not wear these bonnets anymore. Every man gets a bouquet of paper flowers from his dancing partner and puts them on his hat or his revere. All couples dance in the hall of the pub before they start the procession through the village. The procession stops at houses of commendable villagers such as the mayor, the parish priest, the school headmaster, the heads of local associations and clubs or the fire chief. These people get a bouquet of paper flowers as well. The accompanying band plays a tune for an honorary dance and small glasses of vodka are toasted to a good future. The honored villagers show their appreciation with some snacks or a donation to the collection bag. In the evening all villagers meet in the pub for the Shrovetide dance. The slogan for the night is announced: "Dance as much as you can and your flax harvest will be rich. Jump a lot so the plants will grow high or choose a tall guy." The so called Men's Shrovetide ends the happy season. Since it is the last night for dancing, married couples gather in the hall of the village pub and young people meet for the big egg meal.

#### Jatšy - Easter

##### Customs around the Easter egg

For centuries the egg has been seen as a symbol of growth and fertility. Therefore the egg-giving-custom in spring is very old and popular. It was believed that vitality which is inherent in the egg would be passed on to the person to whom the present was given. The custom of giving Easter eggs is a blend of pagan beliefs about the rebirth of nature at the end of winter and the Christian belief in resurrection. Coloring the eggs and decorating them with symbols and ornaments has always been a traditionally fun thing to do. This is probably one of the oldest forms of folklorist and artistic expression of mankind that increased the value of the egg for the giver and the receiver. We know that around 1700 Sorbian Easter eggs were first mentioned. Coloring and decorating Easter eggs has remained to be an important custom in the life of the Sorbs throughout the year. Many people use the wax technique. They apply hot wax in patterns on the clean cooked egg or the egg shell itself with specially shaped quills or pin heads. The cold wax protects the shell from the dye-bath. After the egg is dried the procedure can be repeated. Finally, the heated wax on the egg is removed and the pattern appears in its entire splendor. Thus you have multicolored eggs that differ from each other. A steady hand is needed for the scratch technique. The egg is first dyed. Next, a sharp object is used to scratch on the pattern. Another technique is called etching. Acid is applied on the dyed egg by help of a nib. In former days they used the juice of sauerkraut. Today diluted hydrochloric acid is used instead. Then you remove the color in patterns and wipe the egg very carefully. The wax bossier technique is not often used. It is similar to the wax technique in that colored hot wax is applied to the white or light-dyed egg and left to dry. According to tradition, decorated eggs are given to relatives and friends. Children visit their godparents on Easter Sunday and are given three eggs and an Easter roll.

#### Waleien

This custom is still very popular today. In the afternoon children meet in the garden or in the meadow for *Waleien*. They prepare a sloping track in which the decorated eggs roll down. Of course, the eggs do not roll down straight, but instead go into a spin. This makes the game exciting. Eggs that touch another egg win that egg, a coin or a cookie. Initially, the custom was a fertility rite that assured the growth of grass that was substantial for the farm to survive.

#### Bonfire on Easter Saturday

A very popular and widespread custom at Easter is the bonfire. Many people in the world believe that the fire contains a cleaning power. More than 100 German-Sorbian villages of Lower Lusatia each year preserve this custom.

During the days before Easter the village youth collect wood and other flammable material. On Easter Saturday they build a pile of wood as high and as large as possible. The fire is built on the nearest hill to the village. It is said that the farther the light can be seen the more land will be fertile. Usually around midnight the fire is lit. Some villages compete with the highest pile or try to light the fire in the neighboring village earlier and thus hold the losers up to ridicule. Therefore the fireplace is guarded. Before the fire has burned out everybody is full of high spirit and the brave try to jump through the fire. Others unhinge doors and gates and hide them, close off chimneys and do all sorts of other mischievous things. Villagers who were "mean" - that is, they did not give much to the participants in the festive procession - should be very careful and keep an eye on their house.

