

# Preservation of a Dying Culture: A Study of Sorbian/Wendish Poetry

Samantha Hunt

## *Faculty Introduction*

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*Dr. Ervin Malakaj*

Samantha has undertaken an important project. By translating Wendish/Sorbian poetry from German to English, she is contributing to the preservation of a cultural heritage with important roots in Texas/Texas-Wendish/German communities. Though Texas-Wendish/German culture has previously been researched, the poems here appear for the first time in English translation.

## *Abstract*

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This research outlines the history and culture of the Texas Wends. The Wends are a Slavic group that originated in East Germany and immigrated to the United States in order to preserve heritage. They are bilingual, speaking both German and the Wendish language. The history and culture of the Wendish people have rarely been studied outside of Germany, and only a small amount of their literature has been translated into English. Due to the interaction with both German and American cultures, the Wendish language and culture have nearly disappeared in Texas and Germany. One common way that Wendish culture has been expressed is poetry. This research outlines how Wendish poems are sites where ideas important to the Wendish culture can be registered. Primarily, I uncovered ideas relating to religious faith and culture, which are extensively discussed in Wendish poetry. Moreover, my work shows how translating these poems, makes Wendish poetry accessible to English-speaking audiences, thereby, preserving Wendish culture for a new audience.

The Sorbians are a Slavic minority who live in the Lusatia region of eastern Germany and can trace their history to the pre-Christian era (Blasig 1). There are three different groups of Sorbs in Germany: the Lutheran Upper Sorbs, the Catholic Upper Sorbs, and Lower Sorbs who are primarily Lutheran (Wukasch xiii).<sup>1</sup> There are not only differences in religion, but also in language and folklore. The Upper and Lower Sorbs speak a language that is recognized as distinct from one another (Wukasch xiv). There are two other groups of Sorbs outside of Germany, both more commonly known as the Wends. One of these groups immigrated to Australia. The other group immigrated to Texas in 1854 to preserve their right to practice pure Lutheranism, instead of the unification of Calvinism and Lutheranism forced upon them by Frederick William III (Nielsen 9). They settled in the area just south of Giddings, Texas, in a small community named Serbin.

Throughout history, the Sorbian people have never had a nation of their own. They have lived in a region surrounded by Germans and cut off from other Slavs. They have struggled through most of their history to retain their culture and language to establish a sense of nationality in light of the pressures of dominant groups around them—but they were ultimately unsuccessful. The Sorbians' last hope for separation from Germany, which would have secured them a national boundary of their own, disappeared in 1919 following World War I, when their pleas to Woodrow Wilson for a region of their own were denied as part of the negotiations for the Treaty of Versailles (Blasig 10). As a result, the Sorbian/Wendish culture was rapidly in decline and, to this day, continues to dwindle in size in Germany (and is all but dead in the United States). In Germany, the Sorbians are rapidly assimilating into German culture and speaking the German language. As a result of assimilation trends, Sorbian traditions are not being passed to the younger generations. In the United States, the unincorporated Wendish community of Serbin, Texas, is now a museum, cemetery, and St. Paul's Lutheran church. As young Wends left the town for economic opportunity over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they increasingly lost their Wendish identities and integrated into their present environments (Blasig 84).

In cultural studies, it is imperative that we examine the literature of the culture. Cultural studies are accomplished in varying degrees within literary studies (Bahti 367). In fact, scholars have demonstrated that cultural values found in literature are an integral part in nation-building

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<sup>1</sup> The Sorbian people are not to be confused with the Serbians. The Sorbs are the last remnants of Slavs who occupied northern and eastern Germany since the 6th century (Blasig 8).

rhetoric, fundamental for the existence of nation-states. For example, *Die Gartenlaube* was a German-language magazine in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century read by various German speaking audiences throughout Europe; it played an integral role in the German struggle for national unification in 1871. *Die Gartenlaube* became an important historical document that recorded national ideals and social processes that eventually led to German unification (Belgium xiv). In a similar fashion, one way in which cultural ideals important to the Sorbian people have been passed down is through the use of their poetry and other forms of literature. Because they are a small, relatively unknown cultural group, many of their poems have not been translated into English and have not been studied outside of Germany. Much of Sorbian poetry dealt with themes important to the Sorbian people, such as love of their homeland and culture, the importance of fighting against oppression, and strong religious faith—ideas part and parcel of a nation-building rhetoric resembling the processes deployed by the publishers of

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*Die Gartenlaube*; however, the diminishing numbers of Sorbian people committed to their cultural heritage reduced the scope of influence of such cultural products today, even though they had an impact on their community at the time they were published.

By translating these poems for English speaking audiences, we can preserve the ideals important to the dying Sorbian culture and pass on their rich cultural heritage to future generations. A translation project such as this works against the effects of cultural assimilation and erasure produced by dwindling numbers of Sorbs throughout the world. The chosen poems show that ideals important to Sorbian culture remained unchanged through several centuries. Each Sorbian author represented here played an instrumental part in the preservation of the Sorbian language, literature, and culture at the time their works appeared in print. This translation project is an extension of the cultural labor of the authors in their attempts to preserve and strengthen their cultural heritage. All of these poems in their original German can be found in the library of the Texas Wendish Museum in a book titled *Sorbisches Lesebuch* by Kito Lorenz. The translations are my own.

## Casper Peucerus (1525-1610)

Casper Peucerus was one of the earliest known Sorbian writers. The son of a Sorbian craftsman and town citizen, he was enrolled at the age of fifteen in Wittenberg University. He later became a professor of medicine and mathematics, as well as the Royal Physician and Rector. While at the Wittenberg University, Peucerus worked to promote relationships with the Slavic people while teaching at the university. Peucerus was arrested later for being a proponent of Calvinism and served a prison term in Leipzig. After his release, he became a royal advisor and doctor in Dessau (Lorenc).

Peucerus wrote mostly on topics such as mathematics, astronomy, and theology in Latin, and he was one of the first to consider Sorbian as a literary language. He stated in correspondence with the Czech bishop Jan Blahoslav that he would often repeat writings in his native Sorbian for his pleasure (Lorenc). As we see in the following untitled poem, like most Sorbians, Peucerus has an intense love of his homeland. He describes his native Lusatia in terms that both express the beauty of his native land and his pride in its history.

A city lies in the land of the Sorbians, where Vandals lived and  
were never defeated by foreigners.

Neissen himself mentions the district that runs to the north of  
Lusatia,

Widely known through its service it provides as a border.

In this world lived the Teutonian tribes, and beyond the  
Sorbians, borders were against the kingdom of the Sarmatien  
race.

Here flows to the slope of the mountain past the gushing  
bright Spree, that as the border and watch proves worthy of  
the name.

It originated out of a spring and ends at the foot of the  
Sudenten, scarcely six hours by foot it lies removed from the  
city.

Farther in the course of blending itself after that to the  
creeping Havel, where in the Ebne of mark her flow gradually  
meanders.

Until afterwards the envious Havel steals her name and water

And in the Elbe, itself pours, merging its golden yellow flood.

## Jan Bok (1569-1621)

Jan Bok was born around 1569 in Vetschau, Germany. He is also known in German sources as Johannes Bock or the Latin form of Bucatius. After studying in both Dresden and Wittenberg, he became a rector of the city school in Eperjes. Emperor Rudolf II gave him the title of “Poeta Laureatus,” but later denounced him as a spy and imprisoned him in Prague. He was freed by his Slavic wife and lived afterwards as a biographer of the Bethlen princes. Like Peucerus, Bok also wrote in Latin; yet, he spoke six different languages, including Latin, German, and Sorbian. He confessed a particular love for his Lusatian homeland (Lorenc).

