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Front Page Photo

Shrovetide in the village of Naundorf (Njabožkojce) /
Zapust w Njabožkojcach



**Sorbian Customs
and Traditions
in the Course of the Year**

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When visiting the region of Lusatia, we can come in contact with the smallest Slavonic nation – the Sorbs who have traditionally been also called the Wends. Bilingual town, village and street signs are evidence that in the South of Brandenburg and in the West of Saxony, Sorbs and Germans have been living together for a thousand years. In addition to the Sorbian language, a number of customs and traditions have survived to these days.

This brochure attempts to provide an authentic view of the folk customs of the Sorbs, and those that tourists can directly encounter in particular.

Each custom has its own history. As life changes, so do contents and functions of customs. Many pagan customs and practices were given new contents after Christianity had been adopted; their early forms, however, can still be recognized.

In the times when the Sorbs were subjected to suppression and Germanisation, observing the manners and customs was a means of their survival. Today the preservation of customs is also considered valuable because their variety mirrors the beauty of the culture and strengthens the sense of belonging of the smallest Slavonic nation.

Folk customs are also great tourist pullers. National costumes in individual regions of Lusatia, worn either as everyday clothes or on special occasions, for example, are regarded as unique traditions.

The Sorbs strive to maintain their traditions due to which they would, as one facet of the mosaic, remain visible in the united Europe bringing together a great variety of cultures.

Zymske natožki / Winter Customs

Nowolětka / New Year's Day Dough Figures

In winter the farmer already begins to think about the coming year. In the past, the harvest and the cattle used to be the main things by which to make a living. On New Year's Eve, therefore, small animal figures were formed from dough made of flour, water and a bit of salt. These figures, called *nowolětka* in Sorbian, were then given to the live farm animals of the same species to eat. In this way their well-being was ensured. The custom had been kept in the town of Wittichenau (Kulow in Sorbian) until the mid-1930s. Today, making these dough animal figures is observed particularly at schools and nurseries all over Lusatia – to please the children or to give as gifts to family members.



Ptači kwas / Birds' Wedding

The origin and meaning of this custom has not been fully explained by experienced ethnographers yet. In any case it derives from mystical rites of our forefathers in the pagan times. They believed that sacrificing a dish ensures the favour of the gods of nature. People also noticed that many birds lay eggs in winter season and concluded, therefore, that their »wedding« must have already taken place. At the turn of the 18th century, offerings to forefathers and gods became little gifts for children. This change also shows in



today's interpretation according to which children are guardians of the birds' realm, and at their wedding birds repay the children for the service.

On the morning of 25 January, children in Lusatia place a plate on the windowsill or in front of the door for the birds to fill with sweets. Processions of nursery school children in genuine Sorbian wedding folk costumes of the given region are particularly charming. These costumes can be admired among both the Catholic Sorbs and the Protestant Sorbs in Upper Lusatia, in several places in Lower Lusatia and also in the vicinity of the parish of Schleife (Slepo) or the town of Hoyerswerda (Wojerecy). Like the real wedding, the procession is headed by the *braška* – master-of-ceremonies – in black suit, with a stick and a top hat. After the bride and the groom walk two godmothers, then the bride's maid and finally the wedding guests dressed as birds. Merrily they go through the village stopping at everyone who contributed to the preparation of this feast.



Birds's Wedding is one of the most beautiful children customs in Upper and Lower Lusatia. At nursery schools and in after-school centres it is usually celebrated the whole day.



Another form of presenting the *Birds's Wedding* is an evening performance that goes beyond children's observance of the custom.

Around 1880 already Sorbian publicans in Crostwitz (Chrósćicy) and surroundings held parties called *ptači kwas* for adults on 25 January. After the Sorbian association Nadžija (Hope) was founded in Bautzen (Budyšin) in 1920, the annual Birds' Wedding ceremony took place there, initially together with theatrical performances and concerts. After 1937, at the time of Nazism, all activities of Sorbian associations (as well as the associations themselves) were banned.

