Wend/Sorb Society of South Australia Inc.

Newsletter No. 72 July 2026

Dr George Nielsen 1932 - 2026

We are saddened to report the death of the esteemed historian Dr George Nielsen. In the late 1960s he spent time in Australia researching the Wendish migrants of the mid-19th century. This resulted in the publication in 1977 of his authoritative book on Wendish migration to Australia, *In Search of a Home*. In October 2003 he returned and favoured us with a talk.

Sorbian/Wendish historian *Trudla Malinkowa* sent this tribute:
Sad news recently reached Lusatia that the American researcher George R. Nielsen died on April 9 at the age of 93 in Lewisville, Texas. A descendant of both Danish and Wendish immigrants to the USA, he felt a lifelong connection to both nationalities and conducted professional historical research into both groups.

The deceased was born on May 29, 1932, in the small town of Aleman, Texas. His father, William Nielsen, was of Danish descent, while his mother, Emmy (née Moerbe), was of Wendish heritage. Growing up on the family farm, he was instilled with enduring values: the importance of family, the Christian faith, and the virtue of hard work. The annual pea and cotton harvests, in particular, required great effort from every family member during his childhood.

George R. Nielsen attended Concordia College in Seward, Nebraska, followed by university studies in Houston and Iowa City, culminating in a doctorate. Professionally, he worked as a teacher at Lutheran schools - initially in Houston, Texas, and from 1959 until his retirement in 1997 at Concordia University in River Forest, Illinois, a suburb of the major metropolis of Chicago. While his teaching focused primarily on American history, his research specialised in the immigration of Danish and Wendish people to the USA. He maintained scholarly ties with the Wends of Lusatia as early as the German Democratic Republic (GDR) era.

Thanks to a Fulbright Research Grant, he spent an extended period studying in Australia, where he conducted research on the history of Wendish immigrants there. In 1977, he presented an extensive



study on 19th-century Wendish emigration overseas, titled *In Search of a Home*; a second edition appeared in 1989, and the work became the foundation for all subsequent research in this field.

In 2003, he published a biography of the Wendish emigrant pastor Jan Kilian, titled *Johann Kilian, Pastor: A Wendish Lutheran in Germany and Texas*. He also dedicated himself to specific aspects of emigration history in numerous smaller studies, which were compiled and published in 2021 in the anthology *A Wendish Reader: Essays and Articles on Wends in America*.

George R. Nielsen was a long-standing, dedicated member of the Texas Wendish Heritage Society in Serbin, Texas. He visited Lusatia repeatedly - the last time in 2011, when he participated as a speaker at a conference in Bautzen marking the 200th anniversary of Pastor Jan Kilian's birth.

George R. Nielsen married the teacher Lois in 1955; after retiring, the couple settled in Rapid City, South Dakota. He had been a widower for more than a decade. He is survived by three children and five grandchildren. In his passing, the Sorbs of Lusatia and their descendants worldwide have lost a good friend and a distinguished researcher who made a significant contribution to Wendish historiography.

Happy Connections in Germany

Andrew Digby from Canberra writes:
I have always been interested in my mother's family history, the Schwartz family. However, my serious ancestry journey did not begin until the COVID lockdown in 2020 when I completed an Ancestry DNA test, which came back with surprising results.

But I will go back a few more years. My German language studies, prompted by my German heritage, began during my commerce degree when I had to select a social science subject. I discovered I really enjoyed it. After completing my degree, I travelled to Murnau in Upper Bavaria to study German for 6 months at the Goethe Institute.

I was 24, it was summertime, and I was living in Murnau on the foothills of the Bavarian alps, with its beautiful lakes, hiking trails inhabited by friendly people, not to forget the great beer and food. There was so much to do and see, and the impression it made on me set the course for the rest of my life.

I continued to return to Germany every few years to enjoy holidaying in various parts of Europe with the lovely German friends I met in Murnau and thereafter.

