The hardest years in Simon Dreisbach's life

Here begins a difficult period in the life of the Simon Dreisbach family. Simon was indeed put into prison. The sentence was harsh by our standards, but in the framework of the Count's legal system it was considered to be merited. Only parts of the story have come down to us. We shall use those fragments as pointers to help us make sense of the events in Simon's life from spring 1735 to spring 1737.

The unknown period from 1 April to 1 October 1735, the date when Simon was put into prison.
In the previous DERR we could find an almost verbatim report of Simon Dreisbach's two testimonies in the court of Count August on 31 March and 1 April 1735. The proceedings were not about Simon at that point, but were part of an investigation into the criminal activities of Johann Adam Milchsack. However, it must have been only too clear to Simon that even before his first day of questioning in court on 31 March he was in trouble. Grain stolen from one of Count August's farms had apparently been discovered at Simon's farmhouse,[1] *Am Aberge*, in Oberndorf and Simon could not conceal his part in the theft which had been master-minded by Milchsack.

Though documentation is lacking, the court's next step, after Simon had admitted his collusion with Milchsack, was perhaps to mete out some form of punishment later in the spring of 1735. It was not only a question of theft of grain, but Simon's act constituted grievous insubordination to August, the absolute ruler of Wittgenstein-Wittgenstein. As proposed in DERR no. 13, Simon may well have been fined by Count August's court, perhaps stiffly. We simply do not know.

Did life change for the Dreisbach family after Simon's admission of guilt? Lacking any record of steps the court took in Simon's case, we can nevertheless suspect that he was the subject of gossip in Oberndorf and the nearby villages. DERR no. 13 presented various possible reactions among the Dreisbachs' neighbors, some favorable, some less so.

On 27 August 1735 Count August died. He was succeeded by his son Friedrich who was then in his late twenties. One can wonder if a new young ruler had any interest in a villager's filching of grain and in other not very spectacular activities that may have come to light. However that may be, the wheels of the Wittgenstein judiciary continued to turn, and Simon was arrested in September.

1 October 1735: Simon begins to serve a lengthy prison sentence.
At some point in September Simon must have been called once more before the judicial authorities. Here, too, documentation is lacking and no record of the accusations against Simon or of the sentence imposed has been found. However, a new fact had apparently come to the attention of the court – something that was dangerous for Simon Dreisbach. Our main, if partial, clue to the nature of this incriminating

[1] This information appeared in a later testimony by Milchsack, aiming to shift the blame to Simon, and would only have served Milchsack's purpose if it was already known to the authorities. It is possible that Milchsack himself orchestrated the discovery of the stolen goods at Simon's house.

circumstance is found in the second letter of appeal written by Simon from prison in the spring of 1737 and addressed to Count Friedrich. This letter and its predecessor will be examined below.

Simon's sentence began on 1 October 1735 when he was put into prison in Castle Wittgenstein which sits atop a promontory above the town of Laasphe. (See the somewhat stylized engraving in DERR no. 6, *Fig. 2*.) Here was the official residence of the Counts of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein and the seat of the territory's administrative and judicial authorities. The castle's functionaries and employees, in addition to serving the ruling family, dealt with record-keeping, finance, upkeep and maintenance of the castle, maintaining order throughout the territory and also keeping a small force of militiamen.

In a corner of the so-called Middle Building (no. 5 in *Fig. 1*) was a primitive prison consisting of three parallel cells, possibly an integral part of the castle's medieval foundations. The prison cells are shown in some detail in our *Fig. 2* below.

