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The Movement to Protect Local Values in Germany's Lusatia Region

Abstract: The article discusses the important aspects of the Sorbian minority's existence in Lusatia, in two German eastern states (Saxony and Brandenburg), in the context of the risk for the population of the region stemming from the activities pertaining to brown coal mining, which entail the need for resettlement of the population and the subsequent liquidation of their villages.

Regarding this background, the author presents the dilemmas of the inhabitants of the region, who are, on the one hand, filled with concern for the protection of natural environment and the desire to save the homeland from destruction, but, on the other hand, are aware of the need to invest in energy. The strong commitment to cultural continuity of the Sorbs goes hand in hand with developed plans for the creation of the modern conditions of life.

The text refers to the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the legal status of the Sorbs. It also includes analysis of the attitudes of residents threatened by the need of resettlement. This analysis is based on qualitative and quantitative research carried out by the author in 2010 in the village of Rohne. It identifies five types of different approaches, behind which the various motives are to be considered. Particularly noteworthy is the treatment of space (territory, home), the value of which cannot simply be moved to another location.

Key words: German Sorbian minority, Lusatia region, UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, "Homeland and Future," secure jobs, environmental protection, brown coal surface mining

Introduction

The realization that there are artifacts important enough to be worthy of special protection not only for the individual or a nation, but also for the entire humanity, resulted in the agreement of the World Heritage Convention reached at UNESCO

over 40 years ago. It was in November 1972 that the UNESCO General Conference members agreed upon the Convention for the Safeguarding of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. With that was created the “internationally most significant instrument ever initiated by the community of peoples to protect their cultural and natural heritage.”¹ Up to now 190 states have ratified this convention.²

The guiding thought formulated in the preamble of the World Heritage Convention is the “consideration that parts of the cultural or natural heritage are of outstanding interest and therefore need to be preserved as a part of the world heritage of mankind as a whole.” Consequently, by ratifying the convention, the states oblige themselves, with their signatures to the Convention, to protect and conserve for future generations the “World Heritage Sites” located within their borders.

Some 30 years later, in autumn of 2003, the UNESCO General Conference at its 32nd session concluded an agreement for the safeguarding of the “intangible cultural heritage.” This resulted from the realization, among other things, that “the processes of globalization and social transformation, alongside the conditions they create for renewed dialogue among communities, also give rise, as does the phenomenon of intolerance, to grave threats of deterioration, disappearance and destruction of the intangible cultural heritage, in particular owing to a lack of resources for safeguarding such heritage”³ and “of the universal will and the common concern to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage of humanity.” An important role in the emergence of the agreement was also played by the “recognition that communities, in particular indigenous communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals, play an important role in the production, safeguarding, maintenance and re-creation of the intangible cultural heritage, thus helping to enrich cultural diversity and human creativity,” as well as the realization of “the need to build greater awareness, especially among the younger generations, of the importance of the intangible cultural heritage and its safeguarding.”

Germany only late in 2011 decided to begin the ratification process for the agreement. Germany’s acceptance of the agreement was decided one year later, on 12 December 2012, by the Federal Cabinet⁴ and in April 2013 — as the 151st national state — Germany ratified the UNESCO agreement.⁵ The convention became official law in Germany on 9 July 2013 — nearly ten years after the UNESCO General Conference of October 2003.⁶ The event occurred practically without any echo. In the German media scarcely any notice was taken of it, and not even on the home page of the Federal Minister for Culture and Media, Bernd

¹ See: <http://www.unesco.de/welterbe-konvention.html> and <http://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/> (accessed 21.10.2013).

² <http://www.unesco.de/welterbekonvention.html> (accessed 21.10.2013).

³ See: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00006> (accessed 23.10.2013).

⁴ <http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Pressemitteilungen/BPA/2012/12/2012-12-12-bkm-unesco.html?nn=402600> (accessed 23.10.2013).

⁵ <http://www.unesco.de/7715.html> (accessed 21.10.2013).

⁶ <http://www.unesco.de/7942.html> (accessed 21.10.2013).

Neumann, was there a relevant press release.⁷ Yet, the Culture Minister declared, on the day of Germany's ratification of the UNESCO convention on 12 December 2012, that this move had been from the very beginning the goal of his culture policy and he stressed that "through our engagement the doubts of other ministries could be overcome and the federal states won over to ratification as well. This is a great success for the special need for protection of immaterial forms of culture and cultural treasures."⁸ One can only guess what substantive issues are actually hiding behind this statement, but for the purposes of this paper the Minister's allusion to the "doubts of other ministries" could furnish a relevant indication of what the political situation was behind the scenes.

