

AN ANTHOLOGY OF SORBIAN POETRY

from the 16th-20th centuries

”A Rock against these Alien Waves”

translated and edited
by
Robert Elsie

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INTRODUCTION

The very existence of the Sorbs, a Slavic minority in Germany, may be a surprise to many. After coping bravely with the difference between Slovakia, Slovenia and Slavonia, the English-speaking reader might be forgiven initially for thinking, or hoping, that Sorbian is simply a misspelling for Serbian.

The Sorbs, also known as Lusatian Sorbs or Wends, are descendants of Western Slavic tribes which took possession of the territory known as Lusatia by the end of the 5th century A.D., now in the southeastern part of the German Democratic Republic. Although soon separated from other Slavic speakers, the Poles and Czechs, by successive waves of Germanic conquerors during the Middle Ages, the Sorbs managed to resist assimilation and retain their cultural identity. They clung tenaciously to their language and culture over the centuries in spite of long periods of oppression, not least of which recently during the Third Reich. Since 1948, the Sorbs have enjoyed official status as a national minority in the GDR and can use their language freely in all walks of life where numbers warrant.

No reliable statistics are available as to the number of Sorbian speakers today and their distribution. The traditional figure is 100,000. It is estimated, however, that only about 30,000 people are able to use the language, virtually all of whom speak German, too. Indeed, one of the results of long years of bilingualism among the Sorbs has been that Sorbian no longer serves as an essential means of communication in the region. As in Ireland, Wales and Brittany, where no practical need for a language as a means of communication exists, it begins to die out, irrespective of the strong cultural or emotional attachment speakers may have and despite official backing.

Sorbian is spoken in a number of regional variants having crystallized into two related literary languages: Upper Sorbian and Lower Sorbian, which are, given a bit of effort and good will, quite mutually intelligible.

Upper Sorbian (*hornjoserbscina*) is spoken by large sections of the rural population of Upper Lusatia northeast of Dresden between the towns of Bautzen (*Budysin*), Hoyerswerda (*Wojerecy*) and Kamenz (*Kamjenc*). Although towns such as Bautzen are officially bilingual too, very little Sorbian is to be heard there nowadays. The language is best preserved in the countryside, in particular in the so-called Catholic villages west of Bautzen which, perhaps due to their traditional isolation within a predominantly Protestant region, have held more faithfully to their traditions.

Lower Sorbian (*dolnoserbski*) is spoken in the marshy Spree Forest of Lower Lusatia around the town of Cottbus (*Chosebuz*), about one hundred kilometres southeast of Berlin. It is used by far less numbers than is Upper Sorbian and seems to be well on the road to extinction.

Together with Czech, Slovak, Polish, Kashubian and the now extinct Polabian language, Sorbian forms part of the Western group of Slavic languages. Upper and Lower Sorbian form an indisputable linguistic entity, although whether this entity comprises one language or two is a matter of contention. Some authors refer to one Sorbian language with two standardized variants while others prefer to speak of two Sorbian languages. Upper Sorbian, with stress on the initial syllable and with *h* for Common Slavic *g*, appears to be closer to Czech, as one might expect from its geographical position, whereas Lower Sorbian has many features in common with Polish. Cut off as it is from the other Slavic languages by areas of German settlement to the east and south of Lusatia, Sorbian has not gone without a strong German influence, not only in vocabulary but also in phonology and syntax. On the other hand, it has retained a number of archaic features which have long since disappeared from most other Slavic languages, e.g. the presence, in addition to singular and plural, of a dual number in nouns, pronouns, adjectives and

verbs, a feature found otherwise only in Slovenian, and preservation of the aorist and imperfect tenses of the verb.

Earliest substantial records of the Sorbian language date from the 16th century. Among them are the so-called Bautzen burgher's oath of 1532 and a translation of the New Testament into Lower Sorbian by Miklawus Jakubica in 1548. The first Sorbian book to be printed was a Lower Sorbian translation of a catechism and book of hymns by Albin Moller in 1574. Most early Sorbian literature consists indeed of religious works inspired by the Reformation which created a need for church texts in the vernacular.

A landmark in the history of Sorbian literature was the founding in 1706 of the Catholic Serbski seminar or Sorbian Seminary in Prague, and in 1716 of the Protestant Serbske Predarske Towarstwo or Sorbian Preachers' Society in Leipzig. The latter, in particular, in addition to training Sorbian students for the ministry, played a major role in the teaching of Sorbian and the advancement of Sorbian letters.

The Romantic movement of the nineteenth century brought to the Sorbs, as to many other smaller peoples of Europe, a national awakening and an awareness of their own particular culture. The Sorbs discovered themselves as a small Slavic island in a Germanic sea. Popular verse and traditions were studied and recorded, fostering literary verse and, though to a lesser extent, prose. Poets such as Handrij Zejler, Jan Radyserb-Wjela and Jakub Bart-Cisinski and scholars such as Jan Arnost Smoler, Jan Petr Jordan and Michal Hórnik laid the foundations of intellectual life for a largely uneducated, conservative peasant population and stimulated the advancement of a national culture which in the 20th century was then able to survive the decimation of the First World War and the stifling oppression of the 'Aryan' dictatorship during the Third Reich.

Sorbian literature flourished in its modest way and has made a substantial contribution to the mosaic of European culture, a tiny and quite unique voice in a great choir. It has maintained its momentum to the present day and will no doubt accompany the Sorbian language right to its inevitable end.

The present anthology, the first of its kind in English, is designed as an introductory survey of Sorbian verse from its beginnings in the 16th century to the present day. The translations are interlinear as far as possible. The Hebrew poet Chaim Nachmann Bialik (1873-1934), an anthologist and translator himself, once stated that reading poetry in translation is like kissing the bride through a veil. [...] A bibliography has also been included at the end of the work as a guide for those wishing to pursue the study of Sorbian language and literature further. Gerald Stone's book "The smallest Slavonic nation" constitutes an excellent introduction to the Sorbs in English. Otherwise, a knowledge of German at least is essential. I should like in conclusion to thank all those who assisted me in various and sundry ways with this project and to hope that the present volume will contribute to an awakening of interest in this field.

Robert Elsie
Olzheim / Eifel, Germany
17 June 1984 - 1 August 1986
(updated 22 July 2002)

ANONYMOUS

The oldest Sorbian-language text is not a poem. It is an oath of allegiance to the Kings of Bohemia taken by the citizens of Bautzen, which together with the rest of Lusatia was under Bohemian control from the middle of the fourteenth century to the Peace of Prague in 1635. The oath is contained in a collection of documents dated 1532, now preserved in the archives of the city of Bautzen.

The Bautzen burgher's oath

I swear to God
And to our most gracious lord, Lord ...,
To the King of Bohemia, to the heirs of His Grace,
And to all future kings of Bohemia,
To the mayor and the council of the city
Of Bautzen, to be faithful, obedient and humble,
Both day and night, whenever called upon by them,
To support the council
In all matters which they may deem best,
And to strive for their prosperity. And to protect them
From evil, so help me God
And His Holy Writ.

(1532)

Jurij LUDOVICI
(1619-1673)

Also known as Georgius Ludovici or Georg Ludwig. Ludovici was born in Buchwalde (Bukojna) in the district of Hoyerswerda as the son of a tailor. He went to school in Bautzen, studied theology in Leipzig and became a parish priest. He is the author of the oldest Upper Sorbian poem as such, which he published in Michal Frencl's edition of the gospels of St. Matthew and St. Mark in 1670. Ludovici is, in addition, author of the oldest preserved Upper Sorbian grammar entitled 'Rudimenta grammaticae Sorabo-Vandalicae idiomatis Budissinatis delineata' (Rudiments of Sorbian-Wendish grammar in Bautzen dialect).

