

# Training Specialists at the Institute of Sorbian Studies of the University of Leipzig

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**Abstract**—The article is devoted to the issues of training specialists at the Institute of Sorbian Studies at the University of Leipzig (Germany). Based on the materials of the documents and interviews with representatives of scientific, educational, cultural and social organizations of the Serbs of Lusatia, as well as students of the Institute, the problems and prospects of the Sorbian higher education are considered. An analysis is made of the role of special education in order to increase the protective potential of the culture of the Serbs in Lusatia. The conclusions are drawn on the need to adjust the content of the Institute's educational programs accordingly to the current socio cultural situation in the Sorb community.

**Keywords**—Lusatian serbs, institute of Sorbian studies of the university of Leipzig, professional training, ethnocultural identity

## I. INTRODUCTION

Sorbs (Lusatian Serbs) are the West Slavic people who have been living in the Lusatian region of Germany (the territory of the federal states of Brandenburg and Saxony) since the 6th century. Upper Sorbs live in Saxony, Lower Sorbs, or Vends, live in Brandenburg. Both federal states emphasize in their legislation the necessity and propose measures to protect the culture and language of the Sorbs as an ethnic minority.

Today it is unknown how many Sorbs live in Germany, because German citizens do not indicate in their identity card what nationality they belong to. Rough estimates suggest that there are about 60,000 Lusatian Serbs in Germany, and only a small proportion of them are still active native speakers.

The cultural center of Sorbs is the city of Bautzen (Saxony) where the headquarters of "Domovina", the main cultural and social organization of the Serbs of Lusatia, are located. It brings together all Sorbs in Germany and beyond. One of the most famous and influential Sorbs is the Prime Minister of Saxony, a representative of the Christian Democratic Union Stanislaw Tillich.

## II. METHODS AND MATERIALS

The methods of research are structural functional (the features of the linguistic and cultural component in the program of Serbian educational organizations), as well as the source analysis of official documents and interviews with the bearers of the tradition.

## III. RESULTS

Despite the state support, the survival of Serbian language and culture in Germany is threatened from two sides. First, while the Serbian language is officially recognized as the language of the autochthonous minority, it often does not go beyond the individual cultural initiatives of the Serbs, and in the domestic environment it is used mostly in family communication. Secondly, there are no objective grounds for leaving the language beyond this framework: only a small number of the population (about 8,000 people living mostly in the villages) speaks their own language [1, p. 10].

It should be noted that it is impossible to establish the exact number of carriers of the Serbian culture, since there is no clear criterion that a person could be uniquely identified as a Sorb. For example, according to Act No. 14 of Article 35 of the Treaty on the Unification of Germany, issued in 1990, "the recognition of one's belonging to the Sorbian people and culture is free" [2, p. 6]. However, the document emphasizes that the Lusatian Serbs are "free to protect and preserve the Sorbian language in public life" [2, p. 8]. The lack of clearly defined criteria in determining their ethnic identity is demonstrated by another official document, the Saxony Ordinance Law, adopted in 1999. It says: "A Sorb can be considered one who considers himself such. This accessory is free, that is, it cannot be either challenged or tested. This belonging cannot be accompanied by any negative consequences" [Ibid.]. The above mentioned circumstance of freedom in determining the own ethnic identity of the Lusatian Serbs strengthens the objective complexity of preserving the cultural specificity of the small people in the territory belonging to representatives of a different culture. Besides, the German population in comparison with Lusatian Serbs quantitatively dominates and, importantly, has a language of national importance. Being officially recognized by the government of FRG and European Union as autochthonous people on the territory of Germany, unfortunately, Serbians, in comparison with the numerically prevailing Germans, do not feel as confident on their land as they would like.

Therefore, a distinctive place in the preservation of the language and culture of the small West Slavic people belongs to special academic and educational institutions. One of them is the University of Leipzig's Institute of Sorbian Studies, where professional cadres are trained for educational and social organizations of the Serbs in Lusatia.

