

DERR #3: Where On Earth Is Wittgenstein?

In DERR #2 we presented the three chief 18th century Dreisbach immigrants, Simon, Martin and Henrich, who arrived in Philadelphia in 1743, 1751 and 1754 respectively. All were born in Wittgenstein. On modern maps of Germany, Wittgenstein cannot be found as a separate entity. It is today the eastern half of *Kreis* Siegen-Wittgenstein, one of a number of subsidiary districts of the German state of Nordrhein-Westfalen (North Rhine-Westphalia).

On the map below, we show Wittgenstein alone, separated from its present legislative marriage with Siegen. We see it as a small black lozenge, situated in west-central Germany. As the map shows, persons intending to emigrate to North America would have a significant overland distance to cover before arriving at Cologne where they could take passage on a barge or riverboat to the port of Rotterdam.



Fig. 1. Map of Germany. Frontispiece of The Dreisbach Book, which was published under the auspices of The Dreisbach Family Association in 1998, and is now out of print.

Despite its central location, Wittgenstein is far from being a hub of communications. No super highway or *Autobahn* passes through it. Its railway 'network' consists of one line only, and it stops abruptly in the town of Bad Berleburg. Wittgenstein has no huge cities, though it is rightly proud of its two historic former capitals, (Bad) Berleburg in the north and (Bad) Laasphe in the south, each with an impressive castle or palace.¹ There is not much in the way of large-scale or heavy industry. Nor is the landscape one of endless cultivated expanses. Historically, the forests have always constituted Wittgenstein's principal natural resource. The tree-covered hills of Wittgenstein are for the most part "princely" forests that are owned even today by the two local branches of the ancient house of Wittgenstein. All in all, Wittgenstein has retained many areas of quiet beauty, with parts that are much favored by hikers.

Let us take a look at some high-lying terrain that was familiar to Simon Dreisbach and his sons. We show it in two versions – a photograph taken in late spring 2012, and a map from 1739.



Fig. 2. Late spring landscape photographed by Marcia Dreisbach Falconer, looking north from the top of the Aberg hill above Oberndorf in southern Wittgenstein. A stream, the Oberndorfer Bach, flows between the foreground and background hills. Compare with Fig. 3.

The photo conveys the rural character of much of Wittgenstein. It also shows an interesting continuation of land usage down through the centuries. This hill, called the Aberg, from which Simon Dreisbach's house got its name, was formerly cultivated by the Count's subjects, actually his vassals.

¹ Today the Wittgenstein half of *Kreis Siegen-Wittgenstein* consists of three administrative sub-divisions: the City of Bad Berleburg, the City of Bad Laasphe, and the Municipality of Erndtebrück.

Proof that the hill was already cultivated in the 18th century is found in the *Forstatlas*, or Forest Atlas, a book in very large format that was made during the rule of Count Friedrich of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein. A small part of one of the large maps is shown in Fig. 3. The brown, seemingly barren areas, represent land that the Count's subjects cultivate. The type of field or crop is not indicated as the main point of these maps was to depict the Count's forests. Therefore each wooded area was represented as one of three types; tall beech, tall oak or birch and scrub. The non-agricultural areas in Fig. 3. are of the third, scrub type.



Fig. 3. The Aberg hill (in bottom half of picture) as shown in the Forstatlas of 1739, now in the Princely Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein Archive in Bad Laasphe. Detail of a photo by Marcia Dreisbach Falconer.

The *Forstatlas* consists of schematic bird's-eye view maps, whereas the 2012 photo in Fig. 2 is looking north at eye-level. The map and the photo can nevertheless be 'read' as complementing one another. Moreover, those who can trace their family line back to certain villages in southern Wittgenstein are fortunate, for the *Forstatlas* may contain an aerial view of one's ancestral village as it was some 275 years ago.

We shall return to this map in connection with Simon Dreisbach's secret departure from his house in Oberndorf. It must be pointed out right away, however, that Fig. 3 shows no house on the Aberg, above the Oberndorfer Bach. The map-maker clearly concentrated on drawing the houses in the center of the village. The site of Simon's house is in any event known, and has been photographed on several occasions.