Panegyric for Michal Frencel¹

Your fame has not died, holy stock of Abraham,
Who on Mount Sinai spoke to God Himself
And midst thunder and lightening received His commandments,
And you, land of Galilee, that hearkened in your cities
To the sweet and divine words of Christ, your Lord,
Praise be to you. Disdain not other peoples: Behold, Jesus!
Our Saviour speaking in Sorbian, as if He were one of us,
Speaking to us Sorbian sinners in a clear and splendid translation.
Thus the wisdom of God in His mercy has embraced us who thirst,
And with great love has kissed Sorbian lips,
Through Michal Frencel's able quill and ardent diligence.
Thanks be to him and eternal praise be to God!

(1670)

1 Michal Frencel (1628-1706), known in German as Michael Frenzel or Frenzelius, was the first author to write in Sorbian after the Thirty Years War. Translator of the New Testament into Upper Sorbian, he is often considered the father of Sorbian writing.

T. K.

An unknown author with the initials T.K. composed this simple poem, the first to be printed in Lower Sorbian, on the occasion of the opening of a school, the Neue Friedrichsschule, in Frankfurt on the Oder. It was published in a twelve-language dedicatory pamphlet for the opening on 1 July 1694. To be noted is the prevalence of German vocabulary in this text written in the now extinct dialect of the Guben, Fürstenberg-Müllrose, Beeskow region.

The peasant lad from the Sorbian countryside

As I lay in the barn today
The chiming of bells awakened me.
The peasants were already ploughing
And sowing the seed in the fields.

Oh, wonder of wonders, what do I see?
A new school in Frankfurt
Already opened a week ago,
Which greatly pleases me.

Look, everyone knows about it
And is rushing off to have a peek.
I am also making my way,
I'll become a pious student, too.

Although I have no father, master or mother,
Nor bread, nor cheese nor butter,
I have a merciful Lord who gives me
Whatever He deems fit.

I am afraid to go to school,
But far more afraid simply to stand around
Outside with the others. I myself
Will learn what everyone needs to know.

Learn with me too, lads,
We will make stout-hearted ministers.
I know that a peasant who does not drowse
Can make a sound man.

(1694)

Jurij MJEN
(1727-1785)

German name: Georg Möhn. Jurij Mjen is generally considered to be the first Sorbian poet of substantial literary merit. Born in Grubditz (Hrubocicy) near Bautzen of a peasant family, he studied in Halle and Leipzig and became a parish priest in the village of Neschwitz (Njeswacidlo) where he died on 22 August 1785. His 'Power and praise of the Sorbian language in a noble hymn' of 1757, known in Sorbian literature for short as the 'Noble Hymn', consists of 172 lines of refined hexameter verse bearing the influence of the German classics, in particular of Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, whose 'Messias' Mjen was translated into Sorbian. The two works were first published in part in 1806 by the poet's son Rudolf Mjen (1767-1841), himself a Sorbian poet of note.

Power and praise of the Sorbian language in a noble hymn
(excerpt)

Receive it now and judge kindly,
My spiritual brothers, this first attempt. Our language
Is not in decay, nor rough nor of irony clang,
But smooth and slender. As pure bubbling streams
Murmur their way through groves and blossoming meadows,
So sweetly flows its verse. Our gift from Jehova!
How could He, the Omnipotent, who bestowed only the best
Upon His peoples, how could He have created anything base?
He, our Eternal Lord, has cherished you over the centuries,
Over the millennia. Old Age acclaims you,
The dreaded martial courage of the Sorbs adorns you
In whose veins no weak milk and water flow,
But the pungent juices of radish and horseradish;
Who took up the deadly iron sword,
Girded weapons on their virile loins and triumphed in battle
Forcing Germanic empires to kneel to the Sorbs.
But enough of this! I sing of trifles! Lead me, Muse,
Brighter eye of the reverent, spiritual brothers
To the Holiest of Holy, to God, Creator of the universe!

Sharpen my quill, open my rigid veins
That I may sing in poetic voice of that which is fitting,
Which great men once expressed in coursing speech,
Which you proclaimed to the world and to mankind - the religion of God,
All that Sorbian lips revealed. Take heed of the circle
Of pious writers: first are Molerus, Martini and Wawrich².
Just as the first rays of the morning star penetrate the dark night,
So stands Frenzel, spreading with his powerful lantern
The light of knowledge and putting idolatry to flight...
Regard the suns of righteousness rising to the heights!
There stands Serach³, the very pen of a writer, behold, the cover
Of many a book bears his name for posterity.
Greetings to you, worthy men! Your names
Are like the Roses of Sharon, like the gleam of the morning star,
Here in the land of the Sorbs and there in the temple of the Lord,

2 Albinus Mollerus (ca. 1542-1625), Gregorius Martini (ca. 1595-1632) and Wenceslaus Warichius (1564-1618) are Sorbian authors of early religious texts.

3 Hadam Bohachwal Serach (1724-1772), known in German as Adam Gottlob Schirach, author and apiculturalist of renown.

Engraved on marble columns in shining letters.

So thought I, and lo! An angel of Jehova appeared,
His garments as white as snow, his countenance far brighter
Than the noonday sun. He spoke to me in a friendly voice:
Come, I want to show you the blessed fortune of the men
You have praised and made so blissful in your song,
Come, enter and gaze over there near the throne of God.
Do you see that group? Small though it be, they are blithe and blessed,
Adorned in white silken garments, symbol of purity!
Gaze upon the crowns of their heads sparkling like diamonds!
From the throne of God a full stream of divine light
Flows over them. Do you hear their voices in song?

And over there, far behind the throne of God, you can see
A few men sitting with their faces veiled,
Heads in their hands like fathers observing their children in sorrow,
Shrouded by a dense cloud of fog through which
Only a very few rays of divine bliss shine!
These are the watchmen of the flock (I do not wish to mention their names)
Who buried their pound in sweat rags below and preferred
To sleep rather than to keep watch, who to live the easy life
Or to enjoy fat meals, expelled Sorbian teachings from the parish
(whether their offices demanded it or their careers required it,
Whether their conscience compelled them or the congregation
Rightly expected it), these old men who knew no word of German,
Let them languish and die without consolation,
And indeed never really attempted to impart
These exquisite and blessed teachings properly and purely.

Thus the angel of the Lord appeared unto me in deep grieving emotion,
'Let this be known!' said he, and vanished suddenly from my sight.

Look now, oh men, esteemed brothers and friends!
At the value, wealth, beauty and honour of the Sorbian language.
Know the value of learning it so that you may better teach,
Comfort, give pleasure, lead and take to pasture the flock of the Lord.
You and those who hear you will thus be blessed
And receive the reward of good shepherds from the very hand of the Lord.

Take courage now, stand up, brothers! Do not let
Such a beautiful language turn to dust, fall
And pass away, but rather grasp it and exalt it,
Gird your loins and sharpen hastily your slender quills,
Diligently instruct young teachers how to speak perfectly,
How to write correctly and sing more tenderly the tunes of life!
Shall we but jabber such great, majestic and divine doctrines
In a lazy, sloppy and lowly language,

Such holy and devout teachings which lead us to God and salvation,
With less dexterity than spinners telling tales?

