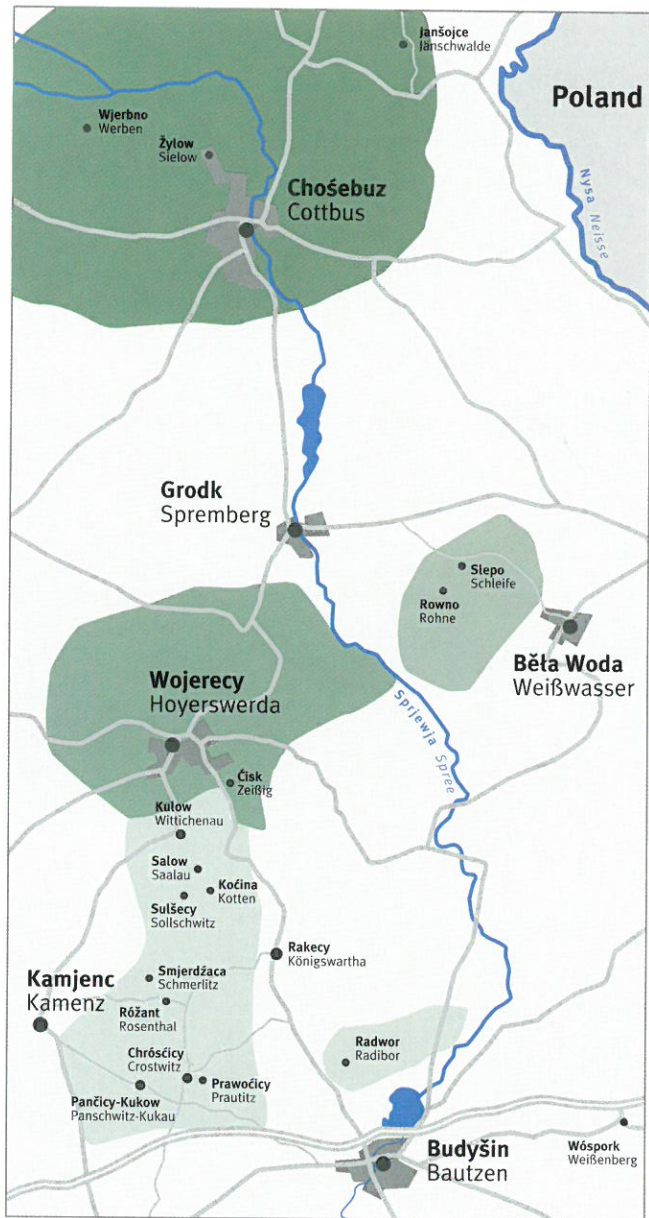




# The Winter Season among the Sorbs

Zyma w Serbach



- The region of the Lower Sorbian national costume
- The region of the Wojerecy (Hoyerswerda) national costume
- The region of the Slepó (Schleife) national costume
- The region of the Catholic national costume

**Dobry dzeń  
a witajće k nam  
do Serbow.**

**Welcome  
to our  
Sorbian region.**



In this little booklet we would like to introduce you to the wealth of traditions and customs which the Sorbs observe in their homeland in bilingual Lusatia in the winter season. Men and women from various places of individual ethnographic regions describe here the ways in which traditions of Sorbian customs have been preserved in their respective homes. Although it is mainly the given community that takes part in their observation, these events are a great experience for any visitor from outside the region. The following texts would like to be your guide on your excursions to one part of the rich cultural traditions and language of the Sorbs.

## N o v e m b e r

In November and December we can find a great number of traditions in various regions of bilingual Lusatia.

In addition to the commonly used word **November**, other variants exist in the Sorbian language as well. Thus in Upper Sorbian it is also called **nazymnik** relating to the word for autumn (*nazyma*). In Lower Sorbian it is given the name of **mtošny** that refers to the farmers thrashing (*mtošiś*) their corn.

## D e c e m b e r

December, the month when Christmas (*hody*) come, is called **hodownik**; in Lower Sorbian its name derives from the winter (*zyma*) month, that is **zymski**.