After the Second World War the continuity of the Birds' Wedding performances was revived and maintained by the newly formed cultural bodies – until 1957 the State Ensemble for Sorbian Folk Culture, then, until today, the Sorbian Folk Ensemble. The Sorbian master of ceremonies leads through the performance with amusing commentary and entertains the »wedding guests«. The choir, orchestra and ballet give various presentations of Sorbian folk music interlaid with sketches; at the end there is a dance party. Every year about 3.000 visitors attend this event in various places on and around 25 January. »Birds' Wedding« can

be seen in the villages of Crostwitz (Chrósćicy), Radibor (Radwor), Drachhausen (Hochoza), Werben (Wjerbno) and in the towns of Bautzen (Budyšin), Cottbus (Chošebuz), Hoyerswerda (Wojerecy), Kamenz (Kamjenc) and Wittichenau (Kulow). Beside the evening performance for adults, special morning shows for children are given.

Zapust w Dolnej Łužycy / Shrovetide Festivities in Lower Lusatia

No other custom is celebrated in Lower Lusatia with such intensity as Sorbian Shrovetide, closely linked with the working life of the village. In wintertime girls and young women gathered at spinning evening parties, sat at spinning wheels, sang folk songs or hymns and exchanged local gossip. Before the spring sowing, young men could then take them to the Shrovetide merry-making. The spinning evenings served also as community centres where young people could socialise.

Today's form of the Shrovetide festivities came into existence as late as at the end of the 20 century and consists of the carnival (*camprowanje*) and a festive procession (*zapustowy pšešeg*).



Camprowanje / Shrovetide (Carnival)

Historically the oldest part of the Shrovetide festivities is the parade of young people going round the village. Its roots go back to pre-Christian religious rituals. By means of noise, masks, beating with birch rods and dance, demons were to be kept away from farmhouses. A rider on a white horse, a stork symbolizing the coming spring, bear as the symbol of the departing winter, a chimney sweeper sweeping the spirits of winter out, and a double person representing a dead man carrying a living one.

At present, these characters lost their original meanings. The village youth put on masks and funny costumes and to the music accompaniment and in group they go from house to house collecting bacon, eggs and money. To repay the gifts, they ask the farmer's wife to a dance and the farmer is offered *palenc* (hard liquor). The gathered food and drink are then, mostly about a week later, eaten and drunk at the »egg feast«.



Zapustowy pšešėg / Shrovetide Festive Procession

Shrovetide in Lower Lusatia culminates with the procession of young couples, held on Saturday or Sunday. All participating women and girls wear the festive Lower Lusatian costume with an elaborately tied headdress called *lapa*. Each young man gets a bouquet made of artificial/paper



flowers from his female partner. Then the procession sets out, with musicians in the front. The procession makes honorary stops at the houses of distinguished inhabitants of the village who, in turn, repay with contributing to the Shrovetide moneybox. In the evening all go to the pub to dance.

In Lower Lusatian Shrovetide festivities, held from mid-January to early March, nearly a thousand inhabitants from almost all villages and Cottbus (Chośebuz) take part.

Nalětne natožki / Spring Customs

Debjenje jutrownych jejkow / Easter Egg Decoration

In many nations we can find specific ways of egg decorating passed from generation to generation. The joy of playing with colours and patterns led to the creation of real small masterpieces among the Sorbs.

Since time immemorial eggs have been the symbol of growth and fertility. For centuries the egg has been given as a present, with the vitality contained in it supposed to be passed on to the recipient.

In the woodland area (called *hola* in Sorbian) around Bad Muskau (Mužakow) and in the whole Central Lusatia,



children used to be given plentiful gifts by their godmothers and godfathers at Easter. Even today children still collect their presents, and decorated eggs are part of them. This duty to prepare gifts on the part of the godparents ends when the child has been confirmed.

Wax decorating is not only the oldest but also the best-known egg decorating technique. With a specially cut goose feather and a pin head molten wax is applied on the egg – little triangles, dashes and dots are used in order to create ornamental patterns. To make multi-coloured eggs, wax marks are applied again and again while the egg is every time immersed in another dye. This procedure can be repeated up to six times. In the end, with a piece of soft cloth, wax is removed from the surface of the egg warmed above the candle flame.

