

Dobry dzeń a witajće k nam do Serbow - Welcome to our Sorbian region.

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.

In this little booklet we would like to introduce you to the wealth of traditions and customs which the Sorbs observe in their homeland in bilingual Lusatia in the winter season. Men and women from various places of individual ethnographic regions describe here the ways in which traditions of Sorbian customs have been preserved in their respective homes. Although it is mainly the given community that takes part in their observation, these events are a great experience for any visitor from outside the region. The following texts would like to be your guide on your excursions to one part of the rich cultural traditions and language of the Sorbs.

November

In November and December we can find a great number of traditions in various regions of bilingual Lusatia. In addition to the commonly used word November, other variants exist in the Sorbian language as well. Thus in Upper Sorbian it is also called nazymnik relating to the word for autumn (nazyma). In Lower Sorbian it is given the name of mlošny that refers to the farmers' thrashing (mlošić) their corn.

December

December, the month when Christmas (hody) come, is called hodownik; in Lower Sorbian its name derives from the winter (zyma) month, that is zymski.

Swjaty Měrcin - Saint Martin

On St. Martin's Day (November 11) processions of children soliciting little giftstake place in all Sorbian Catholic villages except in Radwor (Radibor in German) where this custom is observed on St. Nicholas Day (December 6). Children go about from house to house in small groups and ask for titbits singing the following rhyme:

"Wjele zboža přejemy
a so pěknje prašamy, njej tu
swjaty Měrcin (Mikławš) był,
njej tu ničo wostaji? Ju wšak,
ju, poľnu šklu, hišće wulku
hromadu" "We wish you lots of
happiness and we kindly ask
you this: Has Saint Martin
(Nicholas) been here yet, and
some gifts for us has left?
Yes, oh yes, that he did, a full
dish and a pile of sweets"

Swjata Borbora - Saint Barbara

In some villages of the parish of Kulow (Wittichenau), Swjata Borbora is on her round on the eve of St. Barbara's Day (December 4). She goes from house to house, and two servants, each called Ruprecht, accompany her. Only a few years ago she put on parts of the wedding wear of the Sorbian Catholic bride. Today she dresses in a white bridal gown with a veil over her face. She gives apples, nuts and sweets to good children, but she touches the cheeks of the naughty ones with a birch bundle. "Saint Barbara" never says a word; those are uttered by both Rumprechts. They ask the children to report on their behaviour and sing a song or tell a rhyme. On the occasion the children are excited and afterwards they are proud that Swjata Borbora has given them a present.

Sonja Hrjehorjowa, Sulšecy (Sollschwitz)

Swjaty Mikławš - Saint Nicholas

In some villages of the Catholic parish of Kulow (Wittichenau) we can meet Swjaty Mikławš on the eve of 6 December. He is dressed as a Catholic bishop wearing a red cloak and the mitre and carrying the bishop's crosier. He mostly comes in the company of two characters of the Weihnachtsmann (Father Christmas).

Swjaty Mikławš in Salow (Saalau)

On December 5, on the eve of St. Nicholas' Day, I walk from house to house together with two young people. I am dressed in bishop's garments and, accompanied by two Weihnachtsmänner - Fathers Christmas - I go about our village and pay a visit to every child up to the age of ten. We announce our coming with ringing the doorbell. In the living room we make our introductions and ask the children if they have always obeyed their parents. If it is not the case, the child is given a scolding. Nevertheless, since Saint Nicholas was a very good and generous bishop, censure is the matter of the Weihnachtsmänner. I only praise the children and ask them if they could give us a prayer, song or a rhyme. It is no problem for them because they would be well prepared beforehand. As a reward, they get a small gift from me. The presents are placed by the parents outside the windows of the house before I set out to do my round. After the children have thanked us, that is Saint Nicholas and his company, we say good bye and go to pay a visit to the next family.

Clemens Šořta, Salow (Saalow)

Džěćetko - Gift-giving

At the time of the spinning evenings, when flax is spun and stories told, džěćetko goes on the gift-giving round in the Slepó (Schleife) region. Peasants in this region, called hola (the Heath), belonged among the poorest in the whole of Lusatia. Local girls, therefore, decided to please children at Advent by giving them little gifts, such as apples, pears, nuts, ginger bread, but also smaller parts of the folk costume that were made at home.

A girl who is about to get married is chosen by the kantorka (a female choir-leader) to be the gift-giving person, and on an Advent Sunday she is dressed in the costume of the bridesmaid. A veil covers her face, a white apron is placed over a green skirt, a white shirt replaced with a long blouse pushed inside the bib skirt; white woollen gloves are put on her hands. Each girl

helping with the clothing brings along a coloured ribbon. These are then either bound together and tied around the arm or stitched separately onto the costume of the dzecetko.

