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Traditional Sorbian Costumes—Travel Impressions from Sorbian Lusatia

At the beginning of the 20th century, Slovenian artist Ante Trstenjak paid his first visit to Sorbian Lusatia. The picturesque and virtually unspoilt scenery as well as the autochthonous population who had retained their language, customs, and traditional costumes left quite an impression on him.

Since the middle of the 19th century, folk costumes have been considered the customary dress of the rural population. They were reinterpreted as a marker of ethnic affiliation and became a visual manifestation of Sorbian identity during the national rebirth of the Slavic peoples, especially the Sorbs/Wends¹.

As time passed, several regional costume areas emerged. With the progress of industrialisation traditional costumes had become gradually phased out in some regions. Today we distinguish four regions of traditional costume. These include the garb of the Lower Lusatian Sorbs around Cottbus, the garb of the Upper Lusatian Sorbs around Hoyerswerda, the garb in central Lusatia around Schleife and the Catholic Sorbs' garb around Bautzen and Kamenz.

Men's garb vanished as early as the 19th century. Decorative items, such as colourful pocket squares, coloured waistcoats, ribbon-decorated bouquets and wreaths, however, have endured. The wedding inviter's garb, with its broad, splendidly embroidered sash, gives the strongest impression of traditional costume.

By conforming to traditional forms of existence, work, celebration, and piety, Sorbian paraphernalia demonstrates their deep entrenchment in traditions.² Sorbian traditional costumes, with their strict set of standards, represented conservative ideals, chronicled rural-regional attire, and revealed the wearer's social status.

The Schleife garb is the smallest traditional costume region. Only seven villages in the Schleife parish are part of this costume region. The garb mirrored the poor economic situation and remoteness of the region with wool and linen being the most common materials used. In terms of form and colour, the essence of a traditional farmer's garb was best preserved here. The colour red was associated with happiness and carefree living, with the children all dressed in red. Until the age of four, both girls and boys wore a red patterned, mostly plaid dress. Red bonnets and tuckers were once permitted when worn by elderly women. Due to strong blood ties and neighbourly obligations, however, they were rarely without grieving. As a result, they preferred blue clothes that conveyed the gravity of

¹ The Sorbs—a West Slavic people living in Upper and Lower Lusatia, traditionally known in German as the Wends, and sometimes also as Sorbian Wends or Lusatian Sorbs; Scholze 2014, p. 368. The Wends—a former German term for the Slavic population of the two Lusatian regions, which was replaced in 1945 by the name Sorbs, and updated in 1989/1990; Scholze 2014, p. 488. Only the terms Sorbs and Sorbian are used in the rest of the text for clarity.

² Mirtschin 2006.

life. This became a clear shift from "red" to "blue" garb after World War I. Up to the 1930s, the communities of the distant Schleife villages wore white as the traditional mourning colour.³

The Schleife garb's greatly differentiated expressive value was enhanced by a skilled and varied synthesis of individual traditional costume components. The costume has a stocky appearance thanks to the knee-length, narrowly pleated bodice and skirt made of blue and green striped woollen fabric with a short, high waist and a wide patterned blue print apron. The girls' and women's bonnets have a uniform cut. Artful handicrafts in cross embroidery and broderie anglaise can be found mainly on chin bows, bonnets, and scarves. The scarves are only embroidered on the visible sides. A form of tree of life and geometric patterns are depicted in the corner motif. On the two side parts, stylised crowns, crosses, a year, and the wearer's initials may be seen. Handmade jewellery pieces, corsages, and beaded wreaths complete the Schleife traditional garbs.

The largest Sorbian traditional costume region is the Lower Sorbian costume area, a part of which is also the "picturesque" Spreewald garb. The colourful ribbon skirts and the elaborately tied bonnets (*lapa*) are striking. In the past, the bonnets were tied from one large kerchief. Today, the bonnet consists of three different sized kerchiefs tied together. The width of the sides, the way the kerchiefs are tied and the position of the knot indicate the regional origin of the wearer.⁴ The new bonnet form replaced the old historical festive headdress, an intricately put-together triangular cap shape with ruffs and a large bow.⁵ In the 1920s, simpler forms replaced the elaborate attire for weddings and infant baptisms. Around this time, bonnets also disappeared from girls' school dress. The urban-bourgeois fashion ideals of the big cities of Berlin and Cottbus influenced the choice of fabrics and colours in the 20th century. Since then, light and pastel-coloured silk fabrics, tulle, and precious lace have defined the festive costumes. Flat and whitework embroidery decorated aprons, head and shoulder scarves. Today, festive costumes are mostly worn for traditional events like *zapust* (Shrovetide) or rooster plucking (a harvest custom), or as performance costumes by folkloric dance and vocal groups.

In the 1920s, the Hoyerswerda traditional costume area reveals itself as an intact traditional garb landscape. Special modes of expression had evolved for all occasions in life. Red was the colour of youth, while blue was the colour of everyday life. Green traditional garbs were worn by first-time godmothers, engaged couples, young wives, or mothers with confirmed children. Green was also worn as a symbol of half-mourning, as well as during the Lenten and Advent seasons. Black, on the other hand, was only worn on major church holidays.

Boys up to the age of four also wore little dresses resembling traditional costumes until the beginning of the 1930s.⁶ Because of their high level of craftsmanship and artistic decoration, the festive garbs, which depict the ideal image of a folk costume, are captivating. There is a

³ Nowak-Neumann et al. 1984, p. 33.

⁴ Balke & Nowak-Neumann 1991, p. 37 f.

⁵ Balke & Nowak-Neumann 1991, p. 24 f.

⁶ Schneider & Balke 1983, p. 29.

lot of flat, cross, tulle, and hole embroidery. Tulle embroidery, which used to serve as a substitute for lace in some cases, adorned girls' bonnets, cuffs, and large festive aprons. In the past, real jewellery was supplemented with colourful, shiny glass beads and spangles. Bright drop beads, hearts, rhombs, shamrocks, and crosses adorn the bridesmaids' large pearly breast jewellery today. The orange upper skirt, red-green silk aprons, black bonnets, and white girls' tulle bonnets of the same shape are typical of the festive garbs of girls and young women. The various traditional costume variants in the individual communities reflect the enormous diversity of the Hoyerswerda traditional costume region.

The Sorbian-Catholic area has a more diverse landscape than any other Sorbian traditional costume area. The traditional garb reflects the relatively good economic conditions. Cloth, woollen fabrics, silk, velvet, furs, and lace are among the noble and high-quality materials used. The festive costumes are complemented by high-quality jewellery made of pearls, corals, and coins. The strong ecclesiastical influence is especially visible in the design and colouring. The skirts and aprons are ankle-length.⁷ Dark colours are preferred for church garb. Female churchgoers wear a large, embroidered headscarf with coloured satin stitching or elaborate silk shading. The mourning and processional garb includes a white, starched linen cloth that covers the entire upper body. Colour symbolism plays an important role. Black and white have a ceremonial quality, as well as being mourning colours. The colour red represents youth, and it can be found in the pink of the bridesmaids' head bows. Green is the colour of harmony and tranquillity, and it is reserved for the bride. The bridesmaid and bride are adorned with jewellery made of silver coins, covered by a fine net of small delicately coloured glass beads. Today, the Sorbian Catholic costume is worn for a variety of cultural events and family celebrations with a religious background.

The Bautzen area's Protestant Sorbs were the first to abandon their traditional garb. This traditional costume region already belonged to the "chest costumes"⁸ around 1900, but the traditional costume experienced another renaissance in the 1920s with the formation of diverse associations and opportunities for representation. The Bautzen area was bound to the south by the Lusatian mountains (mountain dwellers) and to the north by a flat heathland with its sandy soil (heathland dwellers). Original costumes could be recreated using existing photographs, written descriptions, and preserved separate pieces. The skirt, spencer, and apron were uniform, while the headdress varied by region. Colourful elements, such as ribbons, scarves, or strings of pearls, were used to decorate the garbs and instead of a bonnet, the girls' dance costumes featured a flower wreath. Until the age of four, both girls and boys wore skirts, then the boys were given trousers, while the girls were given a simplified version of the adult garb. The appropriation of an urban, petit-bourgeois way of life and the adoption of urban fashion had a significant impact on the Bautzen garb. The proximity of the city of Bautzen, the freedom of trade, and the ever-increasing factory

⁷ Meschgang & Balke 1986, p. 42 ff.

⁸ They are known as "Truhentrachten" [chest costumes] because they are no longer worn in everyday life. Nawka 1979, p. 14.

production of textiles all aided this process of change. Today the Bautzen traditional costume is worn on special cultural occasions such as pageants and confirmation.

The Muskau Heath dominates the landscape around Nochten. This originally peasant costume is distinguished by its use of bright red colours. The majority of the costumes were made of linen, wool, calico, or muslin. Lace and silk ribbons were used sparingly. The traditional folk costume was mixed with urban-bourgeois elements relatively early on, and it lost its social function around the turn of the century.⁹ The festive costumes in particular, were lavishly embellished. The bonnets' chin ribbons are made of rich, handmade broderie anglaise. The festive gowns are decorated with embroidered cross and tree-of-life motifs. The corners of the Nochten mourning shawls and church headscarves are also adorned with striking cross-stitch work. The embroidered bases of the bonnets feature rich filet work with three stylised trees of life. A bride wears a bridal crown with silver hoops, a bridal wreath, and a bridal necklace made of large and hollow glass beads. The first symptoms of decline appeared as early as 1870. Although, the traditional form of the festive costumes has survived the longest.

Ante Trstenjak's works are remarkably authentic testimonies with a high evidential documentary value. The majority of the depictions reflect his delight of discovering a living world that is perceived to be unique. As a counter-image to a disappearing world, ethnic cohesion, religiosity, and apparent constancy with its everyday and festive components are precisely reproduced. Trstenjak's works introduce us to important aspects of Sorbian cultural history.

⁹ Nawka 1979, p. 23.