The technique of scratching coloured eggs with a sharp instrument requires skill and the painter's talent. Attention must be paid to scratching the pattern clearly.

Who is fond of blurred outlines, uses etching. This technique means that various motifs are etched in the eggshell by using a caustic – salt acid or aqua regia – and a goose feather.

Another wax technique of embossing has come back and is in fashion now. It involves decorating eggs with coloured wax applied and left on the eggshell.

Easter-egg markets where you can watch folk artists decorating eggs are an unforgettable experience. They are held before Easter in the towns of Bautzen (Budyšin), Hoyerswerda (Wojerecy), Weißwasser (Běła Woda) and the villages of Schleife (Slepo) and Halbendorf (Brězowka). All the techniques are shown with diligence, skilfulness and artistic perfection there. Many visitors are surprised at how many operations must be done before a coloured egg is placed on the table.

Chodojtypalenje / Witch Burning

Records about witch burning appear in literature only since the late 18th century. Belief in witches (called *chodojty* in Sorbian) was also spread among the Sorbs. These creatures, which did not make attempts on people's lives but, nevertheless, brought disease on cattle, had to be, therefore, driven out. By burning the brooms witches used for transportation, their means of transport were destroyed. Both the Sorbian and the German inhabitants of Lusatia have been celebrating this custom with enthusiasm until today.



A number of days before 30 April wood, twigs and other waste is gathered and piled up at a given place outside the village. At the top of the pile an effigy of a witch is placed. The pile must be well guarded to prevent young people from the neighbouring villages from setting it on fire before the ceremony is due. On that night villagers gather around the bonfire lit by children and young people. With the burning brooms, glowing circles are drawn against the evening sky to drive the witches out.

Burning the fires has been known all over Europe. In Upper Lusatia they are called *witch burning*, in Lower Lusatia *Easter fires*. The borderline between the two types runs north of the districts of Weißwasser (Běta Woda) and Kamenz (Kamjenc).

The best-known witch burning performance is held annually in the village of Göda (Hodžij) in the Bautzen district and the German-Sorbian Theatre of Bautzen organizes it together with the village. In the staged »Witch Trial« the actors use the verse form to expose bad habits and hot issues of the day. With thousands of onlookers, the witch, bearing a different sobriquet each year, is tried, sentenced to death and burnt.

Mejestajenje / Stajanje majskeho boma / Erecting the Maypole

On May Day Eve maypoles are erected at village greens in Lusatia. They are about 30 metres tall tree trunks with garlands wrapped around. A small birch tree decorated with ribbons is usually placed at the top. Its lush green symbolizes happiness and fertility for people, livestock and fields. In pre-Christian times the maypole embodied the spirit of growth bringing health to the village and its people.

Guarding the maypole from young men from neighbouring villages who want to cut it or steal it is of great importance. If this happens, the maypole may not be erected in the village for the following seven years.

In contrast to Upper Lusatia, erecting the maypole in Lower Lusatia begins with a festival of all the villagers.



The maypole remains erect mostly till St. John's Day, and then it is felled and sold at auction. In the villages around the towns of Kamenz (Kamjenc) and Bautzen (Budyšin) erecting the maypole tends to be organized by local associations or youth clubs. Traditionally, in this area the custom culminates on the occasion of lowering the maypole.

Mejemjetanje / Felling the Maypole

Felling the maypole in the villages of Upper Lusatia always takes place on a Sunday, and it is young people who prepare the celebration. First the villagers gather around the maypole; boys and girls then dance specially prepared folk dances. Girls usually wear the local national Sorbian costume, young men put on white shirts and black trousers. After the dance the maypole is dug out. As soon as it has fallen, boys race to get the top part. Who grabs it the first, becomes the



May King and chooses his May Queen. While the music band is playing, the May King and Queen as well as other couples ride through the village. Felling the maypole then ends with an evening dance.