In 2005 after chatting with a friend from Berlin, I decided to buy an apartment in Berlin, which were relatively cheap at the time compared to Australia. It turned out to be the best investment of my life both personally and financially. It was my base from which to explore Europe, and from my retirement in 2012 until recently, I have lived between Berlin and Canberra.

Unable to travel during COVID lockdown, I explored my ancestry and discovered by surprise that my mother's family came from a small town called Eichow, about an hour southeast of Berlin in an area known as the Spreewald.

In 2022 I visited the church in the neighbouring town where my great-grandfather Friedrich Wilhelm Schwartz's birth was registered. However, I was unable to find out any more information.

On my return to Australia, I contacted the Lutheran Archives in South Australia. Lyall Kupke referred me to Mrs Simmons (nee Schwartz) whose husband had compiled a history of the descendants of Mattias and Maria Schwartz, my great-great-grandparents. She kindly sent me a copy of the book.

I went back to Eichow in September 2025. What has transpired because of this visit I would never have imagined. It has been a wonderful experience.

It was a beautiful autumn day in Berlin, and with the colours emerging quickly I decided to take a trip into the countryside. I had two destinations in mind; Frankfurt an der Oder, where I could walk across the bridge into Poland, or the train to Vetschau and then bus to Eichow with the Schwartz family history book in my backpack. On arrival at Berlin Zoo train station the hourly service to Vetschau had just arrived, so I jumped on and then caught the bus to Eichow.

Somewhat at a loss as to where to next, I walked along one of the two streets in Eichow. I saw a couple working in their garden and introduced myself. To my surprise, they recognised the house in the Schwartz family history book; it was directly behind them.

I took my chances and went to the house and was met at the gate by a young woman Antje. When I explained why I was there, she warmly welcomed me in to meet her mother Annaliese Senkel (nee Schwartz) and brother Christian. Antje happened to be visiting from Berlin that day. We had a lovely chat for about two hours. I showed them the Schwartz book which even had their photos in it. Annaliese, it turns out is my mother's third cousin, with some similar family traits. What was also astounding was Annaliese had the original letters written by my great-great-grandfather to his brother Christian Schwartz, Annaliese's great-grandfather, encouraging him to come to Australia.



Antje, Andrew, Annaliese & Christian

We exchanged contact details, took photos in their lovely garden and then I took the bus to the next major city called Cottbus. Later, whilst I was waiting on the train platform in Cottbus to return to

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Coming Events

Sun 9th August, 2 pm Annual General Meeting

Followed by an illustrated talk by Leona Coleman about the new book, *Sorbian Monuments* (see newsletter no. 70, July 2025).
At the Glynde Lutheran Homes hall (**22 Avenue Rd, Glynde**). All welcome.

Sat 17th October Eudunda trip

All day trip – visit Eudunda Family Heritage Gallery (the local museum which has recently been renovated) and outlying district attractions.
If interested, contact John Zwar (0408 887 565, or email jzwar@bigpond.com) for further details.

Sun 18th October Peters Hill day

The Friends of Peters Hill Church have their annual get together and AGM.
Lunch at 12 noon, church service at 1.30 pm, Annual General Meeting at 2.30 pm.
For more information, contact the Secretary, Chris Fisher (mobile 0417 837 709)

Sympathy

We express our sympathy to the family and friends of these members who died recently:

Judith Leske
Errol Zweck, husband of Roma

Congratulations

to **Geoff Saegenschnitter** of Greenock. In 2025 he was recognised for

50 years of service in the Country Fire Service

37 years as Chairman of Nain Lutheran Church

Happy Connections in Germany (*cont. from page 2*)

Berlin, I received a WhatsApp message from Antje asking if I was on the train back to Berlin, as she was catching it from Vetschau. So we travelled back to Berlin together and arranged to have brunch on Sunday morning with her husband Stefan. Ironically, we met at the Schwarzes Café near Kurfürstendamm. Upon entering the café, it was like stepping back in the 70s and old Berlin with a lovely friendly atmosphere. We had a great time together. I look forward to our next reunion, whenever that may be.