Against this backdrop, the situation of the German Sorbian minority in the Lusatia region (Lausitz, southeast area of the former GDR, border region to Poland) shall illustrate a discussion of the relevant values held by various actors in a threatened ethnic homeland also with regard to the question of what for them constitutes "cultural heritage" and why. Particular attention shall be given to the situation of a locality in the parish of Schleife, Röhne (federal state of Saxony), and to a few small villages near Welzow (federal state of Brandenburg), which in a few years will be faced with being bulldozed away as a consequence of the expansion of brown coal surface mining operations into the area.

In Lusatia citizens take the politicians' declarations about values seriously

"Immaterial cultural heritage exists in vital forms of expression such as dance and drama, orally transmitted traditions, social customs, rituals and festivities, or also in artistic and craftwork abilities that are passed on from generation to generation. To preserve these culture forms is the goal of the Convention on the Preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage" — thus Minister Neumann in his press release of 12 December 2012.

For a "vital form of expression" to be declared an element of intangible cultural heritage, it must fulfill numerous criteria. There must be people who consider it a part of their cultural heritage, carry it out and pass it on from one generation to the next. It is decisive that they thereby transmit a feeling of "identity and continuity," and that they do not violate international human-rights treaties.⁹ The German UNESCO Commission is expecting many suggestions and a lively discussion over

⁷ http://www.bundesregierung.de/Webs/Breg/DE/Bundesregierung/BeauftragterfuerKulturundMedien/aktuelles/pressemitteilungen/_node.html (accessed 22.10.2013).

⁸ <http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Pressemitteilungen/BPA/2012/12/2012-12-12-bkm-unesco.html?nn=402600> (accessed 22.10.2013).

⁹ For instance: Spiegel-Online: <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/deutschland-tritt-unesco-abkommen-fuer-immaterielles-kulturerbe-bei-a-872029.html> (accessed 29.10.2013).

them. As of 3 May 2013 communities, groups and in suitable cases individuals involved with the cultivation of the most various forms of living everyday culture, are called upon to apply for acceptance in their home federal state. The multitude of traditions and customs that is characteristic of the German cultural landscape, but also regional languages and dialects, narrative as well as culinary and manual crafts will come into a certain competition with one another: Although by the summer of 2013 it was not yet clear how the national deciding committee was to be constituted, at least now it is certain that, on the basis of the fact that in Germany culture is the domain of the federal states, the 16 states together will have to agree on the national nominations. This means that candidate proposals shall be made “from the bottom up” to the states, from where state committees of experts shall choose those to be advanced to the national level. Of these, only two candidates per year may be officially submitted to UNESCO.¹⁰

The first application round ended on 30 November 2013, and until then associations, federations and other organizations could submit their initiatives to the federal states. The representatives of the Sorbian minority in Germany also do not want to lose this chance to see the customs of their region placed under UNESCO protection. Among other parties, the Regional Sorbian Association of Lower Lusatia in July 2013 put forward the proposal to have the Sorbian/Wendian language in Dissen (Lower Lusatia) declared especially worthy of formal protection.¹¹ Also representatives of other localities and Sorbian organizations there have learned of the modalities for gaining UNESCO protected status. The conviction is widely shared in this region that the Sorbian traditions of both upper and lower Lusatia are worthy of UNESCO protection. This includes for example unique customs such as the special Easter and St. John’s Eve (*Johannisreiten*) ceremonies that are intimately connected with the Sorbian language. Ultimately a regional-level decision was taken that not a single Sorbian locality should apply for UNESCO protection, but that a multi-state application should be made. The entire Sorbian region, extending across two federal states, will try to achieve the goal of having all the Sorbian traditions and customs put under the special protection of UNESCO.

What values are important to the people of Lusatia?

The efforts of the people of Dissen to have their language recognized as a value especially deserving of protection shall be in this essay the point of departure for considering other values that can be identified as relevant for people in Lusatia.

¹⁰ http://www.cducsu.de/Titel__unesco_konvention_zum_immateriellen_kulturerbe_in_deutschland_in__kraft/TabID__6/SubTabID__7/InhaltTypID__1/InhaltID__26429/inhalte.aspx (accessed 21.10.2013).