Although during industrialization in the 19 century, many folk customs disappeared, the folk tradition of felling the maypole survived. After the Second World War this traditions was revived and we can still see it in bilingual regions of Upper Lusatia today.

Jutrowne naložki katolskich Serbow / Easter Customs of Catholic Sorbs

Klepotanje a jutrowne spěwanje / Clapping and Easter Singing

For the Catholic Sorbs the forty-day Lent, the time of contemplation and preparation for Easter, begins on Ash Wednesday.

Good Friday is the Catholic fasting day when the bells fall silent. In some Catholic parishes of Sorbian Lusatia, young people of the village meet to go with clappers three times a day – in the morning, at noon and in the evening – round the chapels and crosses and pray there together.

On Good Friday in the village of Sollschwitz (Sulšecy), girls and young women go to the parish church in the town of Wittichenau (Kulow) and, after the mass, back again, singing hymns and praying. They repeat this pilgrimage to celebrate Easter Saturday mass together with other worshippers.



Křižerjo / Easter Rides

What is called Easter Rides is undoubtedly the best-known custom of the Sorbs. Its roots date back to pre-Christian times when people believed that riding around the fields could save the germinating crop from the adversity of evil spirits. Under the influence of Christianisation this custom changed to a Christian procession. The original form (next to the modern one), however, survived only in the village of Ostro (Wotrow). At the dawn already, men gather to make the ritual of riding around the fields praying for God's blessing.

Today the actual Easter Rides are a confession of the faith. Their preparation, organization and rendering are in the hands of the participants, although after a consultation with the parish priest.

Several days before Easter there is much hustle and bustle in many farmsteads. It is necessary to currycomb the horses, plait their manes and polish the harness so that it shines brightly. On Easter Sunday morning the manes of the horses are curled and trimmed with flowers.

The Easter Riders are also dressed up: riding boots, a frockcoat and a top hat. Before they ride out of the farmyard, the farmer's wife sprinkles them with holy water.



Lined up in pairs, riders from each parish gather round their church. The priest hands them over the church banners, a statue of the Risen Christ and a cross, and blesses them. The good news of Christ's resurrection is then, on horse-backs, carried to the neighbouring parish. In the course of these processions in Sorbian Catholic parishes of Bautzen (Budyšin), Crostwitz (Chrósćicy), Radibor (Radwor), Storcha (Bačoń), Ostro (Wotrow), Nebelschütz (Njebjelčicy), Ralbitz (Ralbicy), Wittichenau (Kulow) and Panschwitz-Kuckau (Pančicy-Kukow) the same rules have been observed for centuries. First the Easter Riders ride round the church three times. When riding out and back the processions may not meet. When the riders with their horses return to the home village in the evening, they ride around the graveyard three times, pray for the late Easter Riders, other passed away and ailing people of the village, and several times they pray for God's Support. Easter Sunday ends with the common singing in the church.

Jutrowne nałožki / Jatšowne nałogi pla ewangelskich Serbow / Easter Customs of Protestant Sorbs

Jatšowny wogeń / Easter Fires

The annual fire burning used to play a significant role in the lives of many nations in the past. People believed in their power to protect from evil and thus to save cattle and harvest from harm and spells. Spring fires also symbolically drove winter out.

In Lower Lusatia Easter fires are a popular festivity still observed in over a hundred villages. On Easter Saturday young people of the village build a bonfire on a hill nearby, and have to guard it well because young men from the neighbouring villages sometimes make attempts to light it before the proper time comes. If this happened, the next

year Easter Fire might not be burnt. The time to light the bonfire is midnight of Easter Sunday. The fire then casts its glow that is seen from afar.

When the fire is almost burnt out, various tricks are played and mischief made. Particularly those who did not show much generosity when the Shrovetide parade in masks came collecting gifts (*camprowanje*) should be on their guard.

Jutrowne spěwanje / Jatšowne spěwanje / Easter Singing

Until the 1950s Easter singing of girls and young women in Central and Lower Lusatia was quite common. A few years ago *Kantorki* – a folklore group of elderly women of the parish of Schleife (Slepo) revived this tradition. Singing Easter hymns they go round the village stopping in front of the windows of the houses until they come to the *singers' benches* in the village green where, still singing in praise of God, they greet the dawning Easter Sunday until sunrise.