It was a surreal experience for all of us. I got to see where my mother's family came from and to finally link our German family to their Australian branch and vice versa. It was such an advantage being able to speak relatively good German as the town was in former East Germany where Russian was taught as the second language. It made worthwhile all the effort of learning the language of my forebears over the years.

Andrew Digby

A Day in Peters Hill

Trudla Malinkowa

(translation of article written for the Sorbian/Wendish book calendar, *Serbska pratyja, 2027*)

At the invitation of the two Wendish associations in Australia, in autumn 2018 I had the opportunity of following in the footsteps of Wendish emigrants on the fifth continent. Among other places, I visited Peters Hill, formerly the settlement with the largest Lower Wendish population in the whole of Australia. In this article, I would like to tell the readers of *Serbska pratyja* about the traces of Wendish heritage I encountered there.

The history of Peters Hill

Since 1848, Wends from Lower Lusatia emigrated to Australia in groups both large and small. Many of them landed in Adelaide, the capital of South Australia, where they initially found accommodation in the surrounding settlements. Later they travelled about one hundred kilometres further north. There a number of new settlements were founded, including Peters Hill from the early 1850s onwards, where many Lower Wendish families settled on farms spread out in the district.



The area offered favourable conditions for agriculture. Wheat thrived on the arable land in the lowlands, whilst large flocks of sheep grazed on the surrounding hills. Among the Wends in Peters Hill were the following families: Bartusch, Bela, Borrack, Domaschenz, Dreckow, Duldig, Gassan, Groch, Hondow, Huppatz, Jarick, Kamenz, Klauck, Kschenka, Lehmann, Marschall, Miatke, Noack, Petatz, Proposch, Pumpa, Rhetus (in Australia changed to Rethus), Russchen, Schüppan, Teschner and Zerna.

Once the initial difficulties of settling in had been overcome, the residents founded a Lutheran parish in 1856. However, they did not have their own pastor. A Lutheran pastor would come from a distant parish only four times a year to celebrate worship services and Holy Communion here in German. In the meantime, the people gathered in their homes for devotions and scripture readings in their mother tongue. For this they used Bibles, hymn books and sermon books printed in the Lower Wendish language, which they had brought with them from Lusatia.

From the 1870s onwards a number of families left Peters Hill. Young people in particular were drawn to other regions, where they hoped to find even better economic opportunities. As a result, the Lower Wendish language gradually fell into disuse over the years, and the everyday language shifted first to German and later to English. In 1940 the spelling of the name changed slightly from the original ‘Peter’s Hill’ to the present-day ‘Peters Hill’.

The settlement has left a lasting mark on Australian-Wendish relations. John F. Noack, the long-serving pastor of the congregation in Natimuk, Victoria, hailed from Peters Hill. He had grown up speaking the Wendish language on his parents’ farm, so that in 1905, during a visit to his parents’ homeland in Lower Lusatia, he was still able to communicate in Wendish. Later he conducted research on the Wends in Australia and published a newspaper article on the subject in 1930.

The teacher and archivist Lyall Kupke, who now lives in Adelaide and has chaired the Wend/Sorb Society of South Australia for two decades, also has Wendish family roots in Peters Hill. In the Wendish book-calendar *Serbska pratyja* for 2021, he told readers about the history of Peters Hill.

The settlement today

One weekday in mid-October 2018, I set off with my South Australian host, Geoff Saegenschnitter, to visit Peters Hill. We had already left the main country roads behind as we approached our destination along Peters Hill Road. A rolling landscape stretched out on either side, with huge eucalyptus trees lending it its unmistakable Australian character. Sheep grazed here and there; there were hardly any houses to be seen.