#### Easterwater

This custom apparently originates from pre-Christian times. It refers to the belief, as found in numerous religions, that water promotes health and purity. People used to wash themselves with Easter water and sprinkled it on the farm's livestock, and in some places they sprinkled it over every person they met on the way. In the past young women went to get the curative Easter water in the night between Easter Saturday and Easter Sunday before dawn. On the way to and from the spring or the river the women were not allowed to speak. They scooped the Easter water at a place where the water runs from East to West, where the sun rises and sets. The boys try to scare the girls on their way home or try to make them speak. Once a girl broke the rule and spoke, the Easter water would lose its effect to promote health and beauty. She would instead bring home "tittle-tattle-water" and everyone would make fun of her. How many people today believe in the curative effect of Easter water? No one knows, but perhaps some girls still get up early in the morning and secretly go for the Easter water which promises endless beauty.

Until the 1950's the so called Easter singing was a very popular custom in Lower Lusatia. The girls met on Good Friday or in the night between Easter Saturday and Sunday and sang all the folk songs and hymns they had learnt in the spinning room.

#### Majski bom - Maypole

Green trees and branches in May embody the spirits of growth that bring fertility and health to the village and into every house. May 1 can be found in many traditional calendars as a profound event in the course of the year. It is at the beginning of the six months of summer. Many people preserved the tradition to decorate house and home and other things with fresh green tree limbs for festive occasions. The fresh green tree stands in a particular way for

reviving power. People broke twigs off the trees and took them home believing that these would bring luck. These green branches that were taken home were seen as a new change of life for everyone in the home. The maypole erected in the center of the village was seen as the tree of life for the whole village community. Therefore it was guarded faithfully. Many of these beliefs are outdated, but still live today in the peoples' minds. Until the 1940's of last century in the eastern part of Lower Lusatia the maypole was erected only on Pentecostal Sunday and cut on Midsummer's Day. The tree-trunk was auctioned and the money received was "drunk away" (spent on alcohol for everyone).

During the time of National Socialism people were ordered to erect the maypole on May 1 instead of Whitsun. After the war this date was not changed in many places of Lower Lusatia. Today in some regions the village youth erect the maypole the night before May 1 in the center of the village with a small ceremony. A green birch tree and one or two wreaths with colorful ribbons are attached to the top of a fully grown and decorated trunk. A green twisted garland embellishes the trunk from top to the bottom. A group of young men guard the maypole through the first night since today it is regarded as symbol for health and growth for the whole village. Furthermore, the youth of other villages try to cut the maypole or even steal it to bring humiliation and disgrace. If a maypole is stolen from a village then that village will not be allowed to erect a maypole in the following seven years. In other regions all villagers meet in the morning of May 1 to erect the maypole in the village green and celebrate the whole day. In contrast to Upper Lusatia, where the traditional "Falling of the maypole" takes place on a Sunday in May as a festival for the village, in Lower Lusatia the maypole does not fall until after Midsummer's day and then it is auctioned.

#### Jańskie rejtowanje - St. John's Day Ride

In the very special way that the close relationship between man and nature unfolds its strongest power during the time of solstice becomes apparent on St. John's Day. According to the beliefs of our ancestors the most marvelous things happen on this day. It is believed that the Midsummer's night produces exceptional healing power. The St. John's Day Ride was an important village festivity in many villages of Lower Lusatia in the 19th century. This custom has survived until the present day only in the village of Casel near Drebkau. Instead of the village youth planning this custom there is an association founded to preserve and organize this unique tradition. In the center of the festivities is "John" or "Jan", a figure in disguise embodying the spirits of growth. He is dressed in green branches and flowers. A crown covers his face completely. The preparations for this festivity are extensive and take up much time. Thousands of cornflowers are necessary to create the unusual costume of John. On the day before each girl picks big bunches of flowers and prepares several meters of twisted garlands and wreaths. The men leave early in the morning to find and bring back water lilies. Roses and carthusian carnations make up John's crown. All the different flowers express joy of life and blessed fields. Cornflowers are used as healing herbs whereas water lilies and reed refer to the vital water. Women begin to decorate John in the morning of the festive day. Starting at the collar they sew garlands of cornflowers on the clothes down to the knee. The crown completes the costume after-which John rides together with other men from the village and a brass band from the pub to the village green. The men from the village protect the rider and do not let anybody come near him. Young women dressed in white dresses decorated with blue and red ribbons walk in front of him. They carry another crown with them that will be given to John in the evening for his honorary dance. Having arrived in the village green John rides through the crowd several times. The accompanying men's task is to protect him since the villagers want to get him off the horse and steal pieces of the decorations from his costume which symbolize the spirits of growth. Step by step the number of men protecting