Sorting out the Wittgensteins, part 1. The territory is divided in 1605.

Having had a taste of rural Wittgenstein present and past, it is high time to get a grasp of what we might call the whole of Wittgenstein and its two historic parts. A bare-bones history (much oversimplified) would begin like this: First, in the Middle Ages, there was one Wittgenstein. Then, starting in 1605 there were two, when the territory was divided between two brothers. The southern territory acquired the official name of Wittgenstein-Wittgenstein, while the northern one became Wittgenstein-Berleburg. The ruling families that issued from the two brothers were also known by different names. The south was ruled by the House of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Wittgenstein, which became

in 1653 Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein, and had its residence in the castle of Wittgenstein atop a hill above Laasphe. In the north, the House of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Berleburg lived in its castle in the town of Berleburg (indeed, they still live there), whereas in the middle of the last century the southern Princes moved to another of their properties in the town of Schwarzenau.

This divided situation continued until 1806 when the two territories lost their status and their names in a short-lived takeover by the Grand Duchy of Hessen-Darmstadt. Still greater changes were to come.

* * *

We shall return later to the more recent history of Wittgenstein, but we must first shift our attention to the two Wittgensteins as they existed from 1603 until 1806, thus the period during which the earliest Dreisbach emigrants left to go to Pennsylvania. Another map is called for.

* In fig. 4 we see Wittgenstein traversed by a meandering east-to-west line of red dots marking the border between Wittgenstein-Berleburg and Wittgenstein-Wittgenstein.

* The two capitals are marked by simplified castles, B. for Berleburg and L. Laasphe.

* Important churches other than those in the two principal towns are designated as A (Arfeld), E (Erndtebrück), F (Feudingingen) and R (Raumland).

* For the present, only those villages are shown which were mentioned, however briefly, in DERR #2, i.e. Amt = Amtshausen, Ba = Balde, Ob = Oberndorf, R = Raumland, Rich = Richstein, St = Steinbach.

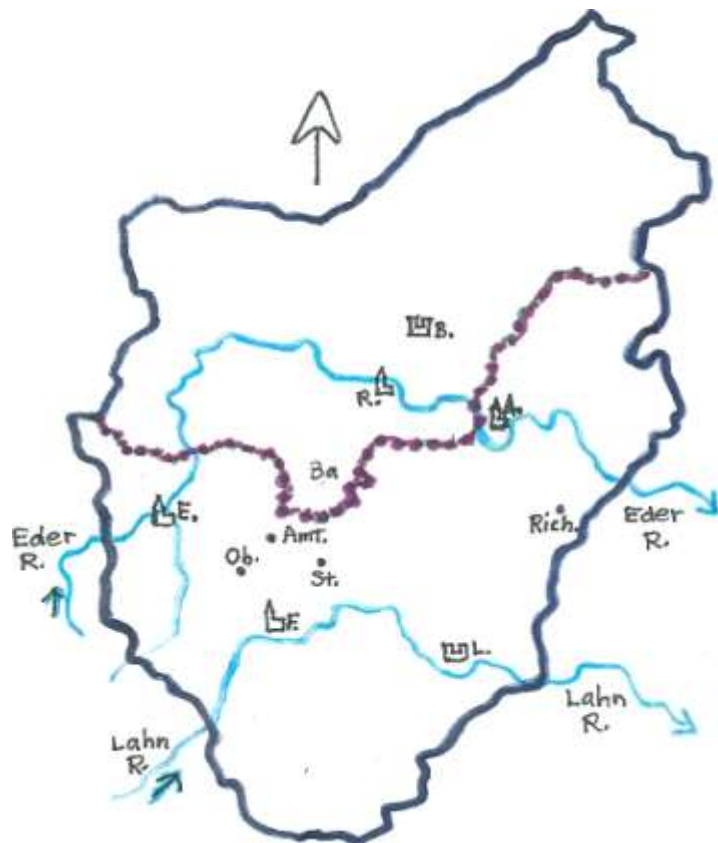


Fig. 4, Northern and southern Wittgenstein, 1603-1806.