¹¹ In the locality Dissen in Brandenburg, the Sorbian/Wendian languages are cultivated still more intensely.

Lusatia is a region of eastern Germany (made up of portions of Saxony and Brandenburg) that is particular by virtue of two characteristic features: it is in part inhabited by the Sorbians — one of four “national minorities” in Germany — and it is rich in natural resources, especially brown coal, which has been surface-mined in this region for almost a century (for example southwest of Hoyerswerda). Even though with the German reunification many surface-mine operations were closed (for example the Bärwalde site in 1992), in the entire so-called Lusatian brown coal field (i.e. the southeast of Brandenburg and the northeast of Saxony) there are still five active brown coal surface mines: Nochten, South Welzow, Jänschwalde, Reichwalde und North Cottbus. Some of them are to be expanded — if the energy company running them gets its way. That will necessitate bulldozing away whole villages and surrounding farmland. At the South Welzow site for example by 2011 already 17 villages had been flattened. At this site predominantly Sorbian-inhabited villages had to be sacrificed. For the planned expansion of this site (called Welzow II) further Sorbian villages will have to be demolished, and this has met with the resistance of many residents and citizens.

Homeland — the most important value for everyone?

“A homeland is unique and should not be taken away from anyone. Here, mature structures are to going to be destroyed that can never be replaced. Respect for life and nature alone should forbid such an undertaking.”¹²

The central theme of nearly all protest actions against mining in Lusatia is the demand that the “right to homeland” be respected. Though such a right is not explicit in the German Constitution (*Grundgesetz*), many people derive it from other contexts.

Mid of December 2013 the Federal Constitutional Court (*Bundesverfassungsgericht*) announced its decision that, contrary to the statements of the protesters, a “right to Homeland” does not exist. But it also stated that individuals have the right to claim against measures of the mining companies as early as possible, that is directly after they got knowledge of the planned activities. That was up to now not possible, the legal procedure against the demolition measures could be started at first directly before the demolition. This a great progress regarding the rights of individuals against the overwhelming power of the mining industry. The existing legal situation was not changed by the court, but individual rights got a higher estimation.¹³

¹² <https://www.opa-ohne-lobby.de/freunde.htm> (accessed 31.10.2013).

¹³ This is the case of a suit brought by a resident of the locality Immerath in the Rheinland which is to be removed to make place for the new surface mine Garzweiler II that is planned by the energy company RWE. Stephan Pütz and his wife have resisted the creation of the mine already for nearly 20 years. The first court session took place in April 2013.

The legal situation is in Germany evidently rather clear — the legal principle “mineral rights over land rights” applies still — and repeated litigations have been to date unsuccessful.¹⁴ But, the opponents of the current brown coal policy in Germany point to the fact that this legal principle dates from a law made during the national-socialist (Nazi) period. From the time of the creation of mining law in the monarchial (Kaiser) period and throughout the Weimar Republic, no one could be dispossessed against their will: up to 1937 the “General Mining Law” (*Allgemeines Berggesetz*) stated that a property owner could “never” be forced to relinquish terrain that was “built up with domestic-, business- or factory-buildings.” Only with the Nazi dictatorship was this prohibition reformulated in the text of the General Mining Law. In the Federal Republic of Germany the principle has endured that in the case of “predominating public interest” also ownership of domestic and business terrain must be relinquished. Basically however, until today it has not been explicitly legally defined what “public interest” and “the public good” mean. Opponents of the mining expansion point out that the over 3,000 persons who in Lusatia are currently threatened with forced displacement from their homes and resettlement by the new mining activity have, with the current mining laws, scarcely any right of appeal. Also people who live at the periphery of mining sites are often helpless vis-à-vis the mining companies.¹⁵

For these and further reasons citizens in the areas mentioned have formed many initiatives, ultimately driven by the desire to protect their homeland from pending destruction and to demand the abolition of the dispossession principle dating back to the Nazi period.