Outside the church, we were greeted by 76-year-old James Huppatz. The road on which the church stands is named Huppatz Road after his family. Like his ancestors, James Huppatz is a farmer in Peters Hill, where he owns a farm with extensive pasture and a flock of 600 sheep with just as many lambs. He and his brother, who lives on another property, are now the only residents of Peters Hill with a Wendish surname. The other residents moved there later. James Huppatz took the time to show both of us around the settlement and its surroundings.

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The small church dates from 1864 and was therefore built by the Wendish settlers. Its exterior, which lacks a steeple, and its interior are both very simple in design. In the first years reading services in the Wendish language were held occasionally by laymen in this church. Since 2000 responsibility for the building has passed from the parish to the Friends of Peters Hill Church Inc. The church is still used for its intended purpose on special occasions such as baptisms, weddings and funerals. A service is still held here once a year, followed by a gathering of former residents. Various photographs on display in the church bear witness to such events and to the history of the district. James Huppatz showed us an English-language Bible which his parents had once donated to the church.



The school stood near the church from 1884 to 1955. Today the site is marked with a memorial, and with the shape of the building outlined with stones. For those interested in the Wendish history of Peters Hill, information is provided by the information board of the 'Wendish Pioneer Heritage Trail', which the Wend/Sorb Society of South Australia (based in the capital Adelaide) had erected here in 2012. Through text and images, the board provides information about the Wends in Lusatia, their immigration to South Australia and their settlement in Peters Hill.

A Wendish religious symbol in the cemetery?

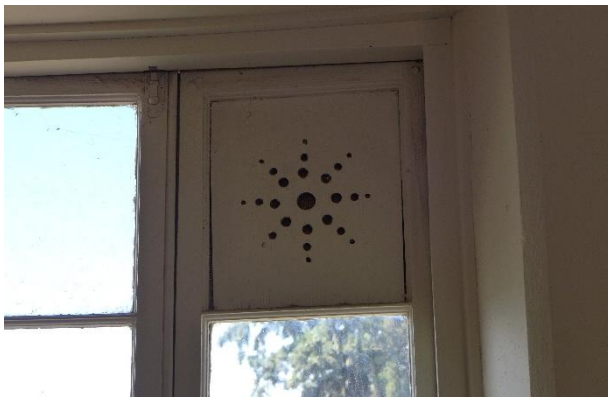
The cemetery stretches out beside the church. On many of the older graves, one can read Wendish surnames in German; on the newer ones, the inscriptions – and usually the names as well – are in English.



The recently created communal area for the burial of ashes came as a surprise. When we visited in autumn 2018, only one of the eight spaces had been taken. At the centre of the site is a large stone circle featuring an eight-pointed star. An information board erected next to it states that this is believed to be a Wendish religious symbol: "The design of this Cremonument is based on the eight-pointed star used by the Wendish people as a symbol of their faith. The star signifies divine guidance. The circle represents eternity and the everlasting God."



Such an interpretation was rather surprising, as I am not aware of any eight-pointed star being used as a Wendish religious symbol in my native Lusatia. The mystery was soon solved, however, when I spotted several such stars inside the church. In the upper corners of the church windows, instead of glass panes, there are small wooden boards with punched holes arranged in the shape of an eight-pointed star. However, this is not a Wendish religious symbol, but a simple measure to ventilate the enclosed church building.



The cremonument, complete with its accompanying information board, was created by the Friends of Peters Hill Church Inc in 2016. The ideas behind the eight-pointed star demonstrate how Wendish traditions – which are not known and strange to one – can be invented through one's own imagination.

[This article will be concluded in the next newsletter.]

Laucke family and Flour Mills

Members of the Laucke family were not aware of their Wendish heritage until very recently, because their grandfather had decided that his family should grow up speaking English. Mark Laucke and his sister Janet O'Brien revealed this in a talk given to our society in May.

The Laucke family is a respected name in flour milling in Australia today. Condor Laucke also made a great contribution to parliament and government.

So how did they find out they were Wendish?