The female choir *Łužyca* tries to pick up this old tradition. Wearing costumes traditional for going to the church, the female singers give a performance of old Lower Sorbian Easter hymns in the Protestant church in Dissen (Dešno) on Good Friday.



Jutrowna woda / Jatšowna woda / Easter Water

In some Sorbian villages, the custom of bringing in Easter water has been revived.

Before the sunrise on Easter Sunday girls, in silence, set out to a spring or a stream to take up water and so gain the promise of health, beauty and eternal youth. In earlier times this magic and healing liquid was also sprinkled on cattle and fields. Lads tried to scare the girls because if the command of silence was broken, the magic water lost its powers and the girls then brought home the *chattering water*.



Walkowanje / Egg Rolling

Rolling eggs has been children's favourite Easter pastime until these days. In the past this custom was considered a charm affecting fertility and was supposed to help grass to grow, which was very important for country people.

In the garden or a meadow on a special sloping surface, boiled and decorated eggs are rolled. The rolling down egg that hits another wins, and its owner wins also the hit one.

Egg-rolling as an Easter custom is popular in nursery schools and after-school centres.

Lěšne a žnjowne natogi w Dolnej Łužycy / Summer and Harvest Customs in Lower Lusatia

Jańske rejtownanje / Saint John's Day Rides

Not only among the Sorbs did people in the past believe that on St. John's Day, on 24 June, all medicinal herbs and roots acquire healing powers. St. John's Day Rides, held as festivals until the mid-19 century in many villages of Lower Lusatia, are as old. At present this custom is observed only in the town quarter of Casel (Kozle) near the town of Drebkau (Drjowk). An association founded specifically for this purpose is the organiser of the festival. Local girls sew garlands of cornflowers onto one of the lads called *Jan* (after John the Baptist). On the head of *Jan* a crown of water lilies, roses and clove pinks is placed. Flowers picked up before dawn are said to have healing powers and bring happiness and joy into life and blessing to the fields.



Accompanied by other young men, *Jan* reaches the village green on horseback. His companions shield him from onlookers. Many try to stop the horse and steal from *Jan* his flower attire. The seized flowers are believed to bring happiness; therefore they are taken to the households. The festive day ends in merry dancing in the pub.



Kokot / The Cock

Harvest used to be the essential part of the country life. When corn remained dry and was harvested without losses, there was joy and gratitude. Our forefathers of the pagan times believed in spirits in animal forms affecting fertility – the cock (*kokot* in Sorbian) was their symbol. Enemies of the old times and heralds of the new times were supposed to have magic powers to control the yield of the harvest. Harvest thanksgiving festivities developed from this concept.

Zabijanje kokota / Threshing the Cock

It is the oldest summer harvest custom in Lower Lusatia. After corn had been harvested and the vegetation time was drawing to its end, the cock had done his duty. He hid under

the last sheaf where he was gathering strength for the new harvest. The reapers decorated this sheaf with flowers and ribbons and shouted: »Žins jo kokot!« – »Today we've got the cock!« Men pinned on a bunch of ears of grain, women made harvest wreaths and a crown. Much celebration followed.

Threshing the cock was another form of the *kokot* custom. When the harvest finished, threshing the corn started. The harvesters let a cock loose onto a field, and then repeatedly caught him and threshed him to death with flails. In this way the spirit of the old vegetation cycle was killed so that its old age weakness could not be transferred to the nature. Today, the killing of the cock is only symbolic.

Alive cock is put into a pit covered with wooden boards. On them is placed a pot which young men try to hit with a flail; they are blindfolded. Everybody can try three times; who manages to hit the pot first, becomes the king and, still blindfolded, chooses his queen. Afterwards the cock is let free, but then caught again and sold at auction.

This custom is observed only in several villages in Lower Lusatia, for instance in Schmogrow (Smogorjow) not far from the village Burg (Bórkowy) in the swampy area called Spreewald (Błóta).

