

Simon Dreisbach 1727 – 1735. The Making of an Emigrant, Part II.

Word of warning

In this and the following DERRs there will be information about Simon Dreisbach – some of it possibly unsettling – for which we lack a fuller context and/or explanatory information. Records concerning Simon Dreisbach are emerging piecemeal from the Princely Archive in Bad Laasphe. Readers should be aware that further archival discoveries may cause us to revise our understanding and to reformulate our present interpretations.

To emigrate or not to emigrate?

When the first major exodus of Wittgenstein villagers took place in 1724-25, Simon Dreisbach was not among them. Numerous families left or tried to leave for East Prussia, as we have seen in DERR No. 8. There were indeed some Dreisbachs among the emigrants, but Simon stayed where he was. DERR no. 9's listing, year by year, of certain major events and circumstances in Simon's life between 1720 and 1727 provