

How the Wendish language was lost

It was a lovely sunny autumn day on 4th May at the Burnside Library when a well-attended and publicized event for about 80 people was held for History SA month.

The topic, **'The Mystery of the Lost Language: the Wendish Language in South Australia'**, was presented by Dr Peter Mickan from the Linguistics Department of the University of Adelaide.

Lyall Kupke welcomed the audience and introduced Dr Mickan with a greeting in the Wendish language (Dobrydzień! meaning Good day!).



Dr Mickan gave an overview of the Wendish history in Australia. The Sorbs, known as the Wends in Australia, migrated to Australia from the political and economic turmoil in Saxony and Prussia for a new life in a new land with new opportunities, and to buy the abundant, good, cheap farming land that was available. There was peace and freedom of worship for the conservative Lutherans and Catholics.

The Wends are a Slavic people with a similar language to the Polish people. They are a separate group to Germans. It is very important to remind ourselves that the Wends are Slavic. The Wends were very aspirational with a background of withstanding much political change and trouble.

The Wends were bilingual when they migrated and spoke both Wendish and German. After migration they soon learnt English. The settlers' children were discouraged from using the Wendish language at home as parents were told it was detrimental to the child's learning of the English language and assimilation into the Australian culture. However, Dr Mickan stressed the importance of maintaining the parents' language such as the Wendish language at home. Also Dr Mickan implored the audience to learn a language as it improved the brain capacity and function.

Dr Mickan discussed the unique Barossa German dialect used by the Wendish settlers and others in the community, which had been considered a poor German rather than a distinct branch of the German language.

The Wendish language was gradually forgotten through lack of use, as German was the main language used. Also marriage between Wends and Germans hastened the decline in the use of Wendish. Of the first generation of Wends in Australia 52% of those from Lower Lusatia married Germans and 38% married Wends, whereas with Wends from Upper Lusatia 65% married Germans and only 27% married Wends.

There is concern about the future of the Wendish language in Germany today due to the lack of government policies to support the use of the Wendish language in schools.

Finally, Dr Mickan reminded the audience that although the Wendish language is not used anymore in Australia, the Wendish heritage remains with the round faces and fair skin still evident in the children born to those with this heritage.

Everyone enjoyed the knowledgeable PowerPoint presentation. The Wendish flags and our Society's new banner, together with the extensive artefacts display including painted eggs, Wendish dolls, needlework and picture calendars, as well as our

mannequin in her striking outfit made an impressive reminder of our home-land.

We enrolled 5 new members to join our society. Members of the committee worked hard to make the event a great success. We enjoyed socialising during morning tea and lunch. We are very grateful to the Burnside Library for facilitating this enjoyable and enriching event.

Marie Brazier