In the following untitled poem, Bok speaks of his love of Lusatia in a style very similar to Peucerus. He describes the beauty of his home and his pride, encouraging Lusatia to go and be an everlasting bloom in the world. The last line is indicative of strong hope in the future of his homeland and culture.

Oh, my homeland! You, Erdstrich, the dear Lusatia over all!

Infamously, certainly denied all my ancestors

If I do not praise you and your memory, mother Lusatia,

I would be sordid and ungrateful, just as the cuckoo bird is.

How glad am I, that King Matthias himself now accepts you.

You, dear homeland! Now go be an everlasting bloom.

In a later poem, Jan Bok's writing begins to reflect a much darker tone than the one above. Many of his writings originated from his time in prison because the Kaiser, who had previously honored him, later denounced him (Lorenc). In “Last Song of an Innocent Condemned to Die,” Bok's writing shows profound changes in his views. He no longer expresses hope for the future, but intense fatalism that contradicts the hope expressed in the earlier poem. Like many Sorbians, Bok has strong faith in God; however, his writing now reflects a dark side to that faith. He has resigned himself to suffering, deeming it God's will that he undergoes persecution. He believes that even if God wills it that he should undergo persecution in life, he cannot be robbed of the belief that heaven awaits him after his death. He ends the poem by asking God's forgiveness on his persecutors in terms reminiscent of Christ asking forgiveness for the Roman soldiers as he died on the cross. Unlike Christ, however, he goes on to express his

anger and contempt for his persecutors.

### **Last Song of an Innocent Condemned to Die**

Could it not be different/  
And now must die/  
After so much sorrow/ache and torment  
Fouly spoils the body/  
It is God's will/  
So I will keep quiet/  
To Him have I given myself  
In death, the same as in life.  
I know/ I am not the first  
I will also not be the last  
One that breaks the white stick over himself  
Nothing sits there again  
If it is God's will  
With stub and stalk  
That my soul shall travel there  
So shall my soul remain.  
My flesh and skin to dust and ash  
But without that must become  
God comes as the treasure, the earth the bag  
That at least remains on the earth  
Quite unharmed  
Toward heaven travel

No man can rob me of that  
Such remains in my beliefs.  
To better night/ you lost the world  
With freedom I travel away  
May God forgive you, without restraint  
Better you and your sins  
You are the wolf  
That eats the sheep  
The creek has dulled you  
Because shame appeals to you.

### **Jan Arnost Smoler (1816-1884)**

Jan Arnost Smoler was one of the dominant figures of Sorbian literature and Sorbian National Revival (Wukasch 44). He was born in an Upper Lusatian village in 1816. His father was a free peasant and a village schoolmaster. He taught in the Sorbian vernacular and taught his son to cherish the language (Brock 28). Smoler studied at the University of Breslau and originally planned on becoming a priest. There he organized a Sorbian student society and eventually published a German-Sorbian dictionary (Wukasch 44). Smoler was primarily responsible for the founding of the *Macica Serbska* in Bautzen, a Sorbian literary society. This society proved to be one of the main forces in preserving the purity of the Sorbian language endorsed by Smoler (Herrity 378). As a young man, Smoler was convinced that the development of a national consciousness of the Sorbians depended on developing a relationship with other Slavic nations. He had found that his fellow Sorbs were largely ignorant of the rest of the Slavic world (Brock 31). He embraced this ideal of Pan-Slavism, feeling that Lusatian nationality was doomed to extinction as a Slavic island in the middle of Germans; however, as a branch of the Slavic community of nations, they could find a secure place for themselves in Europe (Brock 3).

In his poem, “The Siege of the Sorbians,” Smoler uses a Sorbian siege against the Germans to show the bravery of the Sorbians in battle. Smoler

considered the Sorbs a peaceful, religious, and hospitable people, so the siege he speaks of is most likely a symbolic one against the onslaught of Germanization of the Slavic people (Brock 31). He considered a Germanized Slav as morally unfit, and the maintenance of Sorb nationality as a bulwark against moral deterioration (Brock 31). The poem speaks of three advances against a German army. In each case, the Sorbians win a huge victory against the German advance. As their king hears about their victory, he endows them with increasingly more valuable rewards.