Janet began her talk with her husband Simon's decision some years ago to take their children and grandchildren to visit his family home in Ireland. He had his DNA tested to help with his Irish family information. Janet suggested continuing on to Berlin where Lauckes had Piltz relatives. During World War II, the Lauckes had sent food parcels to them. Since then, Piltz family members had visited South Australia from Berlin and Laucke members had travelled to Berlin. Janet's uncle Condor Laucke also suggested that they continue on to Werben, south of Berlin in Germany, where their grandfather was born. This is a Wendish village in Lower Lusatia.

Janet also agreed to have her DNA tested, expecting the majority to show as German. To her surprise it identified only 6% German. Instead 43% was North Central Europe (i.e. Wendish) and 48% Polish (also a Slavic nation).

Mark explained what they knew about their ancestors. Their grandfather, Friedrich "Fritz" Laucke, migrated from Werben, north-west of Cottbus, sailing on the ***Gera***, and arrived in South Australia in 1895. This was about 50 years after the main exodus of Wends to South Australia in the years 1848 to 1860. He married a German, Marie nee Jungfer, and settled in the Barossa. They had 6 children: Therese, Hans, Max, Charlotte, Werner and Condor. Marie died when Condor was only 3, and two of Marie's sisters moved in with the bereaved family to help raise the children.

Hans, who was Mark and Janet's father, always quoted his own father, Fritz, saying to the family "We will speak English in this home. I can't speak the language here and so we will all speak English." Their understanding was that Fritz had difficulty with the local Barossa Deutsch. However, it now seems clear that it was because the locals didn't speak his native Wendish. However, this was not explained to them; instead they had the impression that the family was German.



Flour mill at Greenock

Next, Janet was emailed by a relative with an Ancestry DNA match. Thomas Matchke asked if she would ever visit her Wendish relatives in Werben. Eventually after their visit to Ireland and then Berlin, Janet and family did indeed travel to Werben. Janet felt the beautiful scenery was similar to the Barossa and also noted signposts in 2 languages – German and what she now knows was Wendish.

They found their way to grandfather Fritz's original family home in Werben, which they recognised from family photos. Finally, they met Thomas Matchke and his family, about 12 adults and children, in an hotel for lunch. Thomas, his wife, children and brother spoke English. When offered a meal, Janet was amazed to find familiar foods from her childhood were served: cabbage rolls, dill cucumber and creamed cucumber, followed by streusel kuchen. This was Janet's introduction to her Wendish ancestry.

It appears that most Laucke relatives had spread around Germany before World War II, and most have lost touch with each other. The Matchke family holidayed in Czechoslovakia, Ukraine and Russia, but weren't aware of their Piltz relatives in Berlin. The Matchke family provided Janet with a family tree on a long roll of paper, before an emotional goodbye.

Janet is still finding more Wendish relatives. Her close friend and fellow boarder at Immanuel College, Ruth Pech, has discovered they shared great-great-grandparents on Janet's maternal Jungfer side. Ruth's relatives were the 2 sisters who moved in with the family after Marie, Fritz's wife, had died.

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Laucke family *(cont. from page 6)*

Mark told more of his grandfather Fritz's story. Trained in Germany by a professional miller, Fritz was a merchant marine conscript and sailed around the world, visiting many countries, but not Australia. On leaving ship life, he landed in WA and continued on to visit relatives in the Barossa. While visiting Adelaide he bumped into his former trainer. Knowing Fritz needed work, he sent him to work for a miller, Heidenreich, in Salisbury. He also worked at a mill in Angaston. There were numerous flour mills at that time, and Fritz soon purchased one at Greenock. After a boiler explosion he rebuilt with new technology and the business grew.



Aftermath of boiler explosion

Fritz approached flour milling from a scientific perspective and followed the research of William Farrer who developed wheat strains for their milling and baking quality. He formed a family business and bought mills for his sons in 1928, 1942 and 1950. One son, Condor, became involved in politics and organised the family's finances. During this period, South Australia grew more wheat than the rest of Australia, had more mills than other states and a thriving export industry.