## Swjaty Měrcin – Saint Martin

On St. Martin's Day (November 11) processions of children asking for little gifts take place in all Sorbian Catholic villages except in Radwor (Radibor in German) where this custom is observed on St. Nicholas' Day (December 6). Children go about from house to house in small groups and ask for titbits singing the following rhyme:

*»Wjele zboža přejemy  
a so pěknje prašamy, njej tu  
swjaty Měrcin (Mikławš) był,  
njej tu ničo wostajil? Ju wšak,  
ju, połnu šklu, hišće wulku  
hromadu.«*

*»We wish you lots of  
happiness and we kindly ask  
you this: Has Saint Martin  
(Nicholas) been here yet, and  
some gifts for us has left?  
Yes, oh yes, that he did, a full  
dish and a pile of sweets.«*

**St. Martin's  
procession  
in Chrósćicy**

**Swjaty Měrcin  
w Chrósćicach**





St. Barbara  
in the  
village  
of Kočina  
(Kotten)

Swjata  
Borbora  
w Koćinje

### Swjata Borbora – Saint Barbara

In some villages of the parish of Kulow (Wittichenau), *Swjata Borbora* is on her round on the eve of St. Barbara's Day (December 4). She goes from house to house, and two servants, each called Ruprecht, accompany her. Only a few years ago she put on parts of the wedding wear of the Sorbian Catholic bride. Today she dresses in a white bridal gown with a veil over her face. She gives apples, nuts and sweets to good children, but she touches the cheeks of the naughty ones with a birch bundle.

»Saint Barbara« never says a word; those are uttered by both Rumprechts. They ask the children to report on their behaviour and sing a song or tell a rhyme. On the occasion the children are excited and afterwards they are proud that *Swjata Borbora* has given them a present.

Sonja Hrjehorjowa, Sulšecy (Solschwitz)

## Swjaty Mikławš – Saint Nicholas

In some villages of the Catholic parish of Kulow (Wittichenau) we can meet *Swjaty Mikławš* on the eve of 6 December. He is dressed as a Catholic bishop wearing a red cloak and the mitre and carrying the bishop's crosier. He mostly comes in the company of two characters of the Weihnachtsmann (Father Christmas).



Saint  
Nicholas  
in Salow  
(Saalau)

Swjaty  
Mikławš  
w Salowje

### Swjaty Mikławš in Salow (Saalau)

On December 5, on the eve of St. Nicholas' Day, I walk from house to house together with two young people. I am dressed in bishop's garments and, accompanied by two Weihnachtsmänner – Fathers Christmas – I go about our village and pay a visit to every child up to the age of ten. We announce our coming with ringing the doorbell. In the living room we make our introductions and ask the children if they have always obeyed their parents. If it is not the case, the child is given a scolding. Nevertheless, since Saint Nicholas was a very good and generous bishop, censure is the matter of the Weihnachtsmänner. I only praise the children and ask them to give us a prayer, song

or a rhyme. It is no problem for them because they would be well prepared beforehand. As a reward, they get a small gift from me. The presents are placed by the parents outside the windows of the house before I set out to do my round. After the children have thanked us, that is Saint Nicholas and his company, we say good bye and go to pay a visit to the next family.

Clemens Šolta, Salow (Saalow)

### **Džěćetko – Gift-giving**

At the time of the spinning evenings, when flax is spun and stories told, *džěćetko* goes on the gift-giving round in the Slepó (Schleife) region. Peasants in this region, called *hola* (the Heath), belonged among the poorest in the whole of Lusatia. Local girls, therefore, decided to please children at Advent by giving them little gifts, such as apples, pears, nuts, ginger bread, but also smaller parts of the folk costume that were made at home.

A girl who is about to get married is chosen by the *kantorka* (a female choir-leader) to be the gift-giving person, and on an Advent Sunday she is dressed in the costume of the bridesmaid. A veil covers her face, a white apron is placed over a green skirt, a white shirt replaced with a long blouse pushed inside the bib skirt; white woollen gloves are put on her hands. Each girl helping with the clothing brings along a coloured ribbon. These are then either bound together and tied around the arm or stitched separately onto the costume of the *džěćetko*. Since the ribbon decorations of the *Bože džěćo* (Baby Christ) in each of the seven villages of the Slepó region differ from one another, it is recognized at first sight from which of them the costume comes. In some villages



the ribbons brought by the girls are then sown onto a long, coloured band. So it is easy to count how many girls have taken part in the clothing. After the complicated headdress is put on, the *dźęćetko* gets a birch bundle in the right hand and a little bell announcing its coming in the left hand. During the visit, the *dźęćetko* does not say a word. It is only the accompanying persons



**The  
dźęćetko  
in the  
village  
of Slepó  
(Schleife)**

**Dźęćetko  
w Slepom**

who can speak, and so the *dźęćetko* remains unidentified by those who are given gifts.