No, we shall not! Let us follow the example of Holy Writ
Which imparts its great teachings in majestic words.
We can do the same because our language gives our mouths
Enough elegant words, if we only strive to make the effort.

(1757)

Jurij RAK
(1740-1799)

German name: George Krebs. Rak was born in Schwarznaußlitz (Corne Noslicy) near Bautzen and studied law in Leipzig from 1758 to 1765. He worked as a tutor for a rich Lusatian family for five years and thereafter as a lawyer in Bautzen where he died. Rak was secretary of the Sorbian Preachers' Society during his studies in Leipzig and composed at that time the lyrics of the following song in the 'gallant style' of the late Baroque period, the first of its kind in Sorbian.

Longing for immortality

It is a hard thing to take the road
Leading to immortality and honour,
Full of thorns and steep it is,
But take it, though the way is long.
 At last you will reach the summit
 And your efforts will be crowned with praise.

Alexander longed for the whole world,
Yearned to see immortality itself,
He went into battle, the enemy fled
And Alexander was called the conqueror.
 Life is imperilled day and night,
 Death is on the way, eternity is all you have left.

Archimedes studied the universe at night
Followed the sun, measured its course,
And fixed his eyes on the stars and the moon,
And taught us of their beauty.
 Should you stab him, soldiers, he will not die,
 For he is revered on earth forever.

If you wish to become immortal, man,
You must choose one of two roads,
You cannot win the world, but you can surmount stupidity,
Strive for truth, seek out intelligence.
 The conqueror never dies, the clever remain,
 Even if the whole continent falls to pieces.

Crave as you will for riches, merchant,
Show off your best dresses, maiden,
Sing, young man, the beauty of those cheeks,
And praise your own drunkenness, idiot.
 Death will take you soon, once and for all.
 I long for the virtue of immortality.

Kito Fryco STEMPEL
(1787-1867)

German name: Christian Friedrich Stempel. He was born in Groß Partwitz (Parcow) as the son of a Protestant minister. He attended school in Bautzen, and like so many other Sorbian intellectuals of the period, studied theology in Leipzig. From 1823 to his retirement, he worked as a minister in Lübbenau (Lubnjow) where he died on 2 April 1867.

Stempel is considered the first Lower Sorbian poet of significance. Among his surviving works are metrical translations of the fables of Phaedrus and the bucolic verse of Theocritus, and a didactic epic written in 1859-1863 in 405 stanzas, entitled ‘Te tsi rychle tsubaly: zuk, glos a rec’ (The three lively trumpets: sound, voice and speech), all in the now extinct Spree Forest dialect of Lübbenau. His other manuscripts were destroyed, apparently by his daughter who used them to boil water for coffee and by his son-in-law who made paper bags of them.

The fables of Phaedrus exalt their virtues

It still remained for us to be translated
Into the Sorbian language and show ourselves
To the people in new garments!
Why have you taken such a fancy to us, mankind,
That you have been lugging us around with you now for over
Two thousand years, and still there is no end to it?
On the continent of Asia we first came to life,
Aesop acquainted us with the Greeks
And Phaedrus translated us into Latin.
Into what multitude of languages we were then
Transformed, who can count them all?
That boys on school benches squirm
And rack their brains because of us vexes us indeed,
But when we consider that they, as grown men,
Spice all their conversations with our salt,
We find it a consolation not to have been forgotten.
Yes, we are like good old salt. The better things are,
The spicier. For is salt not spicy
When you let some ass rebuke you as being wicked
Or an idiot and say he's more clever than you?
The benefit of salt can be seen in that
It destroys moss and other weeds
When sprinkled in the meadows,
Allowing the flowers then to grow and blossom.
Well, you Sorbs, how about some salt
So that you, too, can discover its great benefit?
Try it out, my dear Sorbs. Here comes the salt!

(1854)

Handrij ZEJLER
(1804-1872)

German name: Andreas Seiler. He was born in Salzenforst (Slona Borsc) of a peasant family and attended school in Bautzen where he began writing poetry and collecting folk songs. In 1825, he went to Leipzig to study theology and fell under the influence of the Romantic and Pan-Slavic movements. He devoted himself to the study of Slavic languages and literature and corresponded with many Slavic writers of the period, including Czech scholars such as Josef Dobrovsky, Frantisek Celakovsky and Frantisek Palacky. Among his early works is a 'Kurzgefaßte Grammatik der Sorben-Wendischen Sprache nach dem Budissiner Dialekte (Short grammar of the Bautzen dialect of the Sorbian-Wendish language) published in Bautzen in 1830. From 1835 on, he worked as a Protestant minister in the village of Lohsa (Laz) and remained active not only as a poet, but as a publisher and prime figure of the Sorbian national awakening. He was founder and editor of the newspaper 'Tydzenska Nowina' (Weekly News), the first major Sorbian periodical, helped organize the Sorbian song festivals in Bautzen, and was chairman of the founding committee of the literary society Macica Serbska.

Handrij Zejler is considered the founder of modern Upper Sorbian literature. This distinction goes to him not so much for the quality of his verse, but for the ubiquitous influence he exerted on the awakening and development of Sorbian culture in the Romantic period. As a poet, he is remembered for his optimistic lyrics in a popular vein, which were devoted to nationalist themes, love and friendship, and for his didactic fables which he published in 1855 in a collection entitled 'Serbske basnje' (Sorbian poems). His poem Rjana Luzica (Beautiful Lusatia), printed in 1827, was later set to music and became the Sorbian national anthem.

Beautiful Lusatia

Beautiful Lusatia,
Righteous and loving,
Land of my Sorbian forefathers,
Blithe paradise of my dreams,
Blessed be your meadows.

Our Sorbian ancestors once
Seized victory with the sword
In pitched battle,
Chanting martial tunes.
Who remembers your songs now?

The melancholic nightingale
Holds sway in Hromadnik,
In Prasica the owl
Has found its haunt.
Mountains, what are your thoughts?

Corny Bóh,
Ancient kingdom
Is now rife with ravens.
Old moss grows green on the cliffs
Where once an altar soared.

The prophets
Could not augur
The destiny of the people,
Or what the future would bring.
Now we ourselves must turn to prophesy!

Oh future,
Will you now blossom?
Oh, may great men
Be born of your womb
Worthy of eternal memory!

(1827)

The faithless lover

In the garden the bees were humming,
My mother was at home.
I had weeded too little flax
And had brought but one bundle back.

”Do not scold me, mother dear,
For it began to rain.
I took refuge under a linden tree;
A small singing bird was there.”

”Tell no lies, daughter of mine,
Those wee birds, I know too well
By their feathers, by their wings,
And by their enticing song.

With the thoughts of a fox and the coo of a dove
They promise piles of gold,
But their ardour is soon watered down,
To them, a mere game is love.”

A gurgling stream flowed by the path
Floated a feather as it sped.
Indeed my mother spoke the truth:
These lads are gossamer-light.

He disappeared with the wind and the water,
How wretched to be but a maid.
Had I land and money aplenty,
He’d be back the very next day.

He would have climbed the highest peaks,
Crossed the murkiest torrents,
He would have returned with the swallows
And brought me a sparkling ring.

Jan RADYSERB-WJELA
(1822-1907)

German name: Johann Wehle. Jan Wjela was born in Seidau (Zidow) near Bautzen of a poor family and was educated at a teacher training college in Bautzen. He taught school from 1838 until his retirement in 1889, mostly in his native Seidau. In 1847, he took the Slavic pen name Radyserb under which most of his writings appeared.