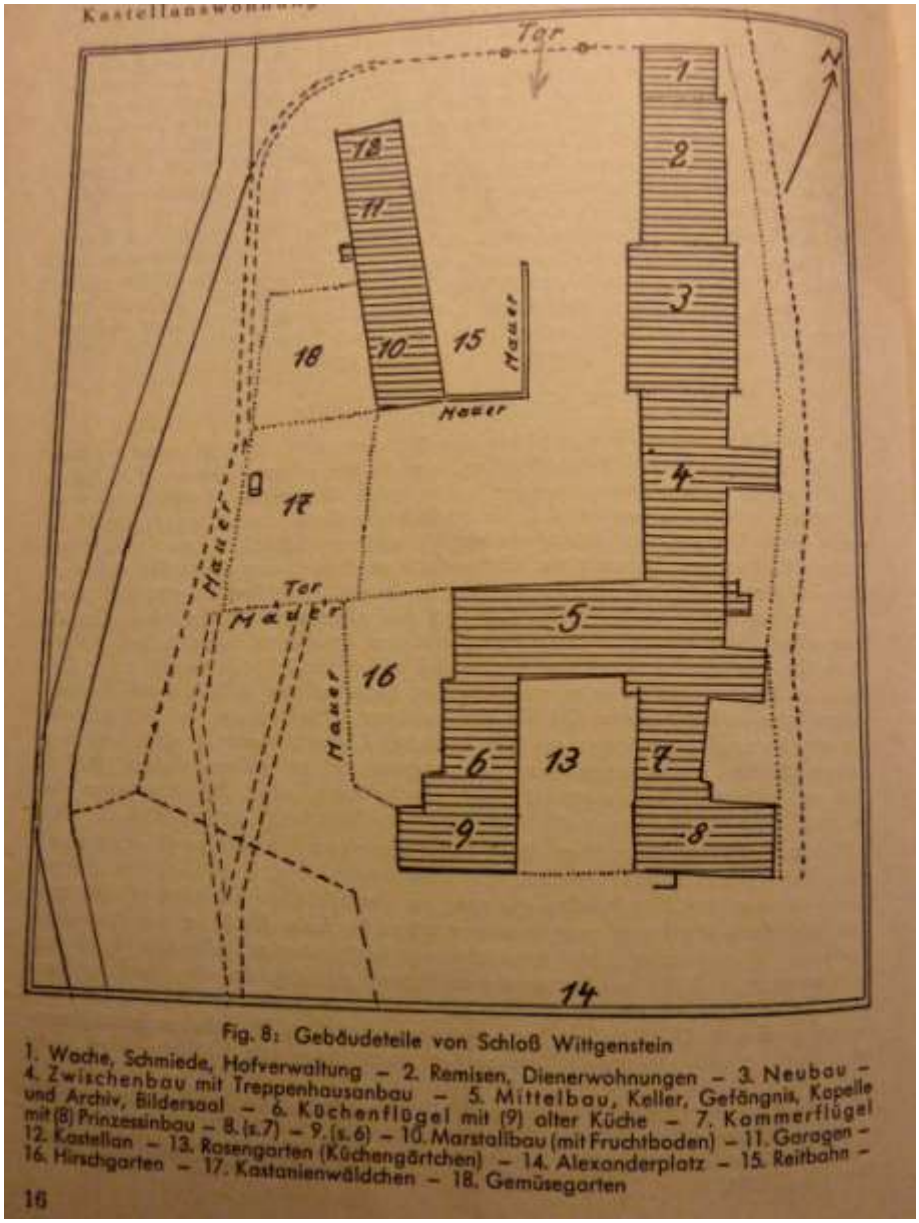

Fig. 8: Gebäudeteile von Schloß Wittgenstein

1. Wache, Schmiede, Hofverwaltung – 2. Remisen, Dienerwohnungen – 3. Neubau – 4. Zwischenbau mit Treppenhausanbau – 5. Mittelbau, Keller, Gefängnis, Kapelle und Archiv, Bildersaal – 6. Küchenflügel mit (9) alter Küche – 7. Kammerflügel mit (8) Prinzessinbau – 8. (s. 7) – 9. (s. 6) – 10. Marstallbau (mit Fruchtboden) – 11. Garagen – 12. Kastellan – 13. Rosengarten (Küchengärtchen) – 14. Alexanderplatz – 15. Reitbahn – 16. Hirschgarten – 17. Kastanienwäldchen – 18. Gemüsegarten

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Fig. 1. Modern plan of Castle Wittgenstein.

In the years when Simon was imprisoned there, the section labeled "5" here, the Mittelbau *or Middle Building, was one of the principal sections of the castle. According to the caption underneath this plan, the Middle Building contained a cellar, a prison, a chapel, an archive and a picture hall.*

The three dungeon-like prison cells were situated under-ground beneath the north-west corner of the Middle Building (5).

Various other parts of the castle are more recent. The sections from 4 to 1 were either altered (no. 4) or rebuilt (nos. 1 – 3) between 1735 and 1782, and were the scene of much hard labor by Simon Dreisbach.

Photo courtesy of Heinrich Imhof.[2]

[2] From Wilhelm Hartnack, "Schloß Wittgenstein", in the journal, *Wittgenstein*, 1962, vol. 26, no. 2, p. 16.

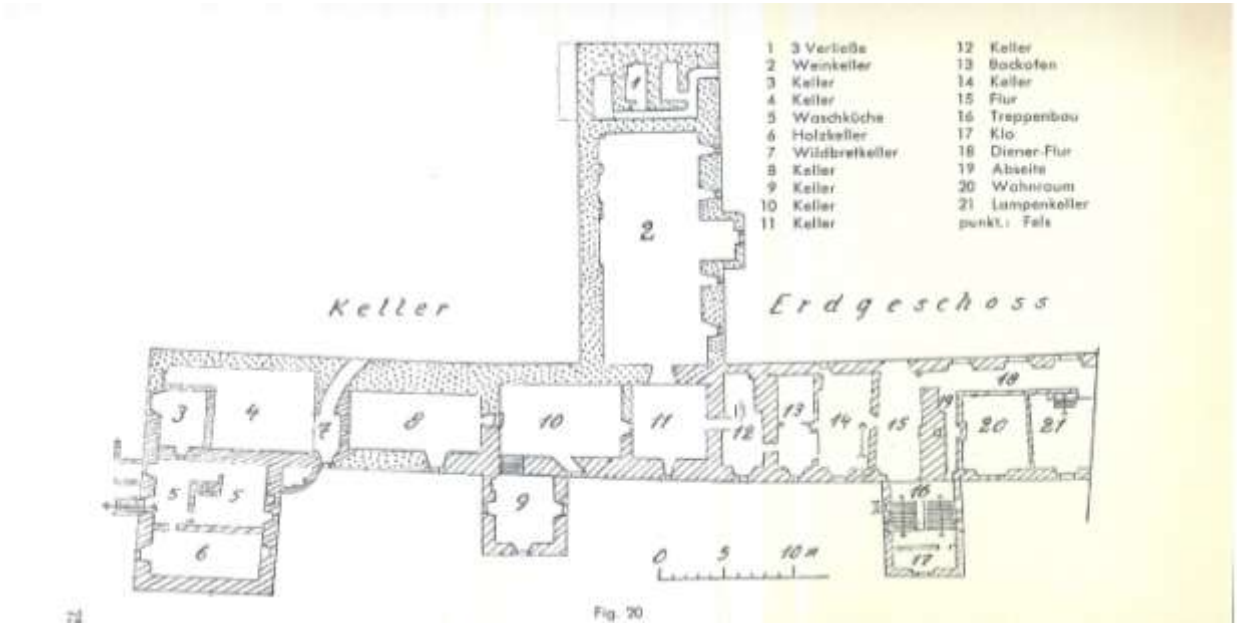

Fig. 2. Castle Wittgenstein, cellar level, showing part of today's structure. (Note that the orientation here is different from that of Fig. 1, which has North at the top. Here North is to the right.) The thicker, dotted cellar walls are of earlier date than those with hatching.

Number 1, at the very top, shows the tripartite prison or Verliesse *(dungeon) which seems to have been windowless). It is not known if Simon Dreisbach spent any, all or none of his sentence confined here, or if eighteenth century prisoners were housed elsewhere on the castle grounds. It is very likely that Simon was required to do daily manual labor on the new sections that were being built to the right of numbers 18 and 21 in this figure. Andreas Sassmanshausen has graciously supplied a full copy of the 1962 article by Wilhelm Hartnack, cited in note 1. The image reproduced here is found on its p.75.*

Simon the letter writer.

The very existence of the letters Simon addressed to Count Friedrich from prison suggests that Simon was not confined to the cellar dungeon, and that he had, or was given, access to pen and paper and was permitted to write and send several letters of supplication. We can wonder how common it can have been for an ordinary prisoner from the countryside to be capable of writing letters in a hand that, if not elegant, was strong and energetic. Was it usual, moreover, that a village farmer was able to formulate a text couched in the florid and subservient style considered appropriate when addressing one's sovereign? We know nothing of Simon's schooling, which could have been restricted to a few winter months each year, but it is evident that he was no stranger to penmanship. In any event we are fortunate to have, in addition to Simon's brief letter to the authorities of 15 January 1727 (presented in DERR no. 6), these two letters that he penned in prison in early 1737.

Simon's first letter of supplication to the Count covers both sides of a sheet of paper. At the beginning, when he addresses his ruler as "High born Count of the Realm", his pen attempts an imitation of the large flourishes one would expect of a professional scribe. In the body of the letter Simon's script is unhesitating, with a strong forward slant. In this and the following letter we shall meet householder Simon in new and unpleasant circumstances, and discover the material cost to him and his family of his imprisonment, as well as the extremely harsh financial terms imposed upon him when he sought to save his farm and his family.