But not only those who have joined local civil initiatives or engaged in one of the bigger organizations among others fighting against brown coal surface mining (e.g. Greenpeace), have raised their voices against the loss of their homeland. And the protests are not always predominantly based on political demands. Often these other voices are quieter, but nonetheless intensely express people’s sense of desperation and helplessness. The following four quotations are representative of opinions of residents of a small locality in Lusatia — Rohne — who will be affected by the demolition. The statements emerged in the context of 2010 interviews with local residents.¹⁶

My homeland around this place is important to me, every tree, every bush, every path awakens memories, also those of my children, grandchildren, and friends, which [if I have to be] moved can never be replaced. To this place also belong the animal park [...] and the places around it with all the plants and animals, trees, paths, ponds, hills and gullies.

¹⁴ Stephan Pütz and the Environmental Alliance for Environment and Nature Protection Germany (BUND) have brought suits before all courts without success.

¹⁵ Contrary to the case in anthracite mining, plaintiffs here must prove damages at their own cost, since the burden of proof in mining law rests upon the victim. The reversal of this principle is a central demand of the plaintiffs.

¹⁶ See Jonda (2011, pp. 27—35).

We won't or just can't make a new home in Schleife or anywhere else. For us with the bulldozing of Rohne village our homeland and identity will be gone forever!

I'm against any resettling of towns or hamlets — that's just the same as forced migration. The stress caused for people is no different from physical or psychological injuries — a criminal act. I don't want to live without my present environment in any case. Resettlement is an unacceptable burden. Any plan for new resettlements only means further destruction of nature, homeland and traditions [...].

I'd be very unhappy to lose or have to leave my home village and hope I'll never have to relive that.

The desire to never have to experience resettlement again — but rather to die first — is heard particularly often from elderly people in the region. They express often their fears about the matter and plainly feel very burdened by the threat of the loss of their trusted and familiar structures. They also fear not being able to cope with the physical exertion of a resettlement. However, one can observe in the localities concerned, where not everyone belongs to the Sorbian minority, a broad spectrum of attitudes. Corresponding to the various attitudes and opinions encountered in the above-mentioned interviews in the village of Rohne, the following five characteristic “behavioural patterns” or attitude types could be identified:

- “Fast resettlers” want to leave as quickly as possible, to pursue their own interests. They attribute great importance to personal advantages (with often the argument: “As long as I still have the strength to build a new life...”). A bond to the homeland seems to play no role at all — not rarely they are people who moved to the area from elsewhere. They often perceive the energy/mining company as their strong ally who helps them with early resettlement. In this way “facts” are created and the dividing of opinion in the community — as reported by residents — is encouraged and made manifest.
- The “hesitators” or “wait-and-seers” want to move only as late as possible — in the event it really becomes necessary. To this type belong, aside from the above-mentioned older people who assume that “when it happens” they will no longer be around, also middle-aged people (such as those with school-age children) who say: “As long as our children are still young and live with us, we want to enjoy the home we have.” These are also often people who say they want to “pass on” their experience of “homeland” to their children.
- The “ignorers” or “deniers”: these are people who refuse to recognize the situation which has emerged. They seem to be in denial that the problem of resettlement is going to directly concern them at all. They try to ignore everything surrounding the issue, or have resigned themselves and will let it all come upon them at once, not wanting or not able to invest their energy in a long-term preoccupation with the issue.
- The “refusers”: whose motto is: “No way — I'm not leaving.” These people refuse for various reasons to take part in the cooperation and planning of their resettlement:

- they are afraid to think about leaving their familiar house and home (“I’m afraid of going crazy.”);
 - they feel certain that a replacement home could never offer them equivalent living conditions;
 - they also feel a duty to “pass on” their heritage;
 - they cannot resign themselves to accept that the nature will be senselessly and irrevocably destroyed.”
- The “goal-oriented”: these are above all younger people who typically want to start a family and need the security of a plan. It is for them often not crucial whether they are going to have to relocate or not; the important thing is that they have clarity as to their future living situation.

Even if it seems paradoxical, “homeland” is also very important for those who prefer a rapid resettlement. In some of the interviews the following view was articulated: Find quickly a new location in order to plant trees and a vegetable garden as soon as possible, and to be able to quietly plan the new house and have thereby “time for taking one’s departure from this life.” This expresses a sentiment of wanting to rescue as much as possible of what they individually understand as “homeland” in order to translate it into the elements of a new sense of locality.