Jan Radyserb-Wjela was a major figure of Sorbian literature during the national awakening and one of the most popular Upper Sorbian writers of the nineteenth century. His influence on the development of Sorbian letters in the Romantic period is second only to that of Handrij Zejler. He is not only the author of didactic poems, folk ballads and collections of popular sayings, but also of the first short stories to be written in Sorbian.

A neck for a neck

A fellow shot a stag in the forest
But the marksman was soon caught.

They threw him in the stocks,
The earl sentenced him to hang.

Beautiful Hilza sobbed and moaned
And fell upon on her knees:

"Oh, have mercy, have mercy, my lord, I beg you,
And free my handsome lover!"

"If you will be mine but for one night,
I will let your lover go free.

But if you refuse, I promise you
He'll hang on the gallows tomorrow."

Thus the poor white dove was trapped
In the talons of the old grey hawk.

But as Hilza left the castle the next morning
Her lover was already dead.

She cursed the earl: "Oh, heathen dog,
May the devil snare your soul."

Lightning and fury flashed in her eyes
As she strode towards the gallows.

"Oh, hangman, dear hangman," she said to him,
"It is you I want as my lover.

The only recompense I ask of you
Is that you wring his neck for me."

In the first rays of dawn on Sunday morn,
The earl was found hanging from a spruce tree.

(1874)

Mato KOSYK
(1853-1940)

German name: Mathias Kossick. Mato Kosyk was born in Werben (Wjerbno) north-west of Cottbus in Lower Lusatia. In 1878, he published his first poetry. He helped found the Lower Sorbian literary society Masica Serbska and collaborated in the publication of a newspaper in Lower Sorbian entitled 'Bramborske Nowiny' (Brandenburg News). In 1883, he left his homeland and emigrated to the United States, studying theology in Springfield and Chicago and subsequently living for a time in Iowa and Nebraska. In 1887, he returned to Lusatia, hoping to find a job as a minister, but as his qualifications were not recognized, he was forced to return to America the following year. From 1907 to 1913, he worked as a Protestant minister and preacher in the German settlement of El Reno, Oklahoma and thereafter settled down as a farmer in Albion, Oklahoma where he, nonetheless, retained his literary contacts with Lusatia until the outbreak of the Second World War.

Mato Kosyk is often referred to as the classic exponent of Lower Sorbian literature. He was primarily a lyric poet but is also remembered for his 1880 'Serbska swajzba we Blotach' (Sorbian wedding in the Spree Forest), an epic of village life in Lower Lusatia. With his ballads and sketches of life in America which he submitted to Sorbian journals over the years, he helped decisively to transform Lower Sorbian into a literary medium in its own right.

The imprisoned songbird

A songbird once was snared,
Shut up in a cage
So that it should sing
In its tiny, sunless house.

But the dainty bird in despair
Just hung its winsome head.
They snatched up the Spree Forest from him
And taken away all his companions.

His chirping was but a sad lament,
The poor wee birdlet all alone,
His heart would break whenever
He sang of his lost Spree Forest.

I am like that little bird,
Far off in a foreign land,
Oh, for my lost Lusatia
And its luxuriant skies.

(1893)

Jakub BART-CISINSKI
(1856-1909)

German name: Jacob Barth. He was born in the Catholic village of Kuckau (Kukow) near Kamenz and attended the Sorbian Seminary in Prague. From 1878 to 1881, he studied theology in Prague and later worked as a curate in the Lusatian countryside and in Dresden and Chemnitz. He died in Panschwitz (Pancicy) on 16 October 1909.

Bart-Cisinski is often referred to as the father of classical Upper Sorbian literature. It was he who introduced a number of new genres and a certain sophistication into nineteenth century Sorbian writing, and who brought it into line with contemporary literary developments in other Slavic countries. He is the author of a national epic 'Nawozenja' (The bridegroom) in 3000 lines of hexameter verse, of a not overly successful novel entitled 'Narodowc a wotrodzenc' (The patriot and the renegade) and of 'Na Hrodziscu' (In the entrenchments), a five-act drama. It was, however, primarily as a lyric poet that Bart-Cisinski made his indelible mark on Sorbian literature. Although never as popular among the Sorbian peasantry as the down-to-earth Handrij Zejler, he was the first Sorbian poet to enjoy a wide international reputation. His first collection of verse, 'Kniha sonetow' (Book of sonnets), published in Bautzen in 1884, was followed by fourteen other volumes of poetic reflections.

My Sorbian confession
(excerpt)

Our land is small, my friend,
And our people, too, like a tiny islet
In the midst of the great sea.
But I firmly believe that
Its mighty waves will never overpower
Our Sorbian countryside, its villages and farms.
Our people are divided and split
From without and within; in many ways
There is no unity anywhere.
Alas, nothing but feuding and division!
Even within the smallest faction
(the ancient transgression of Slavic blood.).
This Sorbian people of mine will never die out.
Steal this belief from my heart
And I will throw down at once this Sorbian quill,
No more will I lift a finger
For this people, for this Sorbian land.
No, never! At least I firmly believe
In the future and in the life
Of the Sorbian people - and rightly so.
Vernal strength and perseverance are to be found
In our people; a healthy mind
And a shining spirit inhabit a robust body.
Oh, may every Sorbian heart be steadfast
As a rock against these alien waves,
May every arm be a shield and every breath
An expression of love for the Sorbian countryside,
A land which will remain eternally Sorbian.
The spirit of the people
Must swell with life
And bring together these scattered members
Into one mighty unit, with ardent love
For the Sorbian language and Sorbian soil.
May you, too, know this: we remain Sorbs!

(1891)

Keep up with the times!

Time flies by quickly nowadays. If you want
To keep up with it, you must hasten your step,
Sleep little, work long hours, and push yourself onward,
If you want to be a godfather, don't be late for the baptism!

And if you think you can hold time back, you're a fool,
'Make hay while the sun shines'
And 'strike while the iron is hot,'
If you are late, there will be nothing left to buy.

Time bears might and vitality in its womb,
If you want to take advantage of it,
Make use of your eyes and your legs.

If you can't keep up with the times, you will fall behind.
But if you can, and put your brain and hands to good use,
You'll have a place of honour at the wedding table.

(1903)

Charlemagne preaches to the Sorbs

The German emperor Charles⁴ defeated the Sorbs in battle
So that he could christen them.

But the Sorbs feared German fonts,
Their houses and farms had too often been razed.

They did not want the gods of the Germans
Wading to their knees in blood...

Charles ranted and raged,
And cursed the Sorbian dogs in his fury.

With Hrabanus he long took counsel
As to how to deal with the steadfast pagans.

”Let the Sorbian prisoners appear before me,
And you can pray for their salvation!

When my battle sword has vanquished them,
You save their souls with holy water!”

”Cleanse yourselves with holy basins,
Let us all be brothers!

Baptism brings redemption to all peoples
And overcomes wicked and evil thoughts.

You will cast from your souls
Your errors of old and be reborn as a people!”

So spoke the Emperor calmly to them.
Prince Milos then nobly replied:

‘How can you help us with your divine droplets
If you don’t follow your gospel’s teachings?
You preach love and peace

4 Charlemagne or Charles the Great (742-814 AD) was king of the Franks and emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. In 772, he launched a campaign to conquer and convert the Saxons, including the Sorbs. The genocidal war lasted some 32 years until Saxony was incorporated into the Frankish Empire. In the chronicle ”De partibus Saxoniae”, death was prescribed for any Saxon refusing baptism.

