

The language and culture of the Sorbs

# An Endangered Language



**Dr. Elżbieta Wrocławska** studies sociolinguistics, especially how the Sorbian and Croatian languages function in society

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**The Sorbs are a fascinating indigenous Slavic minority in the German states of Saxony and Brandenburg. Having preserved their own cultural and linguistic identity through centuries of Germanization and despite Nazi persecution, they now face threats stemming from globalization**



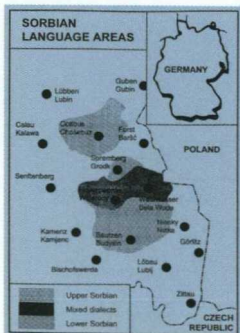
**Prof. Jadwiga Zieniukowa**, as a linguist, Slavist, Polish studies specialist, and ethnolinguist, studies ethnic minorities such as the Kashubs and Sorbs

The PAN Institute of Slavic Studies in Warsaw continues the research initiated by the eminent Professor Zdzisław Stieber (1903–1980) in Sorbian studies – a field which probes the language, literature, culture, and history of the Sorbian people. In so doing our institute cooperates with the highly esteemed Sorbian Institute in Bautzen (known as *Budyšin* in Sorbian), its Lower Sorbian branch in Cottbus (*Chošebuz*), and to some extent also with Slavists at Warsaw University.

## Who are the Sorbs?

As Gerald Stone asserts in the very title of his book *The Smallest Slavonic Nation: The Sorbs of Lusatia*, the Sorbs are a nation – i.e. an ethnic community bound by a common

East News



Known as *Budyšin* in Sorbian or *Bautzen* in German, this unofficial capital of Upper Lusatia and the cultural center of the Sorbs lies on the Spree River in the German state of Saxony

territory, origin, culture, and set of values. Also known in English as the Lusatians, Lusatian Sorbs, or Wends, the Sorbs call themselves *Serbja* or *Serby*. The national existence, culture, and language of this indigenous minority in the German states of Saxony and Brandenburg have remained under threat for centuries, their geographical extent constantly shrinking as a result of Germanization. Never having had their own statehood, the Sorbs have been subjects of German political structures and historically constituted a rural population dependent upon German landowners.

The Sorbian people are characterized by a dichotomy between Upper Lusatia, centered on Bautzen, and Lower Lusatia, centered on Cottbus. Upper Lusatia consists of two portions, Protestant and Catholic, the latter preserving the language to the greatest degree. The Sorbs are all now either bilingual, using both German and Sorbian (spoken by approx. 67,000 individuals in 1987, and approx. 30,000 in 2006), or monolingual in German. This geographical dichotomy is manifest in the existence of two very closely related literary languages, known as Upper and Lower Sorbian; it is a point of dispute whether these constitute versions of the same language or two separate languages. Lower Sorbian is dying out, although the Sorbian intelligentsia is working to prevent that from happening, striving to revitalize both forms.

An ethnic minority's existence hinges greatly upon awareness of a common identity. Such an awareness is facilitated by a set of symbols or value-signs that distinguish the group from others (i.e. "us" vs. "them"): language and written texts, religion, customs, art, and tradition.

The Sorbian national and linguistic tradition has been shaped by such factors as the population's political and social status, the Reformation, the geographic location and ethno-linguistic surroundings, and linguistic contacts with German (characterized by conflict) and with Czech and Polish (amicable). The Czechs and the Poles have supported the Sorbian national, cultural, and linguistic aspirations. An important role here was played by the Slavic student community at Wrocław University in the 19th century, and by the Sorbs' contacts

PH/DPK



with the Union of Poles in Germany in the 20th century. Defining traits of the Sorbian tradition are a Sorbian rather than German ethno-cultural awareness and the intergenerational passing down of culture (i.e. customs, national costumes, songs) and especially language in its dialectical variations. A traditional division between Lutherans (Lower Lusatia and eastern Upper Lusatia) and Catholics affected the religious writings of the 16th–18th centuries, the Reformation-inspired translations of the Bible into the Sorbian dialects, and the process of literary language formation in the 19th century.

### Linguistic and cultural prestige

The Sorbian national, cultural, and linguistic awareness emerged in the 19th century, influenced by the ideas of Romanticism and the "Slavic revival" (the Czech model being particularly salient). The Sorbian minority in Germany then formed its own intelligentsia, consisting mainly of teachers and clergy of both faiths. Such Sorbian intellectuals (writers, publishers, editors, education activists and researchers) as Handrij Zejler, Jan Arnošt Smoler, Michał Hórnik, Jakub Bart-Cišiński, Křesćan Bohuwěr Pful, Jan Bjedrich Tešnař, and Arnošt Muka helped form the backbone of the Sorbian identity and culture. Secular writing made its first appearance, and an Upper and (less widespread) Lower Sorbian

**The right to erect bilingual, German-Sorbian signs showing the names of towns and streets is enshrined in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and advocated by minority-rights organizations**



Piotr Logwin/Agencja Gazeta

**The Sorbs celebrate their holidays festively, preserving such traditions as the traditional decoration of Easter eggs**

press emerged - a phenomenon of great importance for the development of a literary language, and for building the Sorbian identity. Harnessing the persuasive function of language, these press publications promoted such symbols of ethnic identity as the proper names *Łužica* and *Serbjka* or traditional Sorbian first names and surnames such as *Mikławš* "Nicolas", *Marija Měrćinkec* "Maria daughter of Měrćink." Such publications also raised an appeal for preserving the *maćerščina* or "mother tongue" (the most important element of the Sorbian national identity), developed the literary language standard, and expanded the communicative efficiency of Sorbian, thereby lending it greater prestige. Such work by the 19th-century intelligentsia enabled the Sorbian language to function well as a vehicle for writing, as a Church language, and as a language of schooling in the early decades of the 20th century.

The existence of cultural institutions is crucial for the prestige of any national culture. The year 1847 saw the creation of a "Sorbian Homeland" (*Maćica Serbska*) society, which published *Časopis Maćicy*

*Serbskeje*, a language-policy periodical. A "Sorbian House" association was established in 1904, while 1912 brought the founding of *Domowina*, an umbrella organization drawing together all of the Sorbian associations. These institutions were symbols of Sorbian national life and centers of language promotion.

The steady development of Sorbian culture was brought to a brutal halt by the rise of Nazism in Germany. In the 1930s, Sorbian schooling, organizations, and press were banned by the state authorities, and Sorbs were prohibited from using their native tongue.

### The Sorbs after 1945

After WWII the Sorbs were granted a special status as an ethnic group, gaining formal cultural autonomy in East Germany. A "Sorbian Act" enshrined their minority rights: Sorbian-language schooling, equal status for Sorbian alongside German in public administration in areas inhabited by a Sorbian majority, and the right to operate Sorbian cultural institutions. Later reformulated by the parliaments of Saxony and

Brandenburg after German reunification, this law would remain partially defunct during the East German period. It was manipulated by the Communist authorities so as to attempt to transform the Sorbs into a "socialist nation," which in practice meant severing their traditional cultural and linguistic bonds.

Despite such embroilment in Communist ideology, this cultural autonomy was nonetheless conducive to the development of "higher" Sorbian culture, the expansion of the Sorbian language's domains of use, and its modern development within the now-bilingual community. The early 1950s saw the establishment of a Sorbian Studies Institute at Leipzig University's Slavic Department, a Sorbian Institute in Bautzen (now with a branch in Cottbus), and the *Domowina* publishing house - institutions that promote Sorbian studies and culture in the world to this very day. These institutions continue to lay the groundwork for education by helping develop textbooks on Sorbian language and literature and by cultivating the national awareness.

Still, educational efforts have not always managed to boost the functioning of Sorbian language and culture among the population - that is especially true in Lower Lusatia, where use of the Sorbian language, the most important element of national identity, is essentially limited to the oldest generation.

### A minority in the age of globalization

In the wake of German reunification, associations that had been banned under Nazi rule and not revived under Communism were reestablished: the *Maćica Serbska* society, the Cyril and Methodius society, and others. Since 1990 the Sorbs have been working to utilize the mechanisms of democracy to promote the prestige of their own culture and protect it from disappearance. In order to cultivate the Sorbian language and culture - or in the case of Lower and part of Upper Lusatia, in fact to revive them - a program of bilingual education has been introduced into many preschools and schools, open to non-Sorbs as well. Petitions are lodged and protests held to demand the enforcement of minority rights, as enshrined in the *European*

*Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* and advocated by international minority-rights organizations - for example, to protest against the closing of Sorbian-language schools due to a small number of attending students (in accordance with the same law that applies to the German majority), or against the disappearance of German-Sorbian road or street signs set up in bilingual areas. Holidays are celebrated festively by the Sorbs, preserving such traditions as the Catholic Sorbs' horse processions at Easter, the decoration of Easter eggs, rooster chases, and home visits by the *dźećetko* (symbolizing the baby Jesus). While the cultivation of traditional Sorbian customs has taken on folkloric traits, they have never ceased to have a symbolic national character for the Sorbs.

EU membership and processes of globalization have lately faced the Sorbs with the challenge of further reorienting their identity and culture. ■

#### Further reading:

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Marzena Hmielewicz/Agencja Gazeta