For many of the middle generation there is at least a double burden: on the one hand they must deal with their own fear of loss, and take decisions about their own future. On the other hand they have to worry about how their elderly parents will deal with the same situation. Most of them are aware that for that generation the necessity of leaving the familiar environment is particularly difficult and often very painful, since many elderly people in the region already once in their lives experienced the loss of their homeland: either as a consequence of the Second World War or the extensive surface mining practiced during the GDR period.

In some families a clear split becomes visible against the background perspective of resettlement: one faction wants to be involved in the fight for the preservation of the homeland, and in any case, remain; the other wants to exploit the chance to get away. These incompatible positions are even articulated within marriages.

Young people who have found occupational stability in the region and are planning a family, experience the present situation as stressful: wanting to build or rebuild their own home, they have no security in taking the necessary planning decisions. Overall in the region it is becoming clear that the phenomenon of homeland appears in various contexts: For some it is inseparable from the existence of the material structures passed down from ancestors, others are led instead by the wish to build up something new of their own in the face of the inevitable coming situation. Both groups have the same need: to have a place that offers protection and sense of intimacy — both literally and figuratively — as well as produces the familiarity which is a characteristic of “homeland.”

The consideration of homeland as a special value in this text shall be complemented by a mention of one of many homeland-related activities in the region: In Brandenburg in 2011 the federation “Homeland and Future” (*Heimat und Zukunft*) was created, in which civic groups, politicians of all parties and representatives

from business and environmental umbrella organizations, as well as the church, joined forces (over the issue of surface mining). Since then this federation has sponsored a yearly “Festival for Homeland and Future” in the threatened Lusatian village of Atterwasch, which meanwhile has become a meeting-place for brown coal oppositionists. At the festival in October 2013 over 500 participants spoke out against new surface mines in Germany. Interestingly, these were by far not only Lusatian residents who spoke up on the threatened loss of their local homeland, but also many from outside Lusatia who wanted to articulate their opposition to brown coal policy.

Secure jobs — but at what cost?

Opposition to surface mining is not a position shared by all residents of the villages in question, above all not by families with members employed by the mining operators. They are aware that it was the energy company Vattenfall (and for many, it still is) who helped the people of the region to a considerable level of prosperity by guaranteeing jobs for sizable parts of the population. “The reality is, we need power, and jobs. Without the sites, where would we be?” This remark by a resident of Rohne — one of the villages scheduled for demolition — reflects the opinion of many who recognize the other side of developments in Lusatia.

To have a secure job is a basic value for people. “What use to me is a property and house, without a job?” Also this opinion reveals the basic stance of some people who, for the benefit of having a secure job in some connection with brown coal mining, would be willing to leave the region they have lived in, also because they will again be settled in the vicinity of their former home. Those in the population for whom instead the negative aspects of the energy company’s activities are the main issue, and who see the entire environment as threatened, often argue by pointing out that the companies offer only a relative few local people a living through wages. Besides, the question must be put what opportunities will remain there in 30 or so years. “When the coal is gone, the jobs will go, too.” However, advocates of surface mining stress that restoration measures as well as the subsequent use of the terrain for tourism for example, can be expected to create new jobs.

The right to property and chances for new infrastructure creation

Though some residents call the resettlement resulting from the expansion of surface mining “expulsion,” it is still important to know that the resettled popula-

tions are relatively well compensated financially. They can have a new house built in another location. Though this form of compensation is criticized by some, for example with the remark that the new houses, after the end of mining activity, will be left “standing in returning groundwater,” but for many the resettlement is a welcome opportunity to profoundly improve their living conditions. One inhabitant of the community Schleife-Rohne, about 40 years old, married and the mother of two children, is perhaps a representative of these as she wrote in an anonymous email to the author:

My husband and I both work, have qualifications and our net income is about €26,000 per annum. We live in an old type of enclosed homestead with my husband's grandmother. She owns the farmhouse, but worked 42 years as a cook and now gets around €1,200 per month retirement pension. Upkeep on the house costs a lot. Just to renew the roof would cost €40,000. But we don't have that kind of money. The resettlement and compensation payment would give us the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get a new house at today's standards (modern heating and wiring, energy-saving windows, small garden, etc.). Grandma would like to move into the new senior-citizen centre built by Vattenfall, because her health now keeps her from doing any work around the farmhouse. In my husband's family and in mine there is one family member directly employed at Vattenfall, and three members indirectly, in associated firms. So we can also say that Vattenfall indirectly has a part in our family's modest prosperity.

