

# Beginnings of our Society

Below is a reprint of the article in the *GDR Review*, 3/83, which gives the story of the beginnings of our Society in 1982. It was first known as the South Australia Branch of the Australia-GDR Friendship Society; then in the early 1990s it was renamed the Australia-Lusatian Society, and in 1998 it became the Wend/Sorb Society of South Australia. (GDR stands for German Democratic Republic, the name of the former East Germany.)

## Great Interest in Sorb Exhibition in Australia

Over 100 years ago many thousands of Sorb people left their homeland in Germany for other parts of the world. Besides the settlements in Texas and Canada, over 2,000 Sorbs migrated to Australia with most settling in South Australia. Unfortunately their early settlement has been largely ignored by historical publications.

The South Australian Branch of the Australia-GDR Friendship Society held an exhibition from March 16 until May 14, 1982, in the Constitutional Museum in Adelaide entitled "South Australia's Forgotten Immigrants – The Sorbs of Lusatia". The Exhibition was officially opened by Mr Ron Payne, a Shadow Minister and prominent Labor Parliamentarian in the South Australian Parliament. Originally the exhibition was to be on display for a month but as it generated so much interest this was extended to two months. Later it was featured at one of South Australia's largest shopping centres, West Lakes, where again the exhibition was an overwhelming success.

The Exhibition displayed material covering the early settlements in South Australia in detail, with material about settlements in Victoria and New South Wales and immigration of the Sorbs in general. Approximately half of the exhibition was devoted to the Sorbs in the GDR today, which included a brief historical account of their development from the 4th century until 1949. The display of the Sorbs in the GDR emphasised how the culture and language has been preserved and promoted with the full support of the government of the GDR and that since the establishment of the GDR as an independent state, the Sorbs have finally found a nation they can call home.

We were fortunate to obtain costumes and embroidery for the display, plus old family bibles and photos brought with the early settlers. Dolls, newspapers and books in Sorb language and traditional Sorbian dance music added to the exhibition.

The Sorbs, or Wends as they were known by their descendants in Australia, came to South Australia

along with the German migrations between 1848 and the 1870s. Many families settled north of Adelaide in the Barossa Valley, a famous wine growing district. Many Sorb families are still farming in the area today and many who Germanised their names centuries ago can trace their origins to the Sorbs. The Sorbs in the early years of settlement quickly assimilated with the German community and in some families German was adopted as the language in the home – consequently many were unaware of their ancestry. Today there are some who still know the odd phrase or so in Sorb.

The daily round of hard work endured by the Sorb settlers did not allow them time for cultural activities. Lacking in time and teachers to give instruction in Sorbian, with German being more important in the community and the church, and English being compulsory for official transactions and business generally, the Sorbs reluctantly gave way to the pressures and more and more surrendered their own language. Due to the absence of Sorb schools and churches in the main, the identity of the Sorbs has almost disappeared and this is one of the major reasons the Australian Sorbs have become the forgotten immigrants.

Although Sorbs in Australia will always remain a very small minority group and have only recently emerged as another part of the multi-jigsaw on which the Australian nation is developing, the Sorbs have comprised some of our earliest settlers and consequently have contributed considerably to Australia's history.

As a result of the incredible amount of interest shown in the exhibition, the South Australian Branch of the Australia-GDR Friendship Society has plans to display the exhibition at other venues in South Australia and at festivals as well as interstate.

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