Did this political division affect the Wittgensteiners in their daily lives? Did it bring changes for the better? Much remained the same. The villagers continued to share the same culture, worship according to the same Reformed liturgy, speak related dialects and, though the north had somewhat harder winters, they nevertheless continued to deal with similar farming conditions. More important was the inevitable circumstance that all continued to live in feudalistic subjection to the ruler, be it one Count or the other.

A ruler, be it one or two, generally wishes to rule and to prosper. In a geographic area so lacking in natural resources that the principal export was charcoal, keeping up the flow of income to the coffers of both the northern and the southern Counts was a priority matter. One can see from the extant records just how detailed were the obligations imposed on those subjects who farmed the Counts' lands – obligations to be met by means of taxes, in contributions in kind, in manual labor, and in other kinds of personal service. Each subject who left the territory represented, in the eyes of the Count's administrators, a diminishment of the Count's income. For this reason, to permanently leave the Count's territory without permission, and without paying exit fees of various types, was considered

a criminal offense. We shall see in another DERR how Simon Dreisbach's uncle was caught and imprisoned in 1725 for having tried to emigrate with his large family group.

There is much that could be said about social and economic conditions during the two hundred years of the existence of the two Wittgensteins. In both territories, villages were devastated by marauding troops in the Thirty Years' War, and also by accompanying plagues. By the end of the war, in 1648, so many had died that it took fifty years for population levels to return to what they had been.

Our concern, however, centers on conditions in the 18th century, especially those circumstances that contributed to emigration. Thus most of the projected DERR numbers will deal with some condition or problem having a possible connection with the decision to emigrate. Here, however, we must tell the rest of the story of Wittgenstein, a tale that covers yet another period of some two hundred years, including a time of dismay and protest that finally ended in victory.

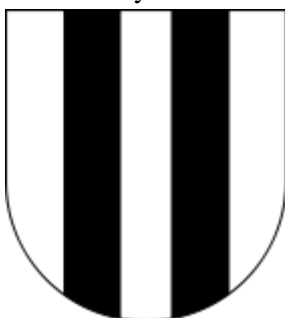
Sorting out the Wittgensteins, part 2. The Counts become Princes; Wittgenstein becomes Prussian; and in 1974 Wittgenstein 'disappears'.

Thus far we have spoken of the rulers of the two Wittgensteins as counts. Prior to 1806, while still enjoying the status of being independent rulers, the northern and southern Counts were elevated to the rank of Prince, the northern house of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Berleburg in 1792 and the southern house of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein in 1801. Their territories could now be designated principalities. When, as already mentioned, Wittgenstein was absorbed into Hessen-Darmstadt in 1806, the Princes retained their titles, but their territories lost their independence. The unfortunate inhabitants had to pay double taxes, to their former rulers and to the new Hessian ones as well.

Then, in 1816, the political map of Europe was drastically revised by the Treaty of Vienna or, more correctly, the Final Act of the Congress of Vienna. Prussia was accorded large and significant regions, including Westphalia. Wittgenstein, extracted from Hessen, was attached to Westphalia as a distinct district, or *Kreis*. This meant that Wittgenstein was now a very small part of the Kingdom of Prussia. And, in essence, it remained so until the end of the Second World War.

In 1946 Westphalia and other nearby territories found themselves in the British occupied zone. The British authorities took it upon themselves to abolish all the previously Prussian provinces in their zone and to reorganize and consolidate them. Thus, two of the Prussian provinces were joined to form North Rhine-Westphalia. Wittgenstein, as part of this new province, acquired a new state capital, Dusseldorf (until 1974), but was not otherwise significantly affected. Twenty-eight years passed. And then... Wittgenstein disappeared.

On 5 November 1974 a major restructuring of the northwestern part of Western Germany was completed. Called the Sauerland/Paderborn law, this new and voluminous legislation affecting district and municipal levels was approved by the North Rhine-Westphalian parliament. The new capital would be the city of Münster. What is more, when the new law went into effect on 1 January 1975, Wittgenstein disappeared. Its neighboring district, *Kreis* Siegen, also disappeared, but was immediately reborn as a new and much larger *Kreis* Siegen which included the former and now



officially non-existent *Kreis* Wittgenstein. For Wittgenstein, this was legislative oblivion; for its inhabitants it was an insult to their sense of self and of history.