With blood streaming down your legs.

Dogs lick the ones who beat them,
But we are not dogs, may you mark that well!

We Sorbs have honour, courage and intelligence on our side,
Know this, Emperor, and may your priests know it, too!

Your weapons are lies, cunning and evil,
We have respect and speak the truth.

You may have driven us into the dust
But you will never baptize us with blood.

You covet the cattle from our land,
You crave the ripening fruits of our fields.

You do not care to sow and reap yourself,
But plunder the cattle and fruit from the pagans.'

'Who wishes then to be baptized?' demanded the Emperor
Fiercely. All replied in unison:

"We will have no cross, nor be baptized,
We would rather hang from the gallows!"

"Silence, damned Sorbian dogs,
I shall put an end to your blasphemy.

I shall have your heads, all of them,
I have the right and power from the bishop.

Get to work, serfs and soldiers!
Carry these men to the gallows!

Princes, voyvodes, off with their heads,
Upon them set the pack of hounds.

May those hounds snap off their skulls
And ravage and devour their hearts.

I am a patient man and have spoken in good will,
So let the hounds now speak to the Sorbian dogs!"

Oh, how appalling was the carnage,
Oh, how hellish was the slaughter!

The gallows resounded with screams and curses

As the hounds tore into the masses.

The priests, all the while, chanted psalms
And litanies and sang hymns.

Horrified by the dreadful sight,
The sun itself in fear took flight.

Hrabanus entered into his chronicle
(while praying on his knees):

‘Charles brought the Gospel to the Sorbs
To the greater glory of God.’

(1906)

Appeal

Let me look into your eyes but for a moment,
It is as though a lark were frolicking in them,
And the heavens were aglow in their light,
All infused with the fragrance of the rose.

No joy penetrates my soul,
An early frost has stolen from me the fragrance of the rose,
No azure gaze has smiled upon me.
Let me look into your eyes but for a moment.

Ota WICAZ
(1874-1952)

German name: Otto Lehmann. Wicaz was born in Quatitz (Chwacicy) and attended school in Bautzen where he was taught Sorbian by Jan Radyserb-Wjela. From 1895 to 1899, he studied theology in Leipzig as well as Slavic languages and literature, notably under August Leskien. In 1903, he got a job at a teacher training college in Stollberg near Chemnitz (subsequently Karl Marx Stadt) and in 1918 was appointed professor there. From 1926 to 1937, he edited the literary journal 'Luzica' and from 1933 to 1937 the 'Casopis Macity Serbskeje' until the two periodicals were banned by the Nazis. After the war, he resumed his activities and became editor of 'Nowa Luzica' and 'Rozhlad'. He died in Stollberg on 28 November 1952.

Wicaz is remembered as a reputed literary historian, critic, editor, translator and poet. He is the author of monographs on Jan Radyserb-Wjela and Handrij Zejler, of numerous translations into Upper Sorbian, and of countless articles and reviews in the above-mentioned periodicals. A broad selection of his lyric and narrative verse first appeared in 1976.

Gyrinus natator (Whirligig beetle)

On a sunlit pond in the clearing
The little beetle ceaselessly scurries,
Hardly visible, a pitch-black dot,
Though glistening, not to be caught.
What is the beetle doing? Over and over
It makes great swirls and lines,
Tracing smooth, elongated strokes,
Adding a point, a dot floating
In the water, ending in a huge bow
And then once again circling the pond,
Suddenly causing spurts of water here and there
To connect everything calligraphically.
What is the beetle trying to do? What a strange sight!
It is tracing the name of the great K. B. Seca⁵.

(1928)

5 Korla Bohuwer Seca (1858-1938), known in German as Karl Traugott Schütze, was a Sorb entomologist and lepidopterologist of renown.

Help me

Anxious, downcast and disheartened,
Poor, hungry and abandoned
In the heat of a July night
I returned to my hideaway.
Smjertnica⁶! Come, we who have lost
Everything on earth call upon you.
They have taken, trampled and destroyed
All I cared for - my Sorbian heritage.
The devil himself has left his haunt in hell
And has taken up residence in Hradcany Castle⁷.
Defiled and bleeding from a thousand wounds
Lies majestic Warsaw.
And now for you, Holy Mother Russia,
Hope of all Slavs, they are madly digging a grave.
Worried and helpless
I returned home in the heat of the night.
Suddenly a star appeared before me
In the direction of my waiting house,
Like the bright, shimmering light
Of a little incandescent lamp.
What could it be? Was someone kindly
Lighting my way home?
As I approached the doorway
I was startled to see
A spider's web stretched
Between the wall and door handle.
In it hung a glow-worm in the throes
Of death. Oh, the horror of it!
The hideous body of a huge spider,
In the form of a black swastika,
Was surrounding and strangling
Its prey.
The terrified glow-worm
With all its strength intensified its light,
Radiating its anguish into the depths of the night,
As if to cry, "Help me! Help me!"
I snatched the spider and flung it to the ground,

6 Goddess of death in Sorbian mythology. She appears, pale and dressed in white, in or near homes within three days of a death in the family.

7 in Prague.

Sheltering the glow-worm in my hand.
Carefully I tried to unravel the web
To release the wings, set the legs free,
One skein after another,
Unwinding and detaching them with care.
The eyes of the glow-worm followed me.
Its heart beat madly with fright, I could see.
When I had finished my laborious task
The glow-worm glimmered cautiously at last,
Finally stirring again in my palm,
And I laid it down in the meadow's cool grass.

(1941)

Jan SKALA
(1889-1945)

Politically committed journalist, short story writer and poet of the pre-war period. Skala was born in Nebelschütz (Njebjelcicy) in Upper Lusatia. From 1925 to 1936, he was editor of the German-language 'Kulturwehr', a periodical for national minorities in Germany. Imprisoned for a time by the Nazis for his nationalist activities, he was expelled from Lusatia in 1941 and died in the throes of the war on 22 January 1945. His delicate love lyrics betraying the influence of Bart-Cisinski were published in two slender volumes: 'Srjódki' (Crumbs) in Bautzen 1920 and 'Skre' (Sparks) in Bautzen 1923.

In vain

The two of us set off, like those
Whom love accompanies,
Hand in hand, through the countryside.

Suddenly we stopped...
Why do our souls now realize
That we have destroyed ourselves?

We went forth, you one way, I another,
In vain our wounds bleed,
In vain our tears flow.

(1926)

Night passes...day fades...

Night passes...a new day begins,
The sun appears from between the clouds.
With your rays you relieve me
Of the heavy burden of anguish,
Divine sun!

Day fades...a new night begins.
Into an immense sea of stars
Suffering takes flight from the darkness...
Give me the power of love,
Divine sea.

(1929)

Jan LAJNERT
(1892-1974)

German name: Johann Leinert. Born in Königswartha (Rakecy) in Upper Lusatia, Lajnert was trained at a teaching college in Reichenbach near Görlitz and taught school in several villages in and around Lusatia. He also took an active part in the Sorbian Sokol movement and was a member of the German Social-Democratic Workers' Federation. In 1934, he was expelled by the Nazis to Upper Silesia and at the end of the war was taken prisoner in the Soviet Union. From 1946 to 1950, he headed a teacher training college in Radibor (Radwor) near Bautzen and from 1951 to his retirement in 1965 worked as a teacher and principal in the village of Baschütz (Bosecy). He died in Rodewitz (Rozwodecy) on 14 November 1974.