The Institute is a department of the Faculty of Philology of the University of Leipzig and was founded in 1951. The founder of the Institute is Michał Nawka (1885–1968), a well-known Serbian-Lusatian writer who is also the founder of the aforementioned cultural and social organization “Domovina”. The goal of the Institute is to study Upper Lusatian and Lower Lusatian languages and their dialects, as well as culture, literature, historical, ethnological and social issues of the Serbian-Lusatian heritage.

Today, the Institute of Sorbian Studies is the only institution of higher education in the world that trains Sorbian Studies specialists with higher education. Graduates of the Institute receive a Bachelor of Arts degree, a Bachelor of Pedagogy, a Master of Arts and a Master of Pedagogy. They work as educators, linguists, literary critics, cultural scientists and journalists. Teaching at the Institute is conducted both in Upper Lusatian and Lower Lusatian languages.

The official website of the Institute emphasizes the fact that qualified and well-educated graduates are particularly in demand in schools, educational centers and other institutions of Lower Lusatia with the center in Brandenburg (Cottbus) and Upper Lusatia with the center in Saxony (Bautzen). So, most Serbian parents want to use the state guaranteed right to engage their children in Sorbian language in bilingual schools. The Institute offers its students a practical-oriented education that implies the language competence, development and strengthening of linguistic and ethnic self-awareness regarding the native culture [3].

The main task of the Institute of Sorbian Studies is the teacher training for elementary, secondary schools and gymnasiums. Many students enter the university with knowledge of the Serbian language, which they acquire at school or the regional educational project WITAJ.

However, education is not limited to learning the language; much attention is also paid to literary and cultural studies. For outstanding academic achievements of students, the Foundation of the Sorbian People provides with annual scholarships which serve as an incentive for excellent study. A number of special disciplines are conducted by invited employees of the Sorbian Institute from Bautzen, which ensures the unity of teaching and research activities.

To ensure a sufficient number of applicants, the Institute of Sorbian Studies conducts systematic work, organizing annual meetings with school students of Lusatia, telling about the opportunities and prospects of studying at the Institute. Also, video materials about training at the institute are being developed and laid out in the Internet; doors open days are held.

At the same time, the Institute of Sorbian Studies sees the demand for graduates not only in the traditional residence of the Lusatian Serbs – in the Lusatian region, but also in other regions and federal lands of Germany. The received humanitarian education allows interacting as representatives of the culture of Sorbian people with representatives of other ethnic minorities, working out strategies for preserving and developing own cultural heritage in a joint activity.

Also, studying at the Institute opens up interesting international perspectives for its graduates, since the

internationalization of science and business does not bypass the Sorbian studies.

Thus, the Institute’s employees have long-standing strong ties with partner universities in Slavic foreign countries. The most important of them are the Department of Slavic Studies at Charles University in Prague (Czech Republic), the Institute of Slavic Philology of the University of Warsaw and the Department of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences (Poland), the Sorbian Center of the Institute of Slavic Studies of Lvov National University named after I. Franko (Ukraine) and the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Russia).

In order to increase the competitiveness of graduates in the labor market, the leadership of the Institute of Sorbian Studies organized the study under the international bachelor program “European Minority Languages” (“European Minderheitensprachen”) several years ago. Sorbian language is represented here not only in a regional, but in a pan-European context, which raises its prestige in its native region.

According to the head of the Institute, Doctor of Philology, Professor Eduard Werner, “since we are the only Sorbian Studies institute in Germany, we are aware of our special responsibility, including the responsibility for increasing the attractiveness of the Sorbian language among Serbian students and youths and motivating them to get an education in our Institute” [4].

The underlying concept means that students study at their home university for two years and abroad for one year. The degree certificate is issued by the home university; the partner is the University of Szczecin (Poland).

This study program is built on that of Sorbian Studies, with elective subjects including modules in Celtic Studies. These modules link to those of the Partner University and guarantee the acquisition of a high level of intercultural competences which are currently rarely available in Lusatia.

Furthermore, the prospects for pursuing an academic career are improved, as graduates will possess the following qualifications, exceeding those of Sorbian Studies: knowledge of Polish (one year stay), good working knowledge of English (language of instruction at the Partner University) and good knowledge of at least one other minority language. This facilitates subsequent work in national and international institutions and forms the basis of comparative interdisciplinary and intercultural research, as is necessary for projects such as WITAJ [5].