Today the *dźęćetko* pays visits to nursery schools, schools, senior citizen's Christmas parties, Advent gatherings of local groups of the Domowina national organization and also the Christmas market in the village of Slepó. In each village the *dźęćetko* is dressed according to the local tradition. We are happy that in all the seven villages, i. e. Slepó (Schleife), Rowno (Rohne), Mulkecy (Mulkwitz), Miłoraz (Mühlrose), Trjebin (Trebendorf), Brězowka (Halbendorf) and Dźęwin (Groß-Düben), this custom has been revived recently.

Lenka Nowakowa, Rowno (Rohno)

In a similar manner, girls in Lower Lusatia clothe the eldest from their midst to be the gift-giving character during the last spinning evening before Christmas. This custom has survived till today in the village of Janšojcy.



### **Janšojski bog – Gift-giving**

The village of Janšojcy (Jänschalde) belongs to the region where the Lower Sorbian costume is worn. Here too the gift-giving girl is clothed in various parts of this national costume put together in a fancy combination. It includes a quilted underskirt. A red skirt decorated with a ribbon is placed over the underskirt. The upper part of the body is covered with a long men's shirt on the sleeves of which small bunches

**Gift-giving  
in Janšojcy  
(Jänschwalde)**

**Žěšetko  
z Janšojc**

or little wreaths of artificial flowers are attached. Over the skirt with a ribbon a white starched lace apron is tied front and back. On its waistband embroidered ribbons are stitched. Around the waist then a wide silk sash is tied. The whole costume is supplemented with white gloves, white stockings and black shoes.

The headdress is particularly remarkable and complex. A woollen scarf is wrapped around the head of the *Janšojski bog* (Jänschwalder Gott in German; God from Janšojcy in English) in the same way as a turban is done, and a knot is tied at the front. Over it a white scarf decorated with two flower tendrils is placed. In the middle a bridal crown of young spruce twigs is fixed. A tulle scarf arranged in folds and trimmed with coloured ribbons, pearl strings and sown-on glittering little pieces of tin covers the face. The whole outfit is supplemented with a birch bundle with coloured ribbons in the right hand and a little bell in the left. With the accompanying women *Janšojski bog* sets out to meet the youngest inhabitants of the village. In order to remain unidentified, the girl may not speak during the round.

A stroke of the bundle against the window and the sound of the little bell announces its coming at every house. Having given the children their presents, *Janšojski bog* touches the adults with the bundle so that the awakening strength of the nature may be transferred to them.

Liska Möschowa, Janšojcy (Jänschwalde)

## **Swjata Marija hospodu pyta – Virgin Mary is looking for shelter**

The story of Mary and Joseph looking for shelter initiated the participation of nine families in the symbolic provision of shelter for Christ's Mother.

All participating in this Sorbian Catholic custom of Advent promise that they will not refuse anyone asking for help.

For nine days before Christmas Eve the statues of Christ's Mother and Saint Joseph are carried from one family to another.

To establish the order of the families, lots are drawn on the second Advent Sunday.

The ninth family may consider themselves lucky because Mary and Joseph will stay with them till Candlemas (2 February).

On the coming of Virgin Mary all participants start praying together. The same ceremony is held when Christ's Mother is leaving the house and is being carried to the other family where she is already expected.

In our village we naturally pray in our Sorbian mother tongue – five times the Lord's Prayer, furthermore, the Creed and the Lord's Angel.

Gabriela Brězanowa, Prawoćicy (Praititz)

## **Nowolětka – New Year's Day pastries**

Among folk customs of all nations we come across a number of festive occasions dating back to the remote past.