Lajnert sings of the spirits of his native Upper Lusatian heathlands in intimate poetry of refined musicality and imaginative vocabulary. His main collection of verse 'Wyskow sapy, sylzow kapy' (Flames of jubilation, teardrops) was published in Bautzen in 1928.

Anguish

Blossoms fall,
Young men dream
In the grass.
Bells ring,
Ears of corn bow
To the roses.

Flax blooms,
Sickles reap
In a field of blue.
Roses redden,
Heather blushes
In the clearing.

Blossoms fall,
Young men bow
To the ladies.
Flax ripens,
Young men bleed
On the battlefield.

Longing burgeons,
Death gnaws,
Sickles reap.
Heather bruises,
Young men die
On the heathlands.

(1924)

Coincidence

Hanka rides into the forest -
Alas her carriage breaks down.
Jank sees the mishap from afar
And gladly saves her from distress.
 All just a coincidence,
 It happens every day!

The maid sets off to reap the grass
But her heavy bundle breaks,
What do you know, the lad is there
And repairs the damage right away.
 Just a coincidence again,
 It can happen every day!

The lad is picking mushrooms,
The maid is picking berries -
She plucks the pretty roses
And he's pricked by the thorns!
 Coincidences do occur,
 Life is full of surprises!

Whenever she goes dancing,
Jank is always watching,
If anything happens to her
The lad is right there to help.
 Hanka gives her Jank a kiss,
 A coincidence again!

(1926)

Mina WITKOJC
(1893-1975)

German name: Wilhelmine Wittka. The grand old lady of Lower Sorbian verse was born in Burg (Borkowy) in the Spree Forest, to which she never lost her attachment. She was raised in poverty by her grandmother and sent from 1907 to 1917 to Berlin where she worked as a maid and later in industry. In 1922, she moved to Bautzen and was inspired there to devote herself to her native Sorbian culture. Her first verse appeared in 1922. From 1923 to 1931, she was editor of the Lower Sorbian journal 'Serbski Casnik' (Sorbian Times) and took part in the Sorbian Sokol movement. In 1932, she was put on trial for 'Czech agitation' and 'anti-German activities' and in the years to follow had difficulty finding a job. In 1941, she was finally expelled from Lusatia and worked as a gardener in Erfurt. After the war, she spent several years in Czechoslovakia, returning in 1955 as a writer to her native Burg until her death on 11 November 1975.

Ardent nationalism for her Lusatian homeland and love for her native Spree Forest characterize Mina Wittka's verse, which was published initially in the volumes: 'Dolnoserbske basne' (Lower Sorbian poems) in Bautzen 1925 and 'Wenask blosanskich kwetkow' (Garland of Spree Forest flowers) in Cottbus 1934.

Song of the Sorbian people
(excerpt)

Am I in a foreign land?
Is this not my own home?
All around me I see the country I know
And yet everything has become strange to me.

A grey mist hovers silently,
The breeze has died away.
Why are the people all scurrying
Like ants? What is going on?

”Come on, let’s bury her”,
I hear the voices say,
”Let’s go, carry her out,
Her time has already come and gone!”

The voices come nearer and nearer:
”It’s time to take her away!”
I’m not even sure myself
If I’m alive - or already dead.

I try to resist, but
They hold me down by force.
A wailing wells up
From the depths of my soul.

”We’ll put a lovely wreath on your grave
For everyone to remember you by!
And once you’re under the ground
We’ll have a fine wake for you!”

Listen to how the men are discussing!
Look at how the women are running around!
They’re coming to put me in a coffin
And seal my lips forever...

(1930)

The butterfly

Secluded in a dark corner
Reached only by the faintest rays of the sun,
A caterpillar lies in hibernation
Deep in its cocoon, grey and numb.

What can it know of itself in such stupor
Until it awakes from its sleep in spring?
Behold, a brightly coloured butterfly reborn,
For whom a new world will now begin.

In the throes of death, in trepidation, in a trance,
The soul of my people lies thus ensconced,
Not knowing summer from winter...

But spring has come! May you too awaken!
Like a butterfly flee your sequestered nook,
And spread your rainbow-hued wings to the sun!

(1946)

Jurij BREZAN

(1916-)

German name: Georg Bresan. Brezan is a leading figure in post-war Sorbian literature. He was born the son of a quarryman in Räckelwitz (Worklecy) near Kamenz and attended school from 1927 to 1936 in Bautzen and later in Poland. After the war, he became a functionary in the Communist party hierarchy and rose to a high position in GDR literary circles. He is a member of the Academy of Sciences, Vice-president of the GDR Writers' Union, a member of the GDR PEN centre, and possibly the best-known contemporary Sorbian writer. Brezan is the author of innumerable volumes of poetry, prose, and drama in Upper Sorbian and German, and of translations and anthologies. His works have been published in relatively large editions in German, Sorbian and other languages.

Promise made in 1948

I know, my love, it's a sad thing
That you have no kitchen cupboard.
But if you think about it for a moment,
You will see that we don't need one:
We have three bowls and two plates,
Four cups and two pots,
And there's enough room for them
On our table and two chairs.

One day, things will be better:
We'll have plenty of meat and sausage,
White bread, scones and tasty cakes
With butter and lard for them, and honey
Straight from the bees; on Wednesdays
A roast of hare and dumplings,
On Fridays fish and fried potatoes,
For breakfast, instead of porridge
We'll have cream and fresh rolls.
Instead of shrivelled, rehashed spuds
For supper, we'll have tasty buns
With ham, smoked eel and anchovies.

And when we've finally got all that
Then we'll need more bowls,
More pots, more spoons.
We'll buy more plates,
And forks just for the fish.
We will use one set of cups for coffee
And another one for tea.
And when we have got all that,
My love, one day,
Then we'll need a cupboard.
I'll go to the carpenter's myself
And order a cupboard for you,
Beautiful, shiny and new,
And big enough for all our pots and pans.

(1948)

How I found my fatherland

I

When I was born
My father was away at war
Defending the fatherland.
Not his, not ours,
Not mine,
But the Kaiser's
And his barons' and counts'.

A fiery death stalked my father
Through trenches and craters
And ripped years of his life
From him day by day.

In my cradle I lay
And knew nothing of this.
My mother sang me a lullaby:
"Sleep, little son, sleep,
God willing, Daddy
Will come home alive."

II

When I grew out of my cradle
My father came back and once again
Took up his chisel, drill and sledgehammer,
And returned to his work
At the quarry.

I went to school
Learned patriotic poems -
Fine phrases with splendid rhymes -
And recited them aloud to my father.

Father laughed bitterly
And said they were only lies,
And I believed my father
More than the school.

III

When I grew up
A brown cry echoed
Through the streets of the town,
And in the windows of private homes
Flags with a four-armed gibbet
Were hung out.
In hidden cellars
People were tortured
And their fresh blood trickled.
The 'Heil',
The flags in the windows,
The screaming from the cellars
And the fresh blood
Were all for the glory and good
Of the fatherland.

But it wasn't my fatherland
And I said so openly,
And so was made one of those who screamed in the cellars.
They cursed me
And called me a bum with no fatherland.

I was a bum for them
And was sad
That I had no fatherland.

IV

When they let me out of prison,
Tanks were rolling through fields of Polish grain,
Villages were burning
And Warsaw was falling.
The radio screamed,
The headlines spattered,
And mothers who had lost
Their sons bragged.
Neighbour goaded neighbour,
The blind led the blind
In a lively dance
For their curious fatherland,
Straight to the grave.