Łapanje kokota / Plucking the Cock

Plucking the cock is a widespread harvest festivity in Lower Lusatia.

In the village an archway wrapped around with oak leaves is erected. A dead cock is hung on the crossbeam. One by one, young men then ride through the gate attempting, from the saddle, to snatch the head or wings off the dead cock. Who gets the head, becomes the *king* and is crowned with the oak leaves wreath. Boys who tear off the wings become then the second and the third king. Girls in festive costumes line up in the circle and the harvest kings, blindfolded, choose their queens from among them and dance an honorary dance with them.

In traditional competitions in which skilfulness is tested, such as carrying a frog or a bachelor on a wheelbarrow, or running with an egg on the soup spoon, girls elect their harvest queen who is also crowned with oak leaves wreath. Afterwards the festive procession, in which harvest crown is carried, goes to the pub to dance.



Rejtowanie wo kołac / Cake Rides

Cake Rides are a unique custom. Until the mid-nineteenth century single young men raced on horses to win a big cake. In this form the custom has been preserved mainly in the village of Neu Zauche (Nowa Niwa) in the northern part of the Spreewald (Błóta) area.

The festival starts with the divine service of the parish young people. Girls put on the costume that is worn to the church and derives from the former costume of the bridesmaid. In the afternoon Cake Rides are held. Before the rides,



cakes of different sizes and decorated with flowers are prepared – always three for boys and three for girls. Then boys in white linen trousers and a shirt race on unsaddled horses to find out who is the fastest rider.

Girls look for the best one in *battering the pot*. The winners get the cakes and the festival is again ended with a dancing party.

Předhodowne natožki / Pśedgodowne natoŕi / Pre-Christmas Customs

The time before Christmas is filled with a number of festivities and it is children who look forward to them each year. In these either children go carolling, or good children are given gifts by creatures usually representing the saints.

Swjaty Měrcin / Saint Martin

The custom of St. Martin's Day singing derives from the legend of St. Martin of Tours, who, in the fourth century, halved his own loose officer's coat to save the life of a beggar shivering with cold. Since the Middle Ages St. Martin's Day, 11 November, has been the day of receiving gifts. In Sorbian Catholic villages in the districts of Kamenz (Kamjenc) and Bautzen (Budyšin) children go, in small groups, from house to house singing the following carol:

*»We wish you lots of happiness
And we kindly ask you this:
Has Saint Martin (Nicholas)
come this way
And left something for us to play.
Yes, oh yes,
that he did,
A full dish and a pile of sweets.«*

*»Wjele zboža přejemy
a so pěknje prašamy
njej' tu swjaty Měrcin
(Mikławš) był,
njej' tu něšto wostajit?
Ju, wšak ju,
połnu šklu
a hišće wulku hromadu.«*

In the parish of Radibor (Radwor) in the Bautzen (Budyšin) district children's carolling takes place on the feast of Saint Nicholas, 6 December.

Swjata Borbora / Saint Barbara



Saint Barbara's Day is 4 December. Since the Middle Ages she has been worshipped as help in need. At present only in some villages of the parish of Wittichenau (Kulow), for example in Sollschwitz (Sulšecy), the following custom is observed: *St. Barbara* goes from house to house on the eve of her name day. She is dressed in a white wedding gown and her face is covered under a veil. She gives apples, nuts and sweets to children who were good.

Swjaty Mikławš / Saint Nicholas



St. Nicholas' Feast dates back to a very distant past – namely to the bishop of the same name from Myra in the 4 century who, according to a legend, used to give presents to poor children in particular.

In most of the Sorbian Catholic villages, Saint Nicholas comes in secret. On the eve of his day, 5 December, children place polished shoes in front of the door and St. Nicholas leaves sweets in them. In doing so, he remains unseen and unrecognised.