him decreases and at the end John rides by himself. Now people can get to him more easily and pick flowers while he is still riding. The captured flowers are eyed as bearers of glad tidings. Afterwards everyone makes his way back to the pub, where the day ends with music and dance in gaiety.

#### Kokot - The Cock

##### Zabijanje Kokota - Beating the cock

Lower Sorbian customs in summer have especially originated from the time around the end of harvesting. The time of the grain harvest was the most important period of the year. A good harvest did not only decide the wealth of the propertied farmers but also if the poorer people in the village, agricultural workers and country dwellers, will have enough to eat the following year.

Bad weather and storms caused great damages quite often. People were much happier and thankful when the grain was dry and had been stored without heavy losses. Our ancestors believed in spirits of fertility and vegetation in the form of an animal. It was said that the cock, Sorbian "kokot," has the power to influence the harvest. After the harvest was over the cock hid under the last sheaf to regain power for the next year since the period of vegetation was over. Reapers decorated this particular sheaf with flowers and ribbons and shouted: "žins' jo kokot - today is cock-day" this means that it was the last day of the harvest. Men got little bunches of grain to pin on the jacket. Women made harvest wreaths and a big harvest crown and took it to the estate of the landowner and announced the end of the harvest. Afterwards they all got together and celebrated happily - ate, drank, sang and danced.

An older form of the summer customs around the cock is beating the cock. After the harvest was finished the next step was threshing the grain. Reapers took a cock into the fields where they let him go and tried to catch him again to "beat him to death" with a flail. Until the 17th century people killed the cock, but today it happens in a mere symbolic way. This custom is preserved only in a few villages of Lower Lusatia. Schmogrow, a village near the small town of Burg/Spreewald, is one place where the living cock sits in a hole covered with wooden boards. A pot is placed on top of them and blindfolded young men try to hit the pot with a flail three times. The man who is successful first will become a king. He then can choose his queen from the girls dressed in their festive costumes to dance around him. He is blindfolded again and has to catch her. Afterwards he releases the cock and the other men try to catch the cock again. In the end the cock is auctioned.

##### Łapanje kokota - Plucking the cock

Plucking the cock is the most popular custom of Lower Lusatia. The villagers erect in the middle of the village a green gate made of beams. They decorate the gate with garlands of green leaves and attach a dead cock hanging upside down to the crossbeam. One young man after the other ride in full gallop through the gate and try to pluck the cock's head. The winner will be called "kral" (king) and he will be honored and celebrated. Men who are able to grab the wings of the cock thereafter while riding through will be second and third king. Thus the most skillful riders and their horses get big winner wreaths decorated with leaf garlands from oak trees. The blindfolded harvest kings choose their partners from a circle of women to start the evening with an honorary dance. The women crown their harvest queen after several games of skill such as frog-carting, bachelor-carting, egg and spoon race. Neither frog nor bachelor is allowed to jump off the barrow with the woman trying to cover the distance in the

fastest time. The winner gets a wreath of oak tree leaves to wear. At the end of these competitive games all form a procession and march to the pub singing and dancing. In the middle some people carry the big harvest crown decorated with ribbons and flowers. A brass band plays all night long in the pub for singing and dancing.