I simply couldn't understand it.

I had no fatherland,
Now less than ever.

V

But later
Between the Volga and the Don
In the battle of the Great Hundred Days
When squalor and death
Were covered by a mantle of hoarfrost,
I was taken by something new,
Faint as yet,
As though shrouded in mist,
My...
Yes, my fatherland.

I saw something in the east,
It was only a little cloud in the distance,
But like the graves it began to spread and approach.
The cloud grew
Larger and larger,
Advanced,
Was so near -
And yet remained a cloud.

VI

As the last dead of the war
Were laid to rest
Under the ground -
'Ashes to ashes
And dust to dust' -
It looked as if my vision
Would take form.

After the frost had five times over
Destroyed the last flowers on the graves,
My vision came true.

My mind understood,
But my heart
Was still empty.

VII

When our delegation set off for Berlin
I was with them.
None of us knew
What ceremonies there would be,
How deeply to bow,
Whether forwards or backwards,
Or what conduct or behaviour
Was expected of us at all
At the residence of the President
Of the Republic.

Someone (who had once been invited
To the house of a local official)
Instructed us
How we were to walk
And what not to do,
And wouldn't it be embarrassing if...
Etc. etc.

But it was all quite different:
We were received not by the State
(as we used to know it)
But by a human being.

He wasn't at all jovial,
But smiled
(like my father used to smile on Sundays)
And asked, without the usual small talk,
How this and that
Was going
(just like my father asks
When I visit him at home).

Then the President smiled again,
The way people smile,
And later he said he would take care
Of this and that.
He spoke as a human being
And at the same time as the State.
But suddenly, I don't know -
I couldn't distinguish
The human being from the State,
And I told him so, too.
He laughed heartily
And I also laughed,

And from this laughter
An excruciating joy penetrated my soul:
Yes, I had found it,
My fatherland.

(1950-1985)

My little plan

I took a close look
At the Great Plan.
Then I used it
To make my own little plan.

First of all,
What I want to do:
To transform
Several thousand sheets of paper
Into literature:
Written about you,
About your work
And how you grow
From a little "I"
To a big "we".

Next in line is education:
From books about people and the world,
From life and what goes on
Day after day around me,
I want to draw on this material
As you draw water from a well
So that I won't wither
But grow and mature
And bear fruit.

I'll add everything up in the end:
The amount I've gained from my work,
Minus so much
For the table, for dishes,
Shoes and clothing,
Books and food for the soul,
And for holidays
(in the mountains and at the seaside),
And then I'll still have
A bit left over
For parties and special occasions.

I go through my plan
Carefully once more:
Everything is fine,
It's a good and realistic scheme.

The words flow
Joyfully from my pen
(at the bottom I write):

If I follow my plan through to the end,
I will have lived ...
Like I've never lived before!

(1951-1952)

Jurij CHEZKA
(1917-1944)

German name: Georg Keschka. Chezka was born in Horka (Hórki) in the district of Kamenz and attended school in Prague. From 1937 to 1939 he studied Czech, German and Sorbian at the Charles University of Prague and worked subsequently as a German tutor in the family of the Czech poet and publisher Stanislav K. Neumann. He was arrested in 1939 by the Nazis after the invasion of Czechoslovakia and conscripted into the German army, serving in France and in the Balkans. He died in mid-October 1944 near Kragujevac in Yugoslavia.

Chezka was influenced by the avant-garde and symbolist movement of pre-war Czech poetry which he introduced to Upper Sorbian verse in his 1937 unpublished collection 'Na pucu za druhej domiznu' (On the road to another homeland). His works were published by Kito Lorenc in the bilingual German-Upper Sorbian edition entitled 'Poezija malej komorki' (Poetry of the little chamber) in Bautzen in 1971. Chezka was also the author of prose sketches and letters.

Green Z

Without erotic fantasies
And ever-changing cares
I loved you silently.
Letter Z,⁸ something about you:
Green, the garment of young birch trees,
Green of deep waters,
Of church spires,
Green of rural scenes,
Of beauty never seen.

In the heavens a gleam
The green of paradise
Forever bubbling forth,
Quietly murmuring: green beauty -
Green Z.

(2 March 1937)

8 The Sorbian word for green (zelene) begins with the letter Z.

Sorbian Song

Homeland, beloved in my soul,
Lotus blossom kingdom,
Save me from the anguish,
This is all I ask.

Homeland, my precious stone,
You are dying, old country,
The pulse of your ravaged heart
Has already come to rest.

Homeland, golden star
In the twilight of youthful dreams,
I shall be forlorn
When your glimmer fades.

Homeland, nation of beauty,
You are a nest without offspring,
Your songs have all been sung
And your sun shines no more.

(9 September 1937)

Memento

Death walks with a leisurely stride
Though you'll never escape it.
But if you hurry
You yourself can catch up with it.

(29 April 1937)

Fantasy

I saw Death sitting
At the edge of a cornfield,
The tender ears were being sliced
By the stroke of a new scythe,
A dreaded swish resounding:
Solingen, Solingen, Krupp⁹.

Glancing about, he gets up,
Like a thief - no one in sight,
The young corn groans and wails.
He but commends his scythe
Which offers tacit reply:
Solingen, Solingen, Krupp.

(26 April 1937)

9 Solingen is a city in North-Rhine/Westphalia noted for its iron and steel industry. Among the major manufacturers in this industry and in munitions was the Krupp family.

Jurij MLYNK
(1927-1971)

German name: Georg Möller. Scholar, bibliographer and poet, Mlynk was born in Schönau (Sunow) in the district of Kamenz. He studied German and Sorbian literature in Wroclaw and Leipzig where he finished his doctorate. From 1953 to his death in 1971 he worked for the Institute for Sorbian Studies in Bautzen and published a number of major works of the Sorbs and Sorbian literature. His Upper Sorbian verse appeared in two collections: 'Do swetla' (Towards the light) in Bautzen 1955 and 'Stoz lubuju' (What I love) in Bautzen 1959.

My aim

I want to learn,
I want to learn to recognize what I see;
Reason must not leave me
But must take me forth to new knowledge.
Richer day by day, I will learn moderation.

I want to serve,
I want to serve the workers of all nations.
Bread will be abundant for me.
Each one will work for the other. This will carry me on
Towards new horizons of joy and confidence every day.

I want to contribute
In the great cycle of activity and mirth.
Thus I shall sow
And garner for myself, too. We shall have land
And divide our wealth among nations in peace.

I want to teach,
I want to teach others to work for peace and progress.
I will reap the harvest I have sown
In youthful hearts so that life
Will ward off death itself.

(1950)

Kito LORENC
(1938-)

German name: Christoph Lorenz. Grandson of the Sorbian prose writer Jakub Lorenc-Zaleski, Kito Lorenc was born in Schleife (Slepo) in the vicinity of Weißwasser. From 1956 to 1961, he studied at Karl Marx University in Leipzig and joined the Institute for Sorbian Studies in Bautzen. He lives presently in Wuischke (Wujezk) near Bautzen.

In his poetic search for his roots, Kito Lorenc has become one of the most popular contemporary Sorbian poets. He has published a number of volumes of imaginative verse in Sorbian and in German as well as numerous translations and anthologies.

What the tiled stove is

What the tiled stove is
That I gave her
Because I hadn't used it
For two years
I got the stove going
For her and told her
That I hadn't lit it
For two years
And had forgotten
How you got it going
And she said you see
You don't have to die
To forget
And I said you know
We may as well
Keep right on living.