Since the ribbon decorations of the Bože džěčo (Baby Christ) in each of the seven villages of the Slepó region differ from one another, it is recognized at first sight from which of them the costume comes. In some villages the ribbons brought by the girls are then sown onto a long, coloured band. So it is easy to count how many girls have taken part in the clothing. After the complicated headdress is put on, the dzecetko gets a birch bundle in the right hand and a little bell announcing its coming in the left hand. During the visit, the dzecetko does not say a word. It is only the accompanying persons who can speak, and so the dzecetko remains unidentified by those who were given gifts.

Today the džěcetko pays visits to nursery schools, schools, senior citizen's Christmas parties, Advent gatherings of local groups of the Domowina national organization and also the Christmas market in the village of Slepó. In each village dzecetko is dressed according to the local tradition. We are happy that in all the seven villages, i.e. Slepó (Schleife), Rowno (Rohne), Mulkecy (Mulkwitz), Miłoraz (Mühlrose), Trjebin (Trebendorf), Brězowka (Halbendorf) and Džěwin (Groß Düben), this custom has been revived recently.

Lenka Nowakowa, Rowno (Rohno)

In a similar manner, do girls in Lower Lusatia clothe the eldest from their midst to be the gift-giving character during the last spinning evening before Christmas. This custom has survived till today in the village of Janšojcy (Jänschalde).

Janšojcki bog - Gift-giving

The village of Janšojcy (Jänschalde) belongs to the region where the Lower Sorbian costume is worn. Here too the gift-giving girl is clothed in various parts of this national costume put together in a fancy combination. It includes a quilted underskirt. A red skirt decorated with a ribbon is placed over the underskirt. The upper part of the body is covered with a long men's shirt on the sleeves of which small bunches or little wreaths of artificial flowers are attached. Over the skirt with a ribbon a white starched lace apron is tied front and back. On its waistband embroidered ribbons are stitched. Around the waist then a wide silk sash is tied. The whole costume is supplemented with white gloves, white stockings and black shoes.

The headdress is particularly remarkable and complex. A woollen scarf is wrapped around the head of the Janšojcki bog (Jänschalder Gott in German; God from Janšojcy in English) in the same way as a turban is done, and a knot is tied at the front. Over it a white scarf decorated with two flower tendrils is placed. In the middle a bridal crown of young spruce twigs is fixed. A tulle scarf arranged in folds and trimmed with coloured ribbons, pearl strings and sown-on glittering little pieces of tin covers the face. The whole outfit is supplemented with a birch bundle with coloured ribbons in the right hand and a little bell in the left. With the accompanying women Janšojcki bog sets out to meet the youngest inhabitants of the village. In order to remain unidentified, the girl may not speak during the round.

A stroke of the bundle against the window and the sound of the little bell announces its coming at every house. Having given the children their presents, Janšojscy bog touches the adults with the bundle so that the awakened strength of the nature may be transferred to them.

Liska Möschowa, Janšojcy (Jänschwalde)

Swjata Marija hospodu pyta - Virgin Mary is looking for shelter

The story of Mary and Joseph looking for shelter initiated the participation of nine families in the symbolic provision of shelter for Christ's Mother.

All participating in this Sorbian Catholic custom of Advent promise that they will not refuse anyone asking for help. For nine days before Christmas Eve the statues of Christ's Mother and Saint Joseph are carried from one family to another. To establish the order of the families, lots are drawn on the second Advent Sunday. The ninth family may consider themselves lucky because Mary and Joseph will stay with them till Candlemas (2 February).

On the coming of Virgin Mary all participants start praying together. The same ceremony is held when Christ's Mother is leaving the house and is being carried to the other family where she is already expected.

In our village we naturally pray in our Sorbian mother tongue - five times the Lord's Prayer, furthermore, the Creed and the Lord's Angel.

Gabriela Brězanowa, Prawoćicy (Prautitz)

Nowolětka - New Year's Day pastries

Among folk customs of all nations we come across a number of festive occasions dating back to the remote past. As the calendar year was nearing its end, peasants were beginning to think of the year to come. They were concerned with the harvest and the well-being of their domestic animals. This was the reason why on the New Year's Eve small animal figures made of flour, water and a bit of salt was baked; on the next day they were given to the live animals - each should have eaten a pastry figure depicting itself. In that way people hoped and believed that domestic animals would be healthy in the course of the coming year. Cows, horses, sheep, goats, hens, geese, ducks, dogs and cats were typical New Year's figures. Out of this custom, which had survived till the 1920s, a new tradition has developed and has been maintained mainly in schools and nursery schools. Children shape and bake various nowoletka for fun and pleasure or as presents there. The museum called the Alter Pfefferküchlerei (The Old Gingerbread Baker's) in Wóspork (Weißenberg) observes this custom as well. In the winter season visitors themselves can take part in the making of animal figures.

The following preparation of the dough is described by Mrs. Irmgard Wenzel from the Alte Pfefferküchlerei in Wóspork (Weißenberg):

Flour and water are mixed together to make a leaven which is then left in a warm place for two days, and later, after adding a greater amount of flour and a necessary bit of salt, the dough is kneaded until it is ready to be used for shaping figures from. It is important that the

dough has been kneaded for a long time and thoroughly. The rest of the dough is covered with a wet cloth to keep it from drying up.