### **The Siege of the Sorbians**

It advanced the Sorbians against the Germans  
However, they understood but a few words in German.

They saddled their horses  
And they laid the spurs on.

They strapped their swords on  
Assembled themselves on a smooth field.

The first time they advanced in the battle,  
There they fought and won huge victory.

As their king and prince experienced this,  
He wanted to look on their faces.

He gave each and every one of them a new gown  
He took them all into his pay.

The second time they advanced in the battle,  
There they found and won a huge victory.

As their king and prince experienced this,  
He wanted to look on their faces.

He allowed each and every one of them  
To attire themselves in pure red scarlet skirt.

The third time they advanced in the battle,  
There they found and won a huge victory.

As their king and prince experienced this,  
He wanted to look on their faces.

He wanted to look on their faces,  
He gave each and every one of them a fox-red horse.

He gave each and every one of them a fox-red horse,  
And a bright sword to the defense.

### **Jakub Bart-Cisinski (1856-1909)**

Jakub Bart is considered to be the greatest of the Sorbian poets by literary critics. He was born in the village of Kukow in 1856. He was a Catholic priest and studied theology at the Charles University in Prague. He was eventually forced into early retirement by the Catholic Church because of his love of writing love poems and his leftist political leanings (Wukasch 46). When he began to write, he added “Cisinski” to his name as a pen name, meaning “the silent one” (Wukasch 46). Cisinski was one of the strongest challengers to the ideal of linguistic purity espoused by Smoler. He felt that if the Sorbians could not understand their own literature, they would naturally turn to the more linguistically accessible German literature. He favored the retention of German loanwords in Sorbian literature (Herrity 379).

As a Catholic priest, many of Cisinski’s poems have a strong religious element combined with his love of his heritage and language. In his poem “My Life,” both of these elements are combined to express his faith that despite the hard times he encountered, God was always good to him and lead him through adversity. Eventually through the darkest times, God sends him miracles and courage to write Sorbian songs.

#### **My Life**

The time elapsed, it sank the sun,  
The day that my song blew through,  
Dead as the embers  
But in the respite that now trickled away:  
Was God good to me.

I burned through the luck of the Sorbians  
And wanted to build in the homeland  
I floated in the flood of strange beaches.

I all but died of grief  
However, I held out and found trust:  
God was good to me.

I learned hard to resign myself  
And never to bow down:  
To me, it lacks in cool blood.  
However, one saw me with displeasure,  
So I could also bitterly laugh-  
God was good to me.

And the dark held me in its clutches,  
And the misery hit me in fetters-  
He sent miracles to me and courage,  
To bloom in Sorbian songs.  
And bravely I grasped the nettles,  
Was God good to me.

Cisinski continues this theme in his poem “Answer.” He feels as if he has been buried by oppression, but his song and poetry have sustained him through his life. His oppressors come against him as a storm but he is able to stand strong. He credits this to the power of Sorbian writings and their power to strike back at oppression. The religious symbolism present in much of Sorbian writing is represented, though not overtly so in this poem. Cisinski speaks in the third stanza of “the sign, the rainbow verse.” In Christianity, the rainbow is a sign of promise: it represents God’s promise to never flood the earth again. In this context, the rainbow can be seen as a symbol of God’s promise to help Sorbians stand against the flood of oppression.

### **Answer**

The gloomy hole, in which one buried me,  
Arose the well that had borne me in life  
Out of the poems have radiance and breath  
And rise up to proud earthly flight.

And my oppressors, their playmates,  
That have branded me, that have haunted me:  
They stand spellbound, converted to designs  
In the song on pillories forever now.