(1981)

Thoughts under a wooden roof¹⁰

But what strange talk
In the villages. Quietly
The Aryan gardener is at work,
Grafting my people. Look:
It is infecting our souls like mildew -
What a stench: the black flower
Of death, a swastika-shaped blossom
Is ravaging our land.

I should have known so
At the time, after the Thyssen hunt,
All that talk among the industrialists of poison gas,
The hunters of Ypres¹¹ having a beer after nation-trapping.
Blazing Spartacus¹², throw the torch
Under their raised blind - Did it frighten me
That they called him a poacher?
Did I not pray: Oh, springtide of peace,
Return to us in all your unrest?
I should have dared so, earlier.

Now, all the faces carved in white
Pinewood, grown dark and now cracked,
Are disappearing back into the trees. Foreboding,
The whispering in the wind, the groaning in the night.
But what should I say to those in the forests?
I, who arrived with a saw (Once upon a time.
The saw blades are broken. Played right to the end)
I who lay there in a steely embrace,
Caught up by the rollers, already reined in
To the music of huge organs droning to the skies
And hearing in my seething blood the screech of the saws:
Solingen, Solingen, Krupp¹³.

¹⁰ Elements of this poem derive from excerpts of the diary of the Sorbian writer Jakub Lorenc-Zaleski (1874-1939), the poet's grandfather, who worked for the August Thyssen Company in the Rhineland before World War I. Returning to Lusatia in 1919, he ran a saw-mill in Schleife.

¹¹ Town in Belgium, site of fierce combat in World War I.

¹² Allusion both to the Roman gladiator and leader of a slave revolt in 72 BC and to the German Spartacus league, founded in 1917 by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, which at the end of 1918 became the German Communist Party.

And thus I learn to see myself
In this wooden room of mine, walls made of pine board
- my life, cut lengthwise and fitted
Into the framework. Building it, I did not choose
Smooth pure-grained wood, but rather
Gnarled, useless boarding, despised by everyone else,
So that I had something to look at: lines of growth,
The prematurity of the soft years, it used to go under my skin,
It used to rise to my head, the sap they call blood;
The hard years followed in close succession when
I took to arms - but the branches, roots in the wind,
Thousands of arms forced their way into me,
With all their fibre, veins to drink
Of the light of the world.

I once wrote: this existence of ours, that we are still here
Is our very masterpiece, it is art itself,
Everyone here was born a poet.
I now write: is he who only worked
For the future to regret his life?
Where is he to find perfection?
Thus I come to you speaking the room's warm language,
I close my life gently behind me.

Here is a picture left over: I'm sitting
Among the conspirators. Not in a partisan forest -
Around us is the bare open siding
Of the trees of this room, where I wait
For news of things to come: fitted into the framework
Of the future - I no longer fear
My own voice. Should you knock, Spartacus,
(the Aurora's thundering cannons approaching from beyond the Neisse) -
I will speak in your language:
'Sorbs live here,
This is a Sorbian house.'¹⁴

(1966)

¹³ Taken from the poem "Fantasy" by Jurij Chezka.

¹⁴ Notice in Russian posted on the doors of Sorbian houses during the 'liberation' of Lusatia by the Red Army in 1945.

Painting Easter eggs

For instance, we can sit around
For hours on end painting eggs at Easter.
Quill, wax and flame - mythical
Requisites, onion-skin gold, paint
From grasses, different types of bark,
Pressed green, filtered black,
Like magic: deftly we twirl
In our fingers the primeval egg, dot
The egg equator with impulses,
Lay chains of wolf's teeth up and down
The meridians, sparkling compass needles
Attracting our gaze to the poles
In a magic magnetic field where
The sun's rosettes shine double under
Our eyes, bedazzled by the mystery of it all,
The quill of a delineating lineage,
Our ancestors who worked in the fields. Thus
We banish the return of time,
The symmetry of traditions,
The balance of the generations,
The proportions of history,
The world's frozen harmony
(let the wolves keep away,
Let the sun shine) -

And then, the only sensible thing to do,
We crack it open on the table at Easter,
This stone-age fetish of diabolical cults,
Remove its beautiful shell
And digest the contents.
Now an awesome metamorphosis takes place -
The resurrection of the egg:
Our heart pricks wildly against our ribs,
In our throats lurks a volatile crowing,
Merrily we break out of the moist eggshell
Behind our ears, we dissolve
Into hoarse laughter.
Don't we look all spruced up?
We, like a solitary divine eye
In the yoke of the sun. With our rocket beaks
We peck away at the membrane of the heavens.
Humanity hatches.

(1967)

Homage to Handrij Zejler

*A cart without shaft or wheel,
A parable without example or proof,
However wonderful the two may be,
They are of no use.
(Sorbian Poetry 1855)*

Everything used to be thought of as a fable: wisdom
Has to be brought to the people, carried to market
In cartloads. But for this cart of fables to move,
It needs examples as wheels.
Now the cart is moving along nicely,
A little slowly at times in trochees
Or in merry dactyls down the heathery path,
Over roots, foot by foot around corners,
Six verses long on towards its goal
Until at the turn of a rhyme,
The moral, proverbially bound, falls off the cart.
But then on the way, as luck would have it,
At about line three, the load being heavy,
A wheel falls off, that is,
The fox for example; but let us abandon the cart.
Its imagery is now sagging, pitter-patter.
The fox for example steals away to glean the wheatfields,
And all the readers, like mice after him,
And are gone for whole verses on end. Another example
Is the wolf. He rushes into the forest to gather firewood.
By the wayside the badger is snoozing and the hare
Is playing a fiddle. All the time, the hamster is chatting
With a farmer at the gate, the dung beetle contemplates
His cow-pie. The fieldmouse scurries off to the fair
In the village, the bear holds a barbecue,
Laziness and Superstition spend eleven verses
Celebrating a Sorbian wedding, before
Managing to drown in the moral. And so
Our cart of fables - we now need it again -
Is stuck without wheels, the readers
Have since scattered to look for them,
The fox for example who stole away
Pitter-patter...

And indeed, everywhere the crafty poet is lurking
With his cart, on a heathery path,

Back in the past or before us in the future
On a paved highway, with the shaft and reality.

(1972)

Epitaph for Johannes Bobrowski

September,
Sempre adagio...

A name (rivers).
We should call it out
Which yesterday
A man still bore.

Rivers (a name).
The Baptist, thereafter
Coming out of the river, they say,
Did not recognize
The one he had
Just baptized
As the Messiah.
But how should he?
He was busy
Baptizing.

Rivers (a name).
The one from the family of the beaver¹⁵ -
Uncommon today
Is the uncommon work
Of the beaver: felling
Wild tree trunks of sorrow,
Building barriers
Of love, of laughter,
And always
In these waves of language
Setting up
Dams of rhythm.

September,
Sempre adagio...

A name.
(Rivers. 'I shall leave by the last boat').
We will freeze

¹⁵ The German poet Johannes Bobrowski died on 2 September 1965. His surname derives from the Slavic word "bobr" for the beaver.

At the rivers
Without him.

(1965)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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[first published as: *Anthology of Sorbian Poetry*. Translated and edited by Robert Elsie. UNESCO Collection of Representative Works. European Series. ISBN 0-948259-72-8 (Forest Books, London & Boston 1990) 84 pp. The electronic version contains slight amendments to the text and, for technical reasons, omits the diacritica used in Sorbian. Also left out here are the map and two samples of texts in the Sorbian original.]