

SORBS or WENDS?

Were our ancestors Wends or Sorbs? That is a question that has puzzled many of us since we have recently heard the term, Sorbs, being used instead of Wends. It is also a question of debate in Germany, as the following article shows.

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SORBS or WENDS?

Whenever the Sorbs and their culture and language are discussed, the Wends are usually mentioned in the same breath. There are a lot of questions and different opinions on this topic, not only among visitors to Lusatia, but also on the part of those who live in the area. Who are the Sorbs and who are the Wends? Who speaks Sorbian, who speak Wendish?

So what is the really going on here? To put it simply, 'Sorbian' and 'Wendish' are just different terms for one and the same thing. The one term - Sorbian - is scientifically more precise, the other -Wendish - is more popular. But both have historical origins, and have been documented in the academic literature. It is of interest that the Sorbs/Wends call themselves 'Serbs' ('serbski') in their own mother tongue. From that one can draw the conclusion that the term 'Sorb' is their own term, while 'Wend' originated as a term used by foreigners. The Sorbs are of course not alone in having such a double name, the same applies to many other peoples throughout the world.

There is a wide-spread opinion that the Wends live in Lower Lusatia - particularly in the Spreewald and around Cottbus - while the Sorbs are at home in Upper Lusatia - primarily around Bautzen and Kamenz. That does not however correspond to the facts, because one encounters the term 'Wend'/'Wendish' again and again in the bilingual area of Saxony [Upper Lusatia]. The truth is however that this particular term [Wend] has taken root more firmly amongst the local population of Lower Lusatia, and once more there are historical reasons for that.

From the scientific point of view, the Sorb population in Lower Lusatia is classified as 'Lower Sorb', while those living in Upper Lusatia are 'Upper Sorbs'. There are by the same token two terms for the corresponding independent languages, Lower and Upper Sorbian.

But how did the two terms come about? Where does the term 'Wends', which also occurs in various versions and contexts in other regions of Germany (e.g. Wendland in Luneburg), come from?

The answer is to be found in history. Originally the term was used in the Germanic languages for the non-Slavic Veneto-Illyrian tribes (including those in Slovenia and in Northern Italy, e.g. Venice) who occupied the area between the Germanic and the Slavic peoples in the period from the Bronze Age to the time of Christ. When those peoples ceased to exist, the name was given to the new eastern neighbours - the Slavs, who had settled in the territory of eastern Germany during the period of the great migrations (ca. 400 AD). The Roman chroniclers Pliny and Tacitus spoke of the 'Vendi' and 'Venethi'. When various Slavic peoples or tribes later created their own states - e.g. Poland and Slovakia - they were given names based directly on those states. But the term 'Wends' continued to be applied to those groups which were not able to form their own state - such as the Slavs in Mecklenburg and the Slovenes in Austria. But today the term is only used to refer to the Sorbs in Lusatia.

The name 'Sorb'/'Sorb' - found as 'Surbi' already in the writings of the Frankish chronicler Fredegar in 631/632 AD - is more exact and more concrete, and corresponds to what the people called themselves. Originally the name was understood to mean the Slavic population between the rivers Saale and Mulde, but then it came to mean the whole grouping of Sorbian tribes, and in particular the Milzener and the Lusizer in Upper and Lower Lusatia.

This brief historical explanation shows that the two terms existed simultaneously and parallel to one another. But there were of course differences in usage in individual periods or regions, or among different social groups in the Sorbian/Wendish population. After 1945 attempts were made, including by the Sorbs themselves, to suppress the term 'Wends', primarily on the basis that the name had been used in a discriminatory and derogatory manner in public opinion, particularly during the period from 1933-1945.

But in this campaign, little tolerance or sensitivity was shown, and historic factors which had applied for centuries were ignored. Particularly in Lower Lusatia that led to a situation where a significant number of members of this small ethnic group distanced themselves from the Sorb cause, remaining reserved and aloof because they did not feel that the name Sorb applied to them.

And today? One tries to learn from experience. The right thing is to treat both terms as co-existing with equal validity, as in the double name 'Sorb/Wend', which is by now very widespread and well accepted. The important thing is that the members of this ethnic group are conscious of their responsibility for the maintenance and continued existence of their language and culture, and are prepared to work for it, whether it be as Sorbs or as Wends.



Bilingual street sign (German-Sorbian) in Bautzen (Wendish Street – Sorbian Street)