Fig. 3. The beginning of Simon Dreisbach's first letter of supplication to Count Friedrich, written about mid-February 1737 while he was imprisoned in Castle Wittgenstein. Simon has attempted to pen the salutation, "Hoch Gebohrener Reichs Graf gnädigster Graf und Herr*" (High Born Count of the Realm gracious Count and Lord), in a calligraphic style suitable to the high station of the addressee. This letter was discovered in February 2013 by Heinrich Imhof in holding* D 14 *in the Princely Archive of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein, Bad Laasphe. Photo courtesy of Mr. Imhof.*

The first letter of supplication to Count Friedrich, written in mid-February 1737.

Simon comes straight to the point in his opening sentence, requesting that the Count will allow him to present in all submissiveness his extremely distressing need and grave situation now that he has been imprisoned for 74 weeks. He then continues with stylistic diplomacy, by thanking the Count as his beloved *landes Vatter* (father of the territory or land) for graciously giving him a stiff sentence so that he will be more prudent in the future and avoid evil deeds.

In a lengthy new paragraph Simon speaks of the fines that were part of his sentence. He will never be able to pay them as long as he remains in prison, and this leaves him in a situation for which there is no help or relief. He proposes therefore that he be loosed from his "chains and irons" so he can earn some money to pay the fines imposed by the Count. The term Simon uses for "irons" is *sprenger*, a word which has many meanings, but the definition most applicable to Simon's prison context is an implement of correction for criminals consisting of an iron post with four chains attached, the two outer ones for fettering the hands, the two inner ones for restraining the feet.[3]

This is a grim picture indeed, and we can doubt if Simon ever was shackled in such a way, nor do we know if the claustrophobic underground prison cells from medieval times were still in use in the 1730's. If Simon had spent 74 weeks shackled in a narrow, cold, dark cell, he would have been a physical

[3] See *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm*, the authoritative source for older German usage, online version at http://woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB.

wreck by the time he penned his letter in February 1737. The mere fact that he was in circumstances which permitted the writing of letters suggests a different form of punishment, one which we have reason to believe consisted of performing unpaid manual labor.

Would an able-bodied man of thirty-seven be left to languish in the dungeon when he could be made to do work on a project of importance to the Count? Keeping Simon in a prison cell day in and day out would have constituted a double economic loss. When at home, Simon, like the Count's other householders, was required to spend many days a year in mandatory labor of various types on the Count's farms, in his huge forests, on his construction projects and more. The Count was now deprived of Simon's unpaid workdays. On the other hand, he was employing builders and craftsmen to work on major additions to his castle. Proof that Simon was made to work at the castle is found in his second letter where he writes that in January of 1737 he was detailed to work for four weeks "in the castle and courtyard".

Fig. 4. Mid-twentieth century aerial view of Castle Wittgenstein. The three sections extending forward from the central building are the parts whose construction began in 1735. Photo, by an unidentified photographer, from Wittgenstein, *Vol. 26, 1962, p. 19, used with the gracious permission of the* Wittgenstein *editors.*

The new wing of the castle replaced older structures, and grew piece by piece, starting in 1735. It comprised practical parts such as a coach house, or *Remise,* near the entrance, and also living quarters for the castellan or castle superintendent. The wing's largest and tallest section was to be the new residence of

the Count and his family (section no. 3 in *Fig.1). S*ee also the tall, five-storey block in *Fig. 4).*[4] Apart from Simon's mention of his four weeks of work at the castle in his second letter, he was surely required to do more or less permanent work in and around the castle, starting from the beginning of his prison sentence in October 1735.

In this February letter, after expressing his wish to be able to pay the fines that had been imposed on him, Simon presented his request. He asked to be freed from "chains and shackles" *(sprenger)* – which we believe to be used here as a figure of speech for being released from prison), so he could earn the wherewithal to pay the debts (fines) owed to the Count. The letter is undated, but has been calculated as having been written in mid-February 1737.[5] At that time Simon had another, stronger motivation, though he did not express it in writing until he was in desperate straits in the beginning of April. Writing in February, with spring not far off, foremost in his mind must have been the needs of his farm and his family. Simon was greatly needed on the farm, as we shall see in his next letter. The all-important season for plowing and sowing was approaching.

Simon's letter was sent off to the Count. Week followed upon week, but no reply came. At last, on April 2nd, a response was delivered in person.

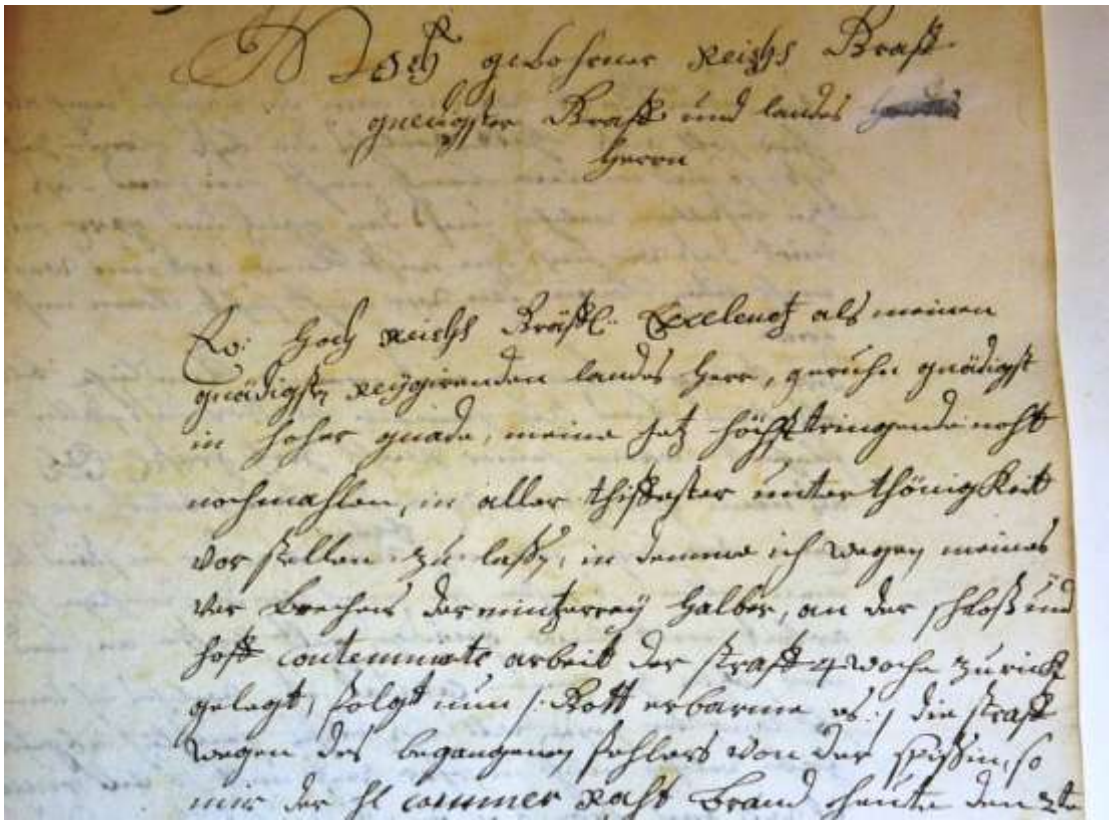

Fig. 5. Simon's second appeal to Count Friedrich, 2 April 1737, part of first page. In line 6 he mentions his crime of mintzerreÿ *(counterfeiting). Photo courtesy of Heinrich Imhof, who discovered this document in holding WA D 14 in the Princely Archive of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein, Bad Laasphe.*

[4] Hartnack, 1962, pp. 15-18 and *passim*. See. n. 1.

[5] Our thanks are due to Heinrich Imhof for calculating the date when Simon began serving his prison sentence and the approximate date of this letter.

Crime and punishment. Simon's second letter to Count Friedrich, written on 2 April 1737.

On 2 April 1737 Councillor Brand, a member of the Count's High Council, read out to Simon the official response to his February request. The Count's decision was not at all what Simon had hoped for. He was so disturbed by what he heard that he wrote a reply to the Count that very day! Simon's main points in this immediately composed letter follow.

- Simon once again humbly presents his very pressing need.
- In January, because of his crime of counterfeiting, Simon was put to work for four weeks "at the court and castle"
- Now, God have mercy, Councillor Brand had informed him today, the second of the month, that because of the misdeed involving the Spiess woman, he would have to work for six more weeks at the court and castle as punishment.
- Simon thanks the Count a thousand times for such gracious punishment (and would also gladly and willingly comply).
- However, as is known, the time will soon arrive when the crops must be sown.
- But because of his more than eighty weeks of imprisonment, Simon has put his family in such a terrible situation this year that they now have no access to bread and nourishment. It has all been consumed so that there is no more bread to be seen.
- If Simon must remain in prison for six more weeks, his family will not have the capacity to till the fields, and this will mean total ruin, with no way for them to save themselves, for he who does not sow cannot reap.

Having thus set the scene, and made his point extra clear with the maxim, *he who does not sow cannot reap*, Simon's proposals follow. He presents two possible ways for him to get back to his farm work before it is too late in the year, and begins in a suitably humble manner.