Summer vacation courses serve the same purpose for the Sorbian language and culture. They have been held every two years since 1967 – in the 1960’s and 1980’s, by the University of Leipzig, and since 1992 by the Sorbian Institute in Bautzen [6]. In the form of a three-week intensive course, they provide the basics for independently learning the Sorbian language or completing the self-taught knowledge and its application in Lusatia. Furthermore, the course aims to arouse interest in the Sorbian language and culture so that attention is paid to Sorbian Studies in centers of Slavic research and teaching, and multipliers are gained who report on Sorbian life and minority politics in Germany abroad.

More than 500 professors, lecturers, students, journalists and translators from 30 countries and almost all continents took part in the summer vacation courses. The visible results of these courses include numerous dissertations and master's theses on the Sorbian language, culture, history as well as translations and editions of Sorbian literature abroad as well as interesting publications by students themselves.

Initiatives of the Institute of Sorbian Studies and the Serbian Institute work in one direction: the creation of a common cultural field where the use of language would occur absolutely naturally and freely. At the present time, this problem needs to be resolved immediately. According to Edward Werner, "we have no Sorbian language society, no linguistic space where it goes without saying that one speaks Sorbian" [7].

Interviews with young Serbian people testify that they have a high degree of responsibility for the preservation of the Lusatian language – so called "personal responsibility for the language" [8, p. 397]. The students of the Institute of Sorbian Studies, Sorbs by origin, often recognize the insufficiency of their knowledge of their native language. For instance, according to Max Baganz, "sometimes it is hard to find every word in the [Sorbian – E.P.] language" [7]. A Max' classmate, Simon Blum, emphasizes the important role of everyday communication in the native language to preserve its viability: "I want to learn the language even better and that is why it is important to use the language in everyday life" [Ibid.].

The above statements of the informants demonstrate the fact that actually, the Sorbian language has troubles in functioning in its customary or traditional environment. It is known that the areas of functioning of small languages can be divided into traditional and non-traditional.

The traditional spheres include the family, the ethno local group ("small society"), traditional economic activities, religion, culture; for many small European languages, there is also literature, and sometimes education. Non-traditional areas include literature (for languages that until recently functioned exclusively in oral form), education, the work of administrative bodies, legal proceedings, the press, radio and television, theater, cinema, signs (with the names of localities, streets, institutions, etc.), advertising, computer program interfaces, Internet [9, p. 17-18].

Obviously, in the case of the Sorbian language, problems of its functioning are primarily observed in the traditional sphere, where the language exists in its natural state and is transmitted in informal communication between members of its social group in a synchronous dimension and from generation to generation in the diachronic dimension. In this regard, it is difficult to overestimate the need to train linguistically competent specialists at various educational levels, since "among the regulated areas, education is the most important in terms of the impact on the viability of a language" [Ibid., p. 18].

One of the reasons for the loss of the language is the migration of the Lusatian Serbs to the larger cities of Germany often located in other federal states remote from Saxony and Brandenburg. This is how the negative causes and consequences of Serbian labor migration are analyzed by the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Serbski Novini*, a journalist

and politician Benedict Durlich. He considers the reluctance of young Sorbian people to live and work in the territory that historically belonged to their ancestors to be one of the reasons for the loss of cultural identity and native language. This circumstance has a very important economic background, since the region inhabited by Lusatian Serbs, Lausitz, is a mining region with rich deposits of coal.

The result of the development of the territory at the beginning of the XX century was massive industrialization which caused extensive development of coal deposits and the consequent destruction of Lusatian settlements. "Today, the large Swedish state energy concern "Vattenfall" is engaged in coal mining in the region. This has its pros and cons. Unemployment is still high. Sorbian youth have no opportunity to pursue a profession, to realize their potential", B. Durlich said [10].

An example of unwanted migration, based on the personal experience, is also given by the informant himself. He reports that both his adult sons live with their families far beyond Lausitz, and they cannot speak their own language except for their family circle, as well as their children. "We must strive to ensure that the Sorbian youth return to their native lands. Or to the fact that outside Lausitz, they continue to learn their language, do not forget about the roots" [Ibid.].