A few years earlier, in 1966, *Kreis* Wittgenstein had adopted as its official emblem the ancient coat of arms borne by the Counts of Wittgenstein, arms which went back to at least the fourteenth century. On 1 January 1975, when *Kreis* Wittgenstein ceased to exist as an independent

district, its coat of arms also ceased to have an official role. In Wittgenstein, however, these arms continued to be a rallying point.

It took nine years of protests and agitation to get the state authorities to listen to the aggrieved Wittgensteiners. When an amendment to the law was at last approved, and "*Kreis Siegen*" was replaced everywhere in the legislation with "*Kreis Siegen-Wittgenstein*", nothing had changed in a material sense. Siegen and Wittgenstein continued to form one *Kreis*. The city of Siegen continued to be its capital. In the non-material sphere, however, the Wittgensteiners' devotion to their history had received a great boost. This minute district, with at that time less than forty thousand inhabitants, had won a David-and-Goliath victory. The revised law gained legal validity on 1 January 1984. Just how effective the protests had been can even be glimpsed in the sober justification (*Begründung*) attached to the revised law:

*"In the former Kreis Wittgenstein, and later also in the former Kreis Siegen, there were numerous demands by citizens, politicians and local associations (Heimatsvereinen) that the name of the Kreis not be limited to Siegen only but – not least for historical reasons – that also the name of Wittgenstein be permanently attached to the appellation of the Kreis."*²



The protests had finally had their effect. However, it took somewhat longer, fifteen years in fact, for the judicial machinery of *Kreis Siegen-Wittgenstein* to at last get round to inserting the Wittgenstein symbol into its official coat of arms. As of 1999, this tripartite escutcheon contains the arms of the Counts of Wittgenstein to the left, and to the right the rampant lion of the Dukes of Nassau, the founders of Siegen. Below are symbols of historic occupations in the two territories: the so-called copping hook used for cutting wood to make charcoal, and the miner's lamp symbolizing Siegen's mining industry.

Wittgenstein and Dreisbach traditions. A final word.

Arriving at the end of this necessarily sketchy account of Wittgenstein's long history, one might wonder what all this has to do with North American Dreisbachs. Perhaps little, perhaps more than is immediately apparent. Certainly Wittgenstein emigrants of the 18th century had few, if any, romantic memories of a carefree life among Wittgenstein's meadows and streams. Life was hard, the Counts were exacting and the emigrants' dreams were therefore forward-looking – to lots of available land for them to cultivate, and a better future for their children.

Simon Dreisbach's descendants do not seem to have preserved any traditions, oral or otherwise, about their Wittgenstein origins. There does exist one oral tradition, however, according to which the aged Simon Dreisbach Jr. had one or more chests the family had brought over from "the old country" containing many papers and documents. At some time after his death the unnamed woman of the house decided that there was no use for that old scrap and took it all outside and burned it. According to the source, who was a descendant of Simon Jr., the burning went on for three days. Some of the papers can have been connected to Simon Jr.'s own political career, but the chests may also have held earlier documents, perhaps some originating in Wittgenstein.³

²See:http://www.edumagazin.de/39000/Das_Gesetz_zur_Neugliederung_der_Gemeinden_und_Kreise_des_Neugliederungsraumes_Sauerland_Paderborn_Sauerland_Paderborn_Gesetz.html

³ Told to the author by the late William J. Fiedler, Jr., of New Tripoli, PA, family historian.

The Martin Dreisbach line has retained information on Martin's having been born in Raumland in Wittgenstein and on his marriage in Krombach in Nassau-Siegen. These and other family traditions were written down by his grandson, "Rev. John", and will be discussed later.

In any event, for many of today's Dreisbach descendants, the word "Wittgenstein" has been merely a group of letters with no real significance or point of attachment, though a number might well agree that to have some idea of the events of the years 1605-1806 is in fact to have a background against which we can view the origins and early lives of our immigrant ancestors.