- Simon presents himself as a child to his father, on bended knee, and requests that the six weeks of obligatory work at the castle be graciously replaced by a sum of money Simon is to pay to the Count in installments that will not ruin him.
- If this is not possible, then he asks to be given his freedom for a time, until he has worked his fields, after which he will return to finish his sentence.

We can understand how serious the situation was for Simon's family and his farm. It being only 2 April, Simon was doing what he could to save the year's crops, and at the beginning of April he could still hope to be back in *Am Aberge* in time to work his fields. Two weeks passed. There was still no answer. The burden of anxiety that Simon must have shared with his wife Kette and the two of his sons who were old enough to understand the situation, must have been almost unbearable.

At last a decision is taken, but it is late – already 17 April.

Simon had written his supplication on both sides of a sheet of paper, folded it twice and enclosed it in another piece of paper which, also twice folded, served as a kind of envelope announcing the contents of the missive – in this case "*My most humble and submissive supplication. Simmon Dreyß bach von Obern dorf*". This is clearly written in Simon's own hand. The missive was taken to another part of the castle, and a new period of waiting began for Simon. Simon, of course, did not see his letter again. We can follow its path, however, in the documents still present in the Princely Archive.

Simon's petition was received on 3 April 1737, as was duly noted on the outside page of the letter. (See the upside-down part of *Fig. 5.*) It was customary to record, on the address side of a petition, the Count's decision, with his signature. At the bottom of *Fig.* 5 we can make out a large 'F' for Friedrich and a capital 'G' for *Graf* (Count). There is a 'z' connected to the 'G' and a 'u' follows, to make the preposition '*zu*'. This is followed by a 'W' and a few strokes to signify an abbreviated form of 'Wittgenstein'. The date of the Count's decision appears at the end: 17 April 1737. Simon had thus been made to endure two more weeks of uncertainty.

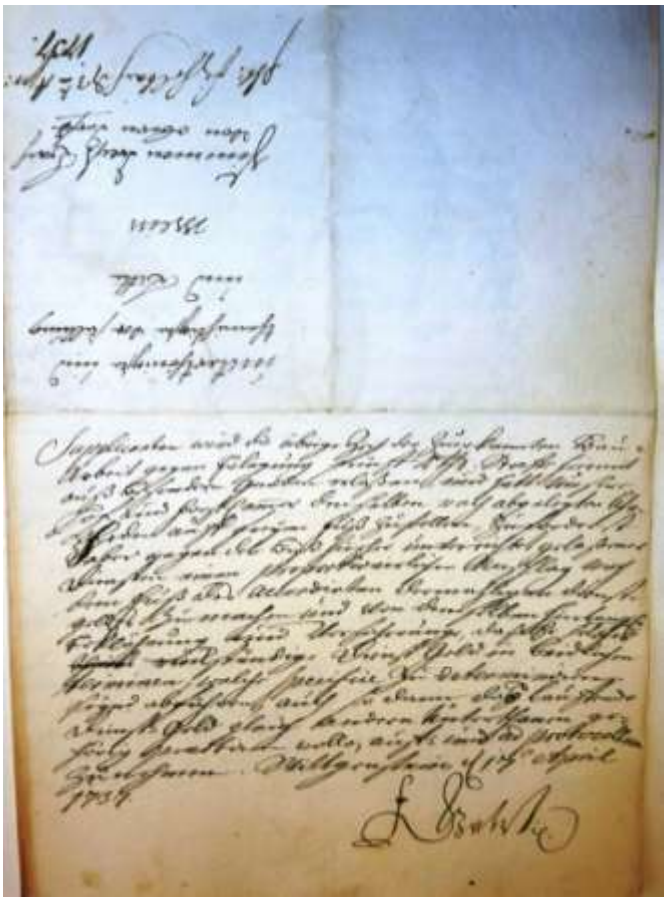

Fig. 5. The outside page of Simon's second letter of supplication to Count Friedrich. There are four different hands on this page, written at four different times. 1) Upper left section (upside-down): Simon Dreisbach's description of the contents. 2) A court functionary has inscribed, after Simon's text, the date of receipt, 3rd April 1737. 3) Bottom half of the page: a secretary of the Count or a court scribe has recorded the text of the Count's decision. 4) At the very bottom Count Friedrich has added his official signature. Provenance: holding WA D 14, Princely Archive, Bad Laasphe. Photo courtesy of Heinrich Imhof .