The situation I describe is similar to that of many neighbours, friends and relatives. Also, their lives play themselves out in old multi-generation houses. Everyday life in this community is not always easy. Incomes are low or inhabitants are often dependent on state benefits because our rural region, with high unemployment and an aging population, is one of the conjuncturally weakest regions in Saxony.

The author of these thoughts wants to express that she and her family hope through resettlement to attain an easier, more modern and a bit more prosperous way of life, and therefore they support resettlement.

**Environmental protection as a special value:
Swěte su nam naše strony!
“No more land for coal!”**

Protests against the threatened loss of homeland usually go hand in hand with protest against the destruction of nature. In Lusatia protest movements against the destruction of locally evolved structures and the natural environment greatly increased in intensity during the second decade of this century. For example in July 2013 in the village of Proschim, not far from the Welzow surface mine, the “Lusatia

Climate Camp” took place, with as guiding theme “No more land for coal! *Swěte su nam naše strony!*” For eight days activists, concerned citizens and interested individuals gathered to talk in various workshops, inform themselves through lectures, presentations and exhibitions, and to participate in demonstrations beyond the camp venue; for example, various Lusatian initiatives held together a demonstration with the motto “Not one more village!” With Sorbian “circle dances” and a march around the village of Proschim, participants protested its planned destruction by mining expansion, and the march then went to the edge of the mine site. Representatives of other initiatives were on hand in a show of solidarity with the other villages threatened by Vattenfall in the area — Kerkwitz, Grabko and Atterwasch. Different speakers deplored the expulsion of the residents of Proschim and the liquidation of local jobs. Precisely in Proschim it has become clear that the argument of mines creating jobs is losing its power to convince people. Proschim already provides jobs to almost 100 persons and, as an “eco-energy village,” over 5,000 people use sustainably produced energy. People there are furious that an eco-power producing site is going to fall victim to the South Welzow coal mine — in order to secure for an international energy company profits based on environmental destruction.

As described above, the region around Welzow belongs to the traditional Sorbian/Wendian population area. The people there lament that “piece by piece [...] our homeland and culture is being irrevocably destroyed by the coal.” If the state government approves the brown coal mining plan, more than 800 people will be forced out of their ancestral homeland.

Beyond the scope of the local protest, the organizers also want to draw attention to the global threat of the ongoing climate change. Power production from Lusatian brown coal mining creates consequences in far-off regions of the world. According to one of the organizaers, Mr. Falk Hermenau:

Whoever today still advocates coal mining must certainly be blind to the consequences for the world’s climate. While for example the Pacific island Koreti Tiulamalu is fighting for its very existence against rising ocean levels, the Brandenburg administration and Vattenfall company work to ensure world climate chaos. With that not only people in our region are forced to move against their will, but also people in the Pacific are being forced from their island homelands. The Sorbian and Wendian culture is now threatened, but the peoples of the Pacific could be lost forever.

As the protesters repetitively emphasize, for the welfare of the people in Lusatia as well as for the world’s climate, no further villages should be lost there to new surface coal mining. The explosive potential of such warnings is particularly keen in light of the fact that in Lusatia already 136 villages have been sacrificed in the past to surface mining.

In the vicinity of the Nochten site, protests have also gained national attention. “No Nochten II” is the slogan as activists try to explain that opening a new coal deposit is today no longer necessary. “The surface mines already permitted in the Lusatia region will provide the power plants there with brown coal up to 2040

and probably longer. For this dirtiest type of electricity generation, six villages and in total almost 1,600 people will have to be relocated” — reads the website of the regional alliance “Structural Change Now — No Nochten II”¹⁷ against the planned surface mine of the same name. A large part of Sorbian culture would be thereby irrevocably lost. The regional language-, costume-, building- and craftwork-traditions would be certainly lost forever and cannot be transferred or re-established in another location in a “socially compatible” way. The Sorbians engaged against the demolition of localities believe that, even with resettlement, their traditions and customs would simply degrade into folklore.

They are also very concerned that valuable terrain that has been laboriously cultivated for centuries will be simply bulldozed away. “Behind remains after mining acidic soil, streams and lakes, monotonous reforestations and shorelines that because of the danger of landslides will probably not be usable for the next hundred years” — thus one members of the Alliance. They demand instead:

[...] for Lusatia not only an end to the destruction of valuable human settlements, natural landscapes, agricultural land and touristically attractive expanses. We demand of the government and mining companies investments in the region that will leave something of value also after the coal is gone. The conservation of Lusatian culture and nature and the strengthening of the infrastructure¹⁸ are of the first importance so that people here can continue to find work, raise their children and enjoy later life without concern for the future.