As the calendar year was nearing its end, peasants were beginning to think of the year to come. They were concerned with the harvest and the well-being of their domestic animals. This was the reason why on the New Year's Eve small animal figures made

of flour, water and a bit of salt were baked; on the next day they were given to the live animals – each should have eaten a pastry figure depicting itself. In that way people hoped and believed that domestic animals would be healthy in the course of the coming year. Cows, horses, sheep, goats, hens, geese, ducks, dogs and cats were typical New Year's figures. Out of this custom, which had survived till the 1920s, a new tradition has developed and has been



**The following preparation of the dough is described by Mrs. Irmgard Wenzel from the Alte Pfefferküchlerei in Wóspork (Weißenberg):**

maintained mainly in schools and nursery schools. Children shape and bake various *nowolětka* for fun and pleasure or as presents there. The museum called the Alte Pfefferküchlerei (The Old Gingerbread Baker's) in Wóspork (Weißenberg) observes this custom as well. In the winter season visitors themselves can take part in the making of animal figures.

*Flour and water are mixed together to make a leaven which is then left in a warm place for two days, and later, after adding a greater amount of flour and a necessary bit of salt, the dough is kneaded until it is ready to be used for shaping figures from. It is important that the dough has been kneaded for a long time and thoroughly. The rest of the dough is covered with a wet cloth to keep it from drying up.*

# J a n u a r y



In January those who are interested can get acquainted with the custom called *ptači kwas* – the Birds' Wedding. The month of January has 31 days and ice is frozen and hard as a horn. Therefore, the Sorbs of Upper Lusatia call it **wulki rōžk** (a big horn). For the Sorbs of Lower Lusatia it is the month in the middle of *zyna* (winter), therefore, it is called **wezymski**.

## Ptači kwas – The Birds' Wedding

Children's  
Birds'  
Wedding  
in the village  
of Smjerdžaca  
(Schmerlitz)  
Džěćacy  
ptači kwas  
w Smjerdžacej

There is a custom in Upper Lusatia that in the morning on 25 January children put a plate on the window sill or in front of the door so that birds, celebrating the *ptači kwas* on that day, can put various sweet things there. It is said that in this way birds express their gratitude to children for feeding them during the winter months. The roots of this custom have not been unambiguously explained yet. Its popularity gave rise to a number of new forms – mainly in schools and nursery schools. In many places in Lusatia, nursery schools in particular hold »wedding« processions through the village with *sroka a hawron* (the magpie and the raven respectively) leading on. Attractive wedding processions of children in the wedding forms of national costumes can be admired in the region of the Catholic Sorbs, in some places in Lower Lusatia and in the Slepó and Wojerecy neighbourhoods.

### Ptači kwas (Birds' Wedding) in the Sorbian nursery school in Chróścicy (Crochwitz)

For the children in our nursery school, preparations for the festive day start at the beginning of the month already. The bride and groom are chosen and on the day of the Birds' Wedding it is these two who walk at the head of the procession together with the *braška*. The *braška* is a singular character in our region. He is the Master of Ceremonies at weddings, and that is why he is part of our *ptači kwas*.

What would such a feast be without the festive wear? Therefore, especially girls put

on the festive form of the Sorbian Catholic costume on this occasion. For our children the day of the Birds' Wedding begins quite early because to put on a festive costume takes about one and a half hour. All the inconveniences and the obligation to sit quietly are, however, forgotten when with the first rays of the sun the wedding procession makes its introduction to the villagers. In our programme we try to entertain the pupils and teachers of the Primary



School in Chrósćicy as well as the inhabitants of the Community Care Centre in Smječkecy (Schmeckwitz).

Angela Młynkowa, Chrósćicy (Crostwitz)

### **The tradition of the *ptači kwas* (Birds' Wedding) performances for adults**

Since the foundation of the Bautzen society named the *Nadžija* (Hope) in 1920, adults have celebrated *the ptači kwas* every year as well. At first, theatre performances or concerts were given on the occasion. In 1937, however, it was forbidden to use the Sorbian language in public, and the ban on all Sorbian cultural activities was imposed soon after.



After the Second World War, Birds' Wedding programmes were prepared and performed by Sorbian folklore groups.

Later these events began to be prepared by the Sorbian Folk Ensemble established in 1952. In addition to about ten performances for adults, this body gives also about thirty performances of a special show for children.