The statements of the majority of graduates of the Institute of Sorbian Studies confirm the fact of their high motivation to master the chosen specialty and readiness to work further for the benefit of the native people.

Thus, according to the testimony of Yulia Serbin, a Serbian-born woman by birth, who began studying Sorbian Studies at the University of Leipzig in 2011, she "would have liked to become a teacher and would have remained in Lusatia in the future. The chances of getting a job here are very high, because teachers are required everywhere" [11].

The Ministry of Science of Saxony, in charge of the University of Leipzig, in turn, also seeks to create attractive working conditions for graduates of the Institute who come to teach in rural schools in Lusatia. The federal scholarships serve the same purpose, being provided to those graduates who are sent to work in the villages of the region, as well as job security which implies the employment of all professional teachers of the Upper- and Lower-Lusatian languages.

These data indicate that the role of the Institute of Sorbian Studies in the training of qualified personnel for the preservation and development of Sorbian culture is difficult to overestimate. According to the testimony of representatives of educational and social organizations of the Serbs in Lusatia, even now in both federal states – Brandenburg and Saxony – there is an obvious shortage of teachers of the Sorbian language.

In this regard, recent attempts have been made to change the requirements of entrance examinations for applicants of the Institute of Sorbian Studies. If formerly an entrant must necessarily have mastered the Sorbian language, then, taking into account the prevailing circumstances, the Institute's leadership is now ready to consider as applicants those who, instead of Sorbian, are native speakers or are fluent in one of the other West Slavic languages, as well as Russian.

Since Upper Sorbian language has similarities with Czech and Slovak languages, and Lower Sorbian language has similarities with Polish, it is obvious that those who speak them will easily master both Sorbian in both its variants (see, for example, [12]).

Representatives of other Slavic states also study at the Institute of Sorbian studies, and after graduation they remain in Germany to work in educational and social organizations of Sorbs. For example, the head of the language center WITAJ in Cottbus is the Doctor of philology Victor Zakar. He received a university linguistic education at home in Macedonia (Skopje), and then studied in graduate school at the Institute of Sorbian Studies. Zakar defended his thesis on the Upper Sorbian language in comparison with the Macedonian under the guidance of aforementioned Prof. Dr. Werner. Finding a common ground in his native language and in Lower Sorbian, Zakar emphasizes the mystical character of the latter. According to him, the unusual nature of Spreewald, which has long been associated with Lusatian Serbs, gives the language a special emotional component [13].

At the same time, some representatives of Serbian national organizations adhere to the point of view that the availability of language training for ethnic Sorbs provides them with greater motivation and awareness in choosing a future profession related to their native language in comparison with non-Sorbs. This assumption, in particular, confirms the idea of N. Giles and R. Johnson that the desire of a group of individuals to identify themselves depends on the degree of real or perceived ethno-linguistic viability [14].

Obviously, it is precisely the ambiguity of this circumstance that causes a lot of discussions in the Sorbian environment about the expediency of teaching young people of non-Sorbian origin at the Institute of Sorbian Studies. Thus, according to Lyudmila Budar, the chairperson of the Sorbs School Union, “we must first save the native speakers before “we make Sorbs” of others” [12].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, today the training of professional personnel at the Institute of Sorbian Studies at the University of Leipzig is of paramount importance for the preservation of the ethno cultural identity of the Lusatian Serbs.

In the conditions of migration of representatives of the small ethnos to the large cities of Germany, insufficient protection of the social and cultural interests of Lusatian Serbs at the regional and federal levels, problems in relations with the German population that is numerically prevalent in the country, an integrated approach to preserving the culture of these people is of fundamental importance.

The knowledge of the Sorbian language, as well as the history and traditions of its people, which is acquired in

educational institutions at various levels, including the Institute of Sorbian Studies at the University of Leipzig, becomes the factor that preserves the vitality and uniqueness of the Sorbian culture.

Thanks to the received education, the cultural initiatives of Lusatian Serbs allow the new generation not to forget about their roots and to do everything possible so that their rich historical heritage will be demanded by modernity.

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