Just as in Lusatia much is seen from different perspectives, also the activity of the various citizen initiatives is perceived differently. The previously quoted resident of Rohne wrote to the author also in this regard:

This elite “back-to-the-land” generation sees nature very romantically, connected with a constant and tranquil life, but for us who live here, security is necessary for survival. I would expect from the environmentalists who so love to debate, that busses will be full again with passengers (with them among them), and that their gadgets today will not be constantly replaced by newer ones. These people have everything, but we have to fear constantly for the future. I find it pretty hypocritical when someone tells me that prosperity is not the most important issue, while they themselves have everything. I also believe that our country without industry cannot maintain today’s prosperity and the achievements of the

¹⁷ The “Action Alliance” has the goal of preventing the planned surface-mine operation “Nochten II” and to save the threatened localities from demolition. As for its information material: “To reach our goal we organize and support informative events in the region and in cities, demonstrations (e.g. watches and Eastertime marches) and bring legal suits. Furthermore we inform the public about our work with an internet site and publish regularly a newsletter (‘Nochten Today’) for the region. [...]. The ‘Action Alliance’ is non-partisan and non-confessional, and understands itself as a line of defense against nationalism, racism and all forms of violence against people.”

¹⁸ The activists point to the fact that Lusatia is one of the structurally weakest regions in all Germany, “although we live on top of the until now most important native commodity, coal. How can it be that the region in which the coal is mined has almost nothing from it?”

social system. The “energy turnaround” (German national policy of converting to sustainable energy) is now praised as the only real solution — without proof of its workability in practice. But how can there be quality of life and social peace, without a functioning economy? [...] I find it unfair of the environmentalists to persuade insecure local people to pull their green wagon and with it to promote their pampered frugality ethic. These people simply don’t live here. [...].

Concern for Sorbian culture and traditions

In the many protest activities currently taking place in Lusatia, the values of homeland and nature are represented as worthy of preservation and almost always brought into connection with the desire and simultaneously the demand that Lusatia’s culture and traditions be protected.

The Alliance’s “Structural Change Now — No Nochten II” warns for example in its publications that with the planned surface mine Nochten II “a large part of Sorbian culture would be irrevocably lost.” Sorbians engaged in the struggle against the new mining fear that after a resettlement their traditions and customs would degenerate into “folklore.” The regional language-, ethnic dress-, building- and craftwork-traditions would be then lost forever and could not be built up again in another place in a “socially compatible” way. For outsiders this may seem to be a radical conviction and scarcely comprehensible — that traditions cannot be carried on in another place; the Sorbian culture however has elements that are explicitly bound to particular localities. This is especially perceptible in the parish of Schleife, where ethnic dress, customs, songs and dances performed to typical Sorbian folk-instruments, as well as legends and tales, today still form the basis of the traditional “Schleifer” folk culture. Characteristic is the colourful rural women’s habit in almost 60 variants. Some older women wear them daily, but among the younger generations only on special occasions. Equally varied are the Sorbian customs observed in the Schleife region during the course of the year. For example at Easter especially colourful Easter eggs are made and a special kind Easter singing ceremony takes place: The Easter message in song is taken from house to house. This begins at midnight, when the church-bells of Schleife are rung at full force after Passiontide. The choralists (*Kantorki*) sing before each house three Sorbian chorales, and are underway with this until sunrise. A further particularity is the Sorbian Christ-Child, the *dzecetko*. Already before the last century there was practiced in the parish Schleife the Sorbian variant of the Christ-Child: From the church service the Christ-Child is sent around to all the homes in the village to share with all families the joy and blessings it brings. Also the other villages of the parish have their own *dzecetko*, each of which differs in its dress from the others and from the Christ-Child of Schleife. They are the unmistakable face of Schleife. In an interview with the author in 2010 an older Sorbian woman stressed this aspect of the custom:

Tradition says the *Dzeczko* should not leave its native village — or something bad will happen. That means, the Rohne child stays in Rohne, the Trebendorfer in Trebendorf, the Mühlroser in Mühlrose, the Schleifer in Schleife. Otherwise the traditions couldn't be passed on, the value of memories would disappear [...] and the Schleife parish too.