Bože džěćetko / Baby Christ – Gift Giving in Schleife (Slepo)

The figure of *bože džěćetko* originated from spinning evenings in the region of Schleife (Slepo). Peasants in this sandy woodland called *hola* belonged to the poorest in whole Lusatia. Local girls had an idea how to make small



children happy in the Advent. *Džěćetko* is dressed in specific costume established by the tradition of the given village of the parish of Schleife (Slepo). Girls who come to help with dressing the *džěćetko* bring coloured ribbons along. These are then tied in a noose and fixed on the sleeve, or loosely hanging they are pinned onto the costume of the *džěćetko*. In its right hand a birch rod is placed and a little bell announcing its coming in the left hand. When giving out sweets, it caresses the children's cheeks but never says a word. It touches the adults with the birch so that the awakening power of nature might transfer to them. Two girls dressed in the regional costume of the given village always accompany *Bože džěćetko*. It is also a popular guest in nursery and after school or senior home Christmas parties.

Janšojcki bog / Janšojcky God – Gift Giving in Jänschwalde (Janšojcky)

The figure called *bog* (god) going round and giving gifts is a pre-Christmas custom confined to the region of Lower Lusatia and dating back to the times of spinning evenings. It has survived to these days only in the village of Jänschwalde (Janšojcky).



Records about the Lower Lusatian spinning parties come from 14 century already. From mid-October to Ash Wednesday, girls from one village met at such parties in one farmstead to spin together. On Wednesday before Christmas, other girls dressed the oldest girl in Janšojcky as *Janšojcki Bog*. The clothes of this figure consist of the most beautiful parts of the Lower Lusatian national costume: especially its rich headdress. In its middle three little wreaths of the bridesmaid's costume are fixed. The face is covered with a tulle scarf adorned with pearl strings and appliqués of little coloured metal pieces. The red skirt is covered with two white aprons. *Janšojcki bog*. carries a little bell and a birch rod with intertwined coloured ribbons, too. While it is giving gifts to children, its female companions wait outside. The children's parents are touched with the birch so that they may be healthy and happy in the New Year.

Swjata Marija pyta hospodu / Virgin Mary Seeking for Shelter

The biblical theme of looking for shelter for Virgin Mary is sometimes used as a symbol. In Sorbian Catholic villages it is obvious to most people that nobody seeking help may be refused it.

In the villages round the Convent of Marienstern (St. Mary's Star) in the district of Kamenz (Kamjenc) for nine days before Christmas Eve the statues of God's Mother and St. Joseph spend one day in one family, then they are carried to another. On the statues entering and on leaving the house, the participants pray together. With the ninth family the statues remain till Candlemas (2 February).

Epilogue

Folk customs and traditions of each region of Lusatia had been closely linked with the annual farming cycle in pre-Christian times already. With the coming of Christianity, festivities gradually concentrated around the main religious feasts of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. Ancient pagan customs interspersed with the new Christian tradition.

In the Catholic as well as Protestant parts of Upper Lusatia the customs still retain a strongly religious character and their place in the lives of the local inhabitants is firmly fixed. Many festivities connected with Easter are characteristic of central Lusatia situated between the cities of Hoyerswerda (Wojerecy) and Weißwasser (Běła Woda). This feast is the main event of spring; in them victory of life over death is celebrated. The egg as a symbol of new life, fertility and strength is, therefore, of great importance among the Sorbs. In Protestant Lower Lusatia many Christian festivities were abandoned in the post-reformation times. Harvest customs, therefore, play an important role, because good harvest was, and still is, essential for the life of a village.

Each custom also has its deeper meaning. Traditions are part of the histories of the nations. They enable us to access thoughts and feelings, work and everyday life, joy and suffering of our predecessors. Observing the customs and traditions renders the pride of the nation of its own culture, represents confidence in our own powers and expresses hope for the future.