In a more general way, our being aware of the changes in Wittgenstein's official status in the 19th and 20th centuries can help us connect with various aspects of modern European history, from the defeat of Napoleon and the Congress of Vienna in 1815 to Britain's remapping of its occupied zone after the Second World War. Knowing that Wittgenstein was 'erased' from the West German map in 1975 can give us some insight into what it means to be a modern Wittgensteiner, and can help bring us closer to our German cousins. Indeed, we have a lot of German cousins, descended like many of us from Abraham of Balde or his son (or son-in-law) Georg Dreisbach, or from other ancestral Wittgenstein lines in our Dreisbach family trees. We have met some of these cousins, as mentioned in previous DERRs, and they immediately offered to help us learn more about our Wittgenstein roots. Once again we must stress that the DERR would not exist without them.

Castle Wittgenstein was founded in 1187. Berleburg was established in 1258. Notwithstanding its tiny size and minimal population, the territory of Wittgenstein has managed to preserve its particular identity, even when hemmed in by powerful neighbors such as Hessen, Nassau-Siegen and the Archbishopric of Cologne. Wittgenstein's history, as we have seen, is long indeed. As Dreisbach descendants, we too have a share in its eight hundred years of existence as a political entity.

Research Notes

* Only two of the birthplaces of the three principal Dreisbach emigrants can be found in the 1739 *Forstatlas* maps preserved in the Princely Archive of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein in Bad Laasphe. They are **Oberndorf**, shown above in a detail from one of the maps, and **Richstein**, which will be shown in a later DERR. Martin Dreisbach's birthplace, **Raumland**, is not in the *Forstatlas*, as Raumland was in the northern Count's territory whereas, as we have seen, the *Forstatlas* maps were made to depict the forests of the southern Count.

* Laasphe or Bad Laasphe? Berleburg or Bad Berleburg?

Until recently, the names of the towns where the northern and southern Counts (later, Princes) had their seats were **Berleburg** and **Laasphe**. Berleburg, having been numbered since 1971 among those places with approved health spas of the Kneipp type (using various water treatments, hence *Bad* or bath), became officially **Bad Berleburg** by adding the prefix "*Bad*" to its name on 1 January 1974. Laasphe, which had had a Kneipp spa since 1960, followed suit, and on 1 January 1984 became officially **Bad Laasphe**. In conversation, the *Bad* prefix is almost never heard.

* Re: previous publications that touched on the question, "Where on earth is Wittgenstein?":

The Dreisbach Book (compiled, written and edited by Ardis Grosjean Dreisbach, Bruce Jack Dreisbach and Rev. Charles V. Dreisbach, published under the auspices of the Dreisbach Family Association in 1998 and now out of print) was perhaps the first attempt since 1915 to present to North Americans of Dreisbach descent published information on the territory of Wittgenstein. We shall

consider in a later DERR some of the interesting statements on Wittgenstein that appeared in *The Dreisbach Family Journal* in the years 1913-1915.

The Dreisbach Book (TDB) contained specially drawn maps, and included a historical and economic overview based chiefly on information provided by researcher Gustav Schneider of Bad Laasphe. The text in section 2a. of *TDB*, titled "Wittgenstein", is still generally valid:

(Wittgenstein) had no large cities, its agriculture was marginal and there were no raw materials to speak of, only endless stands of beech and oak covering the steep slopes of its hills. The amount of land that could be farmed has always been limited. The valleys which lie between the wooded slopes are not broad, and even today forest covers 60% of Wittgenstein. Villagers combined a little farming, some pasturing and woodcutting and perhaps a trade. Life in Wittgenstein was literally life at the edge of the forest. It was a countryside that could not possibly absorb large increases of population.

We shall return to questions regarding eighteenth century population pressures and job possibilities for young people in Wittgenstein. In the meantime, for an excellent and more detailed presentation of Wittgenstein in English, see Dr. Paul Riedesel's online document, "Wittgenstein History and Genealogy" at:

<http://www.riedesel.org/wittgenstein.html>

A.D.G., 25 April 2013