#### Rejtowanje wo kofac - Stollen-riding

Stollen-riding is a custom of a different kind. Only in Neu Zauche, a village on the northern margin of the Spreewald, is this custom preserved in the original way. Until the middle of the last century people preserved this custom on Whit Sunday. It also used to be a part of the wedding ceremony where unmarried guests would compete for a big cake, called stollen or fruit loaf. Today it is a harvest custom that is carried out in the month of August. The festival starts with a service in the morning although many young people are no longer members of the church. The girls wear the church costume that is similar to the costume of the bridesmaid following the original wedding formalities. Above the banded skirt the women wear a colorful silk apron and around their neck an embroidered scarf. Before the competition starts in the afternoon women present the prizes for the winners at the riding place. Three stollen cakes differing in size and decorated with flowers and asparagus are awarded to first, second, and third place for men and women. The men ride in white linen breeches and shirts on unsaddled horses to determine the fastest rider. The women exchange their silk aprons with white lace aprons and compete for the three best women in pot-beating. Along with the stollen cake a big wreath of oak tree leaves is presented to the winners. Last place receives as consolation a pipe with a tobacco pouch. The festival ends with a dance in the village pub.

#### Janšojski bog - Gift-giving in Jänschwald

A regional custom in the weeks before Christmas, the gift-giving child, can be found only in the village of Jänschwalde. This village is situated north of Cottbus and is the only village where this custom has survived until the present day. It originated in the spinning room in which between the mid of October and Ash Wednesday the local women met every evening in one of the farmer's houses. Wednesday before Christmas Eve was the last night in the old year when all the women met and dressed the oldest of the unmarried girls as the gift-giving child. The costume of "Janšojski bog" consists of the most beautiful parts of all different costumes in Lower Lusatia throughout the year. The headdress is especially made in a remarkable and lavish style. Wedding garlands and wreaths of three bridesmaids adorn the headdress. The face is covered with a white mesh and numerous colorful ribbons and chains that should make it impossible to recognize the girl. Above a banded skirt the gift-giving child wears two white aprons and four to five colorful embroidered skirt ribbons. Two women in a spinning room costume accompany the disguised person. Together they walk through the wintry village and the gift-giving child rings a little bell to tell they are coming. In the other hand it carries a birch rod that is decorated with red, white and blue ribbons to knock on people's doors and windows. The two companions wait outside while the gift-giving child goes in the home. The children are very curious as they notice the little pouch on the arm. The "Janšojski bog" silently gives a hand full of sweets to each child and leaves. On the way out it touches parents and grandparents with the birch rod to pass along strength, luck and health for the following year. The covered face and the silence retain the pre-Christmas atmosphere and secrecy of this figure.

#### Nowolětka - New Year Figures

A particular mystic time of the year is between Christmas Day and the feast of Epiphany. On the threshold to the New Year nature appears full of secrets. Special procedures were used and oracles were consulted to find out much about the future and to keep sickness and bad luck away from the home and livestock in the following year. Two Sorbian writers, Leopold Haupt and Jan Arnost Smoler, note in their book "Sorbian Folksongs of Upper and Lower Lusatia" in 1841:

"In the evening before the new year and the feast of Epiphany, sometimes on the day itself, some people bake dough figures in the shape of cows, sheep, pigs, geese, and so on. They called the figures baked on the last day of the year "New year's little figures" (Sorbian: nowe ljetka) and the ones baked on the day of Epiphany "threesome" (Sorbian: tsjódrak). Children give these figures to their godparents and get a present in exchange. They feed it to the livestock that will hopefully grow big and healthy." Today these figures are made of savory dough.

Many people are not aware of the original meaning of these New Year figures, also called picture biscuits. Nevertheless, this very enjoyable custom is still alive today. Children and grownups enjoy forming these figures and giving them as a present to relatives and friends as a bearer of good tidings in the New Year.