

# My journey to Niederlausitz by Debra Burke

In August 2019, I travelled to the homeland of my Wendish ancestors in Niederlausitz – Lower Lusatia. They came from a couple of villages close to Cottbus, about 100km south of Berlin. The main purpose of the trip was to see where my forebears had come from, to experience the landscapes that formed the backdrop of their lives, to visit the churches where they worshipped and celebrated key life events and to gain a deeper understanding of the culture and history of Wendish people.

**Babow** was where my 3x great grandmother Anna Rußchen (1811-1848) was born and where she raised her own family before their emigration to Australia in 1854, unfortunately without her. As there was no church in Babow, Anna was baptized, married, baptized her own children, and ultimately was buried in the nearby village of **Papitz**.



*Papitz church*

Both villages were small and quiet but reasonably prosperous looking. Though comprised mostly of quite new buildings, it was pleasing to see evidence of traditional Wendish customs still being practised in both villages – the remnants of a Maypole in Babow and a quirky sign advertising a forthcoming Hahnrupfen (rooster plucking contest) in Papitz.

I was lucky enough to meet Pastor Axel Geldmeyer who generously gave of his time to show me around the 14<sup>th</sup> century church in Papitz. It was very moving to see the altar before which Anna and her husband exchanged vows and the font where family members were baptized.

**Dissen** was the birthplace of 3x great grandfather Georg Proposch (1799-1874). Its 18<sup>th</sup> century church was extraordinarily beautiful, featuring galleries that were richly decorated with biblical scenes and texts in both Wendish and German,

thanks to Pastor Bogumił Swjela. A bust of this Sorbian Evangelical clergyman committed to, and very active in, preserving the Sorbian language and culture in Lower Lusatia stood opposite his former church.



*Dissen church (outside & inside)*

Dissen is also the site of the Heimat and Stary Lud open air museums which together illustrate the history and way of life of Wends from 7<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. I was particularly keen to see them, given the Wendish Museum in Cottbus was closed at the time.

Stary Lud is a reconstruction of a medieval settlement of the Lusatians - a West Slavic ethnic group, the probable ancestors of today's Sorbs/Wends. Based on archaeological finds from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century CE, it features 5 pit houses made of timber, clay and thatch and furnished with replica everyday objects including weight looms, stools, baskets, clay ovens etc.



*Pit house at Stary Lud Museum*

Elsewhere in the village were bronze and blacksmithing workshops and examples of equipment used for processing grain. A



demonstration of the construction of a clay bread oven was a highlight.

Another interesting feature of Stary Lud is a huge timeline from 375CE (beginning of great migration) to 2015 which included major developments in Wendish history alongside of those in Germany and the rest of the world.



*Heimat Museum at Dissen*

The Heimat Museum itself comprises several rooms containing artefacts that demonstrate the daily life, work, customs, handicrafts and costumes of Wendish farmers. Some are set up like rooms of a household. From the excellent information panels, I was able to learn a great deal about the cultural traditions and lifestyle of my forebears.



*A room in the Heimat Museum*

From the charming town of **Lübbenau**, I took a relaxing 2-hour Kahnfahrt (boat ride) through the labyrinth of canals that crisscross the incredibly picturesque, lush, and serene landscape of the Spreewald.



*A canal in the Spreewald*



*Entrance to Freiland Museum at Lehde*

In nearby **Lehde**, I visited the Freiland Museum, the oldest open-air museum in Brandenburg. It consists of 4 historic courtyards containing typical houses from different parts of the Spreewald. The originally furnished rooms offer a vivid and authentic insight into the life, work, and customs of Wendish people in this area from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It beautifully complements the collections in Dissen. Thanks for the tip, Lyall.



*Kittlitz Haus at Lehde*

In **Cottbus**, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Klosterkirche, Sorb Institute (LODKA), Wendish quarter, and many other attractive and historic sites such as the city walls and towers, Altmarkt, Oberkirche and Mühlgraben were highlights.



*Klosterkirche at Cottbus*

My four-day stay in Niederlausitz was too short. Nevertheless, the opportunity to walk in the footsteps of my ancestors was a wonderful experience.

*Debra Burke*