Further information on life, language and culture of the Sorbs in Saxony and Brandenburg can be found in our information materials published in English:

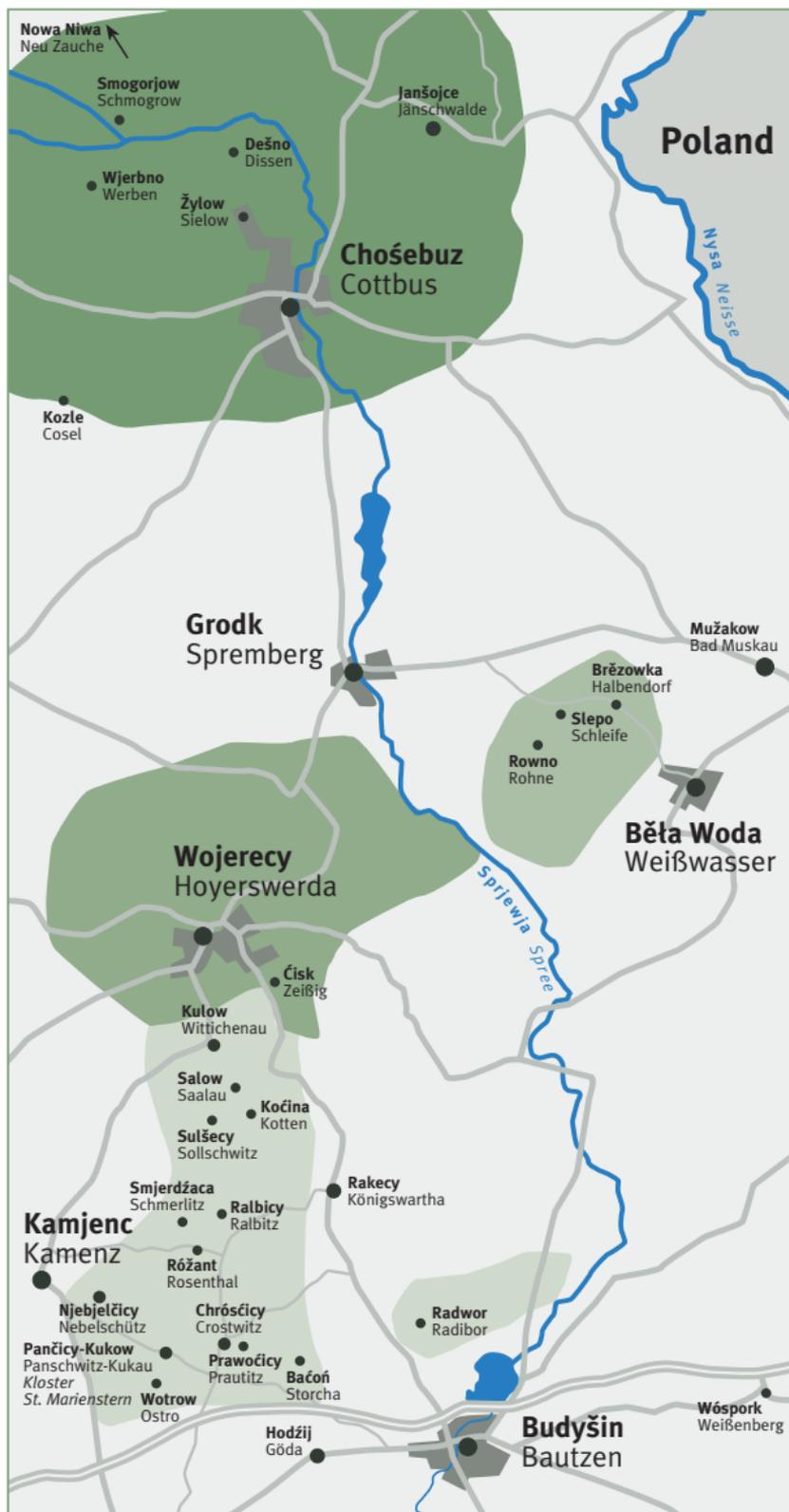
The Sorbs in Germany

Easter with the Sorbs

The Winter Season among the Sorbs

Customs and Traditions of the Sorbs in Lower Lusatia

*These texts can be obtained
in Sorbian information centres
in Bautzen (SKI)
and in Cottbus (LODKA).*



- Costume region of Lower Lusatia
- Costume region of Hoyerswerda (Wojerocy)
- Costume region of Schleife (Slepo)
- Costumc region of Catholic Sorbs