The sky, from exorbitant thunderstorms  
Out of fists clenched against me to the storm:  
He already wears the sign, the rainbow verse,  
Eager to victorious radiant violence.

The Sorbian word-it strikes today and lashes,  
And strikes back, breaking the steely track.  
What miracles, that it chisels rage in your eye,

Please allow me to thank you,  
Their hard forge of my energy,  
And their lords put honey in our  
Bitter drink: So tastes the game of irony to me.

### **Josef Nowak (1895-1978)**

Josef Nowak, a Catholic priest, was born in 1895 in Bautzen, Germany. He attended school in Prague and was a pupil of Sorbian seminarians. He became a minister in various cities until he was driven out by German authorities in 1940 (Lorenc 398). In his writings, his chief emphasis was faith in his nation, patriotism, and hope. He firmly believed that despite the adversity that the Sorbians faced, a new day was at hand that would bring change. His writings stemmed from conditions arising from the German defeat in World War I (Golabek 284). At the conclusion of World War I, the Sorbs tried to press for an independent Sorbian state. After this failed, they tried to press for autonomy in Sorbian majority areas such as Lusatia. However, both movements ultimately failed and the Sorbian secessionist leaders were sentenced to jail time by German authorities (Wukasch 63).

It is in this context that Josef Nowak wrote his poem “To the Revolt, Sorbians!” The poem is a call to action using symbolism familiar to a farming community to describe the struggles of the Sorbian community to maintain their language and culture despite oppression from the surrounding Germans. At the end, Nowak calls for his readers to look to the past, namely by reading the literature of important Sorbian writers such as Smoler and Cisinski. He encourages them to use these past writers as a rallying cry to stand against assimilation into German culture, thereby maintaining their cultural heritage.

## **To the Revolt, Sorbians!**

The day of harvest dawns,  
The sickle swings!

The scythe, brothers, the weapons in grip,  
Cuts freedom down as ears of corn  
The seeds that you have sown yourselves.  
Fruit, that you fertilized with blood and tears  
Create the end with the discord that the guards allow!

You have stubbornly born the hunger,  
Misery and hardships of the struggles,  
Dreary, rotting life,  
In your trenches  
Until they are slain like livestock.

Forward brothers, to the glorious siege!  
The flag of freedom,  
The blood red flag allowed to fly-  
Freedom to the people!

Rip the parasite from your chests,  
Never should we desire your heartblood again!  
Shatter the yoke, break the lashes,  
Open the dams, unleash the floods,  
Stoke the flames out of the smoldering coals!  
Burn the register of the serfs  
Push the tyrants from the throne.

Crown Hornik with laurel branches!  
Smoler calls out of the silence,  
The herald of the siege,  
The leader of the war  
Against the roaring plunder!

In the fire the right of the servants!  
In the fire the nightly powers!  
Cisinski sings our songs, listen!  
Let us be the warriors of the song!

To the revolt, Sorbians! After signs of the storm!  
The unjust judgement, the end of disgrace!

Through the approximately four hundred years of poetry represented, the ideals valued by the Sorbians have not changed. Their literature

reflects these ideals of strong religious faith, love of their homeland, and the desire to stand strong in the face of adversity. Because the Sorbian/Wendish culture has rarely been studied outside Germany, the literature is largely inaccessible to their English-speaking descendants in America and Australia. By translating Sorbian literature, we can preserve their dying culture so that others can appreciate values inherent in their ancestry and pass them on to future generations. Although these poems represent a small sample size of the literature that has not been translated, my work here is a first step in simulating interest in the preservation of Sorbian culture and represents the preliminary steps in my continued research. ■

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## *Student Biography*

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Samantha Hunt is a senior in the SHSU Mathematics department, pursuing a minor in German. She became interested in this topic when researching her family heritage and realizing that their culture was close to extinction. During the course of her research, she presented at SHSU Undergraduate Symposium and the North Texas University German Symposium. She plans to graduate in the fall of 2018 and continue on to graduate studies.