This text shows that the Count has agreed to the first of Simon's proposals. Simon must pay five Reichstalers to compensate for the number of days of construction work he still had left to do as a prisoner. He will be free on the condition that he pledges to reimburse the Count in set installments for all the ordinary obligatory work he would have performed for the Count had he been a free man, to be calculated proportionally. The very next day the agreement was ready for signing. Simon could then return home a free man, but laden with a heavy burden of debt,

The high price of freedom.

The original agreement which Simon must have signed, has not survived. The extant version is a copy that has been entered in chronological order in the official record book of decisions and other acts of the Count's High Council.[6]

[6] This is the basic document Heinrich Imhof found in January 2013 in archival holding WA D 14. It is what one might call the '*Acta* book' kept by the Count's chancelry to record official acts and decisions. The agreement with Simon Dreisbach is on pages bearing the stamped numbers 26, 27, 28. Only the recto side of the page is numbered; thus the document is actually on 4½ page sides.

The agreement which Simon Dreisbach had to accept is lengthy and detailed, and probably turned out to be much more demanding than Simon had ever imagined. Simon would have to reimburse the Count for the many days of normal obligatory service he did not, and of course could not, render to the Count while he was in prison. The total arrived at as repayment was the considerable sum of 35 Reichstalers, 22 Albus and 4 pennies.[7] Moreover, he was required to pay the Count an additional yearly sum of 23 Reichstalers and 30 Albus. This was a heavy financial burden for a man with a small farm that had not been properly tended for a year and a half.

Simon had no choice but to sign. It was already the second half of April and he had to get home and get to work. No further information on the end to his prison term has been found. After signing, Simon was permitted (we hope) to depart immediately, with the unpaid five Reichstaler 'exit fee' weighing upon him.

Simon's return to *Am Aberge* and his family.

Simon's walk home was not a short one. There was no straight road from Laasphe or the castle going northwest to Oberndorf. More than 18½ months had passed since he had last been in his house. Even if members of Simon's family had been permitted to visit him in prison, little John would probably not have been among them. Eight months old when Simon went to prison, he was now a toddler of two years and a few months. Nor would George Wilhelm, soon to be four, have any clear memory of his father. Simon Jr., the middle son, now seven, would have had memories of his father, but the returning ex-prisoner may have looked very different from the father he remembered.

The two oldest sons would have been only too aware of the social embarrassment associated with their father's being investigated by the High Council in the spring of 1735, not to mention the wagging of local tongues during the summer. Then there would have been the shame of their father's arrest in September and his being put into prison in October. (There is of course the possibility, mentioned previously, that some may have felt tacit approval of Simon's attempts at counterfeiting, which could be considered a resistance measure in a situation where change was not to be hoped for.) In early October 1735 Jost had just turned fourteen, and Adam was twelve going on thirteen. If they were occasionally sent to the castle to bring some necessary item to their father, they would have seen some aspects of his prison life. In any case, they were the sons who would have been most affected during this long and painful period. And then there was Kette. We cannot imagine how Simon looked to her after more than a year and a half of imprisonment and hard labor. It was she who would have detected the most changes, large and small, in her husband.

There would have been changes to his farm and livestock. Kette and the children would have maintained the vegetable garden and the cabbage patch, and kept the chickens for eggs and occasional meat. Whether they had the means to keep and feed all the livestock is uncertain. That they would be able to plow, sow and harvest as Simon would have done is out of the question. In accordance with the ancient system of land tenancy, Simon's fields were scattered round about Oberndorf, and some, such as pastures and meadows were perhaps farthest away. See the schematic map of how villagers' farm lands may have been distributed in DERR no. 11, *Fig. 3*. We do not know if Kette and her sons received occasional help from neighbors and relatives, but that can hardly have been sufficient to maintain a family of six on their farm for eighteen months.

[7] According to Heinrich Imhof, 35 Reichstalers was a very large sum, and was the equivalent of the price of three or four cows. (Imhof's message of 17 January 2013.)

Where were Simon's brothers, Georg and Mannes?

At the time when Simon went to prison, his brother Georg was nearing his thirty-fourth birthday. What help could be expected from him? Very little. Georg had left Oberndorf before 1730 and made his own life in eastern Wittgenstein in Richstein, a village larger than Oberndorf. He did come back to his old home for the baptism of Simon Jr. in the Feudingen church on 24 January 1730, where he is listed as the second of a number of baptismal sponsors. He would of course have stayed to take part in the festivities at the house where he had grown up. By June of 1734 Georg was married to a Richstein girl, and at the end of October 1735 their first-born, Henrich, was baptized in the Arfeld church. Simon, who would normally have been invited to the christening and the celebration that followed, was just then finishing the first month of his imprisonment.