Fritz's business model emphasised the importance of partnering with wheat breeders and growers, and respecting the knowledge of their soils. Mark also talked about the transition of the family business from one generation to the next. In 1990 Mark and his cousin Condor Junior bought out the rest of the family. In 2000 they separated: Mark now has the flour milling at Strathalbyn, while Condor Junior has the animal feed milling business at Daveyston.

Today 90% of the milling industry in Australia is controlled by 3 multinational companies, while Australian companies own the other 10%. The largest of these Australian companies is Laucke, and Mark believes their success is due to their emphasis on partnerships. They also continue to develop a range of flour products to meet the needs of today's cooks. Words such as share, innovate, lead and passion indicate the current business philosophy.

With many Laucke family and friends attending, there was much sharing of information. We heard that their grandparents who started the Laucke story, Fritz and Marie, are buried in the Greenock cemetery. Everyone enjoyed this fascinating coverage of a family re-discovering their Wendish ancestry. Finally, the large audience of around 100 appreciated scones, with jam and cream, which Wend Society Committee members made with Laucke scone flour.

Pauline Burger & Ruth Walter

Who do you think you are?

Did you see the SBS program on Bruce McAvaney?

It featured Bruce's great-great-grandmother, Maria Marschall, who lived for a short time at Peters Hill. Her parents, Christian and Elise Marschall, lived in the house on the slope of Peters Hill. The house has recently been rebuilt and is the Marschall Hut on the Heysen Trail.

Maria married her first husband Johann Lehmann at Peters Hill and had 3 children with him. They moved to Sedan, where sadly Johann died by drowning.

Maria than remarried Ferdinand Traeger and had 9 more children. They moved to Mildura, but unfortunately Ferdinand died by drowning as well. A tragic tale! Watch it on SBS – On Demand.

For Sale

Books:

- *The Sorbs of Germany* - $10, plus $3 postage
- Korall & Schwikart, *Journey through the Spree Forest* (with lovely pictures) - $35, plus $10 postage
- Schulenburg, *Wendish Folklore. Its Legends, Traditions and Customs* - $50, plus $10 postage
- Schneeweis, *Festivals and Folk Customs of the Sorbs (Wends)* - $50, plus $10 postage

Also the best books about the Wends in Australia:

- Burger, *The Coming of the Wends* - $12, plus $3 postage
- Nielsen, *In Search of a Home* (second edition, hard cover) - ***Sold out!!***

Also: Trudla Malinkowa, *Wendish Keepers* - $30, plus $10 postage
[The story of the four Wendish societies in Australia and America]
Trudla Malinkowa, *Ufer der Hoffnung* - $20, plus $10 postage
[This is the German version of *Shores of Hope*]

NEW book:
The Wends in South Australia. Their Heritage Trail - $25, plus $10 postage

Music CDs:

Cost $10 each, plus $3 postage

- Kocor, *Naleco* (Spring). [Majestic oratorio, with memorable, joyful and folk-like themes]
- Zahraj nam rejiku (*Sorbische Folklore mit Sprjewjan*) [Lively folk music, instrumental and vocal work]

Calendars for 2027:

With scenes from Lusatia, these are really beautiful. There is a new photo every 2 weeks!
Please order *straight away,* so that we can get them from Germany before the end of the year.
Cost = $25, plus $10 postage

Wendish/Sorbian Flags (small, on a stick) $5, plus $3 postage

Contact Ruth Walter, 43 Clifton St, Prospect SA 5082, (tel. 08 8269 7168, mobile 0435 211 606),
email: ruth.walter43@gmail.com

Please make cheques or money orders to *Wend Sorb Society of South Australia*,
or email Ruth for Direct Debit (EFT) details.

We welcome any contributions to this newsletter. Please send them to the Editor at the address below.

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