Moreover, in the shop windows of the bakeries we may see as well that bilingual Lusatia celebrates the *ptači kwas*. In addition to traditional, well-known small pastry birds called *sroka*, meringue birds, bird nests and other delicacies special to the occasion are on the display.

### **How to make the pastry »sroka« (magpie)?**

*The dough you need is made of flour, milk, fat, sugar, yeast, a bit of salt and various aroma flavours, such as vanilla, lemon or almond essences. After the dough has risen, knead it and, using both hands, roll out into a conic, snake-like shape which you then tie. The knot stands for the head and body, the rest is the tail. The tail can be further formed by skilful lengthwise cuts. Finally, eyes, made of two currants, are the final touch to the little bird. Then it remains but to wait for about twenty minutes before the sroka is ready to be baked at 220 °C.*

*To improve the taste further, the cooled-off birds are sugarcoated or brushed over with melted butter and sprinkled with icing sugar.*

the Scholze bakery, Róžant (Rosenthal)

## F e b r u a r y

In bilingual Lusatia Shrovetide carnivals are characteristic of the months of February and March.

February with its 28 (29) days is the shortest month, and ice is still frozen and hard as a horn. That's why it is called **mały rózŕk** (a small horn) in Upper Sorbian. In Lower Sorbian the word for February relates to Candlemas / **swěckowny**.

## M a r c h

In Upper Lusatia the month of March brings the spring, *nalěčo*, and is, therefore, called **nalětnik**; in Lower Lusatia it is the month, which comes after zyma, the winter season, and so it is called **pozymski**.

## Póstnicy – Shrovetide

No custom has been observed for so long and with such vigour as Shrovetide, though its form and intensity differ from region to region. While around Budyšin (Bautzen) and Kamjenc (Kamenz), except for children's processions, it is observed only in the form of a fancy-dress dance



party, in other regions a number of features has been preserved reminding of the solidarity of the traditional village community.

## Camprowanje – Zampern – Shrovetide carnival

This going about from house to house and collecting gifts is the most widespread custom. It is rooted in pre-Christian religious beliefs. With masks and big noise, evil is being driven out of the farms. A rider on a white horse and a stork symbolize the beginning spring, the bear represents the ending winter, the chimney sweep drives out the spirits of winter, the policeman symbolizes the authorities and the famous

egg-woman collects gifts for the Shrovetide feast. Except for the egg-woman, other traditional figures have lost their symbolic meanings in recent years. Today, young people in the village put on bright fancy costumes and go about, with music, from house to house.



**A Shrovetide  
carnival  
in the village  
of Rowno  
(Rohne)**

**Camprowanje  
w Rownom**

Those taking part in the procession greet inhabitants of each house with loud noise and music and invite the lady of the house to dance. The visit of this merry group of dressed up young people is an honour to every family. Even members of the household where mourning is observed do not want to be left out, and like the others, they give the visitors their fee, that is eggs, bacon but also hard drinks and money. All foodstuffs collected in this way are then eaten at a big egg-feast held a week after with which the carnival ends.

### **Camprowanje – Zampern – The carnival in Ćisk**

Shrovetide carnivals are an old tradition in the village of Ćisk (Zeißig). On a February Sunday, a masked and fancy-dress party of about fifty – men and village youth – go about from house to house; they are accom-

panied with a brass band and a colourfully decorated horse-drawn wagon.

Though it is easily said: »They are playing the fools«, staging the procession requires good organizational skills because it has to take place in a strictly traditional manner. The day begins in the following order: entering the names on the list of participants, getting moneyboxes, taking a group photograph and lining up for the procession through the village.

Leading the procession marches the brass band followed by the »oldest« of the village. They can be recognized by their blue aprons and caps with a colourful bouquet of flowers on its left side. Behind the »oldest« proceed the traditional figures typical of the given community. In Ćisk they include: the chimney sweep, Sorbian egg woman, baker, clown, gypsy woman, witch and many other merry figures. The procession ends with »gulaschkanonen«, that is large pots of the army's kitchen pulled by a tractor, and a decorated horse-drawn wagon strewn with rushes. At the farmhouse of the Forches the procession comes to an end and then the real round of the whole party from house to house begins. The »oldest« are the first to enter the yard or the house, and on behalf of the members of the carnival group they ask for a small financial contribution into the main moneybox. The band plays a serenade and the »oldest« dance with the women of the house. In gratitude for the given money, beer vouchers are distributed and hard drinks are poured out. All the others of the group naturally want to get some small money in their moneyboxes too, which the car drivers passing through the village at that time cannot fail to find out. Things are, however, easier for the egg woman. She is already expected and her basket is quickly filled with eggs.