In my 2010 interviews in Rohne questions of tradition and culture repeatedly came up. In the following further statements of residents are presented to make appreciable the high level of relative importance that traditions and cultural elements occupy in the lives of these people:

We won't or can't build anew in Schleife or anywhere else. For us, with the destruction of the village of Rohne, our homeland and identity are lost forever! In the hope that it won't happen, or — if God wills it — I won't have to see it [...] the Sorbian gravestones with their epitaphs or symbols in two languages should be permanently protected!

Unfortunately the Sorbian traditions will be degraded to cultural curiosities and kept alive only artificially if Rohne has to be moved, because then the relation to authentic tradition is gone.

To the question what cultural goods and objects are important enough that they — in the case of resettlement to a new locality — should be restored or rebuilt, one person answered:

Well, it's all important! [...] there's no more or less! Whether a wooden house, a 400-year-old oak tree, one or one-hundred protected plants, or an ancient forest — all of it is important. And our language, Schleife Sorbian. So really, just everything!

In statements like this emerges the expression of a great commitment to preserve the content of this culture. The interviewer questioned (out of 445 persons eligible) in total 347 persons,¹⁹ 69% of whom assessed as very important or rather important the possibility to carry on with their cultural heritage of their locality. This issue was treated in the interviews with special attention by purposefully asking what institutions that either embody cultural heritage or symbolize its maintenance should also be present in a (possible) new location. Over 88% named buildings housing the local fire brigade, 85% the cemetery and 65% the “Njepila-Hof,” an assemblage of traditional rural buildings (*Schrotholzhaus*, *Scheune*, *Bienenhaus*, *Backhaus*), today the village museum which houses objects expressive of the Sorbian way of life, customs and traditions.²⁰ Also the Sorbian kindergarten (with 56%) and generally

¹⁹ This means that participation was at 78%. Young people from age 14 could participate.

²⁰ A particular place in the exposition is occupied by the life and work of the Sorbian folk author Hanzo Njepila-Rowinski. In his Sorbian language (in its Schleife dialect) writings Njepila tells of everyday things in life. He was the first non-cleric writer to produce manuscripts in Sorbian. More about him at: www.njepila-hof-rohne.de.

“monuments and memorabilia” (62%) were described as worthy of care. As among these residents understand the War Monument to the Fallen of 1914—1918, as well as the memorial tablet to the fallen of the Second World War. Besides the above, architectural particularities in the village were named, for example the three- and four-sided farmhouses and the wooden *Schrotholz* houses. Furthermore several characteristic natural elements were mentioned such as the orchid meadow, the forest with its mushrooms and berries, the linden tree-lined roads and even the Struga, a river flowing through Rohne. A few people answered either “Everything is important!” — or — “Nothing in particular — the main thing is that Sorbian culture should continue.”

Some reflections in conclusion

Against the background of the protests in Lusatia and the responses of residents during interviews in Rohne in 2010 which in various contexts articulate the significance of the Sorbian traditions and culture, it is understandable that the representatives of the Sorbian minority in Germany want to see the cultural specificities of their region put under the protection of UNESCO. The joint application of two German states to UNESCO intends to have the entire Sorbian region with its traditions and customs recognized as worthy of official protection. One need not delve so deeply into the traditions and culture of the Sorbians in Germany to see that this is exactly a case of what the Federal Minister for Culture and Media considers necessary for recognition as “intangible cultural heritage” (see the second part of this article): The Sorbian culture is precisely one that is reflected in several vital forms of expression such as dance and theatre, oral traditions, social customs, rituals and celebrations, but also in artistic abilities and accomplishments, and is passed on from generation to generation.

But if we look at present developments in the Sorbian localities described above — in particular at the expansion of the brown coal surface mines — the irreconcilable contradiction of the situation is readily apparent: The aim of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage is precisely to conserve such a culture as the Sorbian. At the same time this culture is faced with the partial destruction of its material basis through the expansion of surface mining. As of autumn 2013 not all the necessary permits for starting new mining had been granted by the responsible state governments (for Nochten II, Saxony, and for Welzow II, Brandenburg). Therefore some chance still exists that the values to which the people of Lusatia are committed may endure. As does the chance that the “intangible” ones may be officially included among the cultural heritage of all humanity.

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