If Georg had his own life to live near the eastern border of Wittgenstein, was there help to be had from the youngest of the three Dreisbach brothers, Mannes/Hermannus? Not much, it appears. Born in April 1706, he was twenty-nine when Simon began his prison sentence. We can follow Mannes in the lists *(Untertanenverzeichnis)* of the Count's village subjects that were put together, household by household, with some frequency, much like a census. In the 1727 list both Georg and Mannes are listed as unmarried and living in *Am Aberge.*

The next such list available to us is that of 1736. Part of it has already appeared as *Fig. 1* in DERR No. 4, where we see the household of *Simon Dreisbach* and *Maria Kete Dreisbach*. Here we encounter Mannes again, listed first, before the five Dreisbach sons, as "the man's brother", age 25, followed by a note in the right margin, "militiaman – 4 years". Mannes, while registered as having his home base in *Am Aberge*, was serving a four-year term in the Count's militia. Thus he was away on duty much of the time, and was of little if any use to Simon in the fields. (Note, no mention is made in the margin of Simon's being in prison, as he remained the Count's official tenant.)

Small uprisings in Hessen, a levy of village soldiers, and two "liberations" on 18 April 1737.

Why did Count Friedrich's administration take so long to consider and answer Simon Dreisbach's two letters of supplication? Simon received no response to his first letter until some six weeks after sending it as 'internal mail' within the castle. Regarding his second letter, penned immediately after he had at last received a response, it too was sent off as 'internal mail', but got no official answer until two weeks and three days later. Were Count Friedrich and his administrators insensitive to the seasonal and very practical needs of this tenant farmer?

It was not easy to be the "absolute" head of a tiny territory surrounded by larger and more powerful neighbors, Hessen being the dominant power. In early 1737 there were peasant uprisings in several of the villages in the Province of Oberhessen some distance southeast of Wittgenstein, and the local lords demanded military reinforcements. Friedrich, *Landgrave* of Hessen, then exacted "tribute" from the surrounding territories, Wittgenstein-Wittgenstein included, in the form of soldiers and peasants.[8] This left visible traces in the 1737 *Untertanenverzeichnis* or list of tenant subjects, a census-like house-to-house visitation ordered periodically by the Count's administration in Laasphe.

Fig. 6 below shows some of the effects in the village of Oberndorf of this "tribute" in the form of male subjects called up as militiamen to be made available to the Hessian authorities. Only three households are shown here, but all have been affected by the Hessian demand for soldiers. Starting from the bottom, we see in the margin that in the Wied household a son, Johan Jost, age 23, was called to the

[8] I am indebted to Dr. Ulf Lückel, Editor of the periodical, *Wittgenstein*, for his communication of 7 May 2013 with otherwise unobtainable information on the military situation in Oberhessen in early 1737.

militia on 12 April 1737, but that he was dismissed *(befreÿt)* on the 27th of the same month. In the Hackeller family above the Wieds, 19-year old Jacob is serving a two year stint in the militia and is thus not eligible for dismissal. Above him, his 33-year old brother Conrad was to present himself at the militia on 27 April 1737, but that has been crossed out and *befreÿt* is written below.

Fig. 6. Part of a page from the 1737 list of the Count's householders and their families in Oberndorf. The right-hand column shows a number of changes regarding service in the Count's militia. These are explained in the text. Provenance: WA W 56, Princely Archive, Bad Laasphe. Photo, Heinrich Imhof.

We come now to the Simon Dreisbach household at the top of the page, where Simon's brother Mannes is listed last in the family. He is shown as a militiaman serving for four years. We have just seen that in 1736 he was also listed as doing four years of duty in the militia. Not knowing when his period of four years started, it is possible that he had begun it in 1733 and was now ready for dismissal. In any event, he too is *befreÿt*. By this time the uprisings in the Oberhessen villages had abated, or had been quelled. Mannes now joined the many village men who were released from Wittgenstein service before having to begin the long march to Oberhessen. The date of Mannes's release, like Simon's, was April 18, 1737.

It is not known where Mannes had been serving. Nor do we know if one of the brothers was aware that the other was regaining his liberty on the same day. It seems likely that by the evening of the 18th of April, both men were back in *Am Aberge*, and that suddenly Kette had two long absent men at her table.

We take leave of Simon Dreisbach here. He was home. He had many weeks and months of hard farm labor ahead of him. He was also carrying an invisible but extremely heavy burden of debt. In six years and almost one month, on the night of May 15, 1743, Simon and his family would be leaving *Am Aberge*, never to return.

A.D.G. 14 March 2015