Housewives, beware! The chimney sweep has blackened hands and is ever ready to hug you affectionately.

In the evening those who have actively taken part in the merrymaking of the carnival proceed, under the music, into the village pub. Women and girls wear the most beautiful Sorbian national costumes of the Wojerecy (Hoyerswerda) region; men wear black trousers, a white shirt and a blue apron.

The first three dances – the fast waltz, polka and mazurka – belong to the participants of the carnival while elderly women of the village watch them intently.

To get a place in the pub hall on that evening is not at all easy because both the old and the young of the village want to take part in the Shrovetide dance. It is the occasion to use the beer vouchers, too.

The carnival ends long after midnight, and everybody looks forward to taking part in the *camprowanje* next year again.

Günther Zschech, Ćisk (Zeißig)

### **Zapust – A festive Shrovetide procession of young people in Lower Lusatia**

In addition to the *camprowanje* and its ending connected with the consumption of the gathered eggs, a festive procession of young people called *zapust* takes place in the period before Lent as well. It is one of the most significant events among Lower Lusatian festive customs.

Gerhard Grähbig,  
in: *Wendische  
Fastnacht,  
Ein Lesebuch  
(Shrovetide  
Carnival in Lower  
Lusatia, A Reader)*,  
1999

### **Zapust – A festive Shrovetide procession of young people in Żyłow (Sielow)**

The *zapust* is held on a Saturday or Sunday after the *camprowanje* carnival. All girls in the procession wear the festive Lower Lusatian dancing costume. Embroidered scarves, skirt ribbons and the elaborate headdress

**Shrovetide  
in the village  
of Wjerbno  
(Werben)**

**Zapust  
we Wjerbnje**

called *lapa*, which make this national costume complete, are often new because elderly women often give them to their granddaughters as a present. In order to avoid criticism, girls tend to leave the dressing to experienced women. Afterwards girls gather in the pub and wait for the young men of the village.

When they finally come, they get a Shrovetide bouquet of artificial flowers, which they fix, to their hat or to the lapel. The oldest of



**Earlier it was believed that all had to dance as much as they could because only in that way flax harvest would be rich in the new year. Girls tried to dance with the tallest young men and jump as high as possible so that the flax plants could grow high as well.**

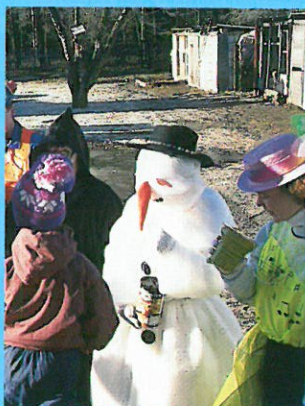
the young people then reads a strict order concerning the staging and course of the procession. At the same time it is announced who will walk, in pairs, with who. After a dance of individual pairs, the whole party goes out of the pub and is photographed in front of it. The procession of young people then sets out, in the agreed order and with the band in the lead, on the round through the village. The main purpose of the procession is to stop at houses of those inhabitants who contributed most to the welfare of the community. The honoured villagers are given a bouquet of artificial flowers and dance an honorary round. In return the young people get good sums of money.

In the evening all villagers meet in the pub for the Shrovetide dance.

**Further information** on the life, history, language and culture of the Sorbs in Germany can be found in our booklets (published in English)

**A Little Guide to the Sorbs / Wends in Germany;  
Easter among the Sorbs;  
Customs and Traditions of the Sorbs in Lower Lusatia**  
which you can get at the following addresses:

Sorbische Kulturinformation, Postplatz 2, 02526 **Bautzen**,  
Tel. 035 91 421 05, [www.sorben-wenden](http://www.sorben-wenden)  
or: Sorbische Kulturinformation »Lodka«, August-Bebel-Straße 82,  
03046 **Cottbus**, Tel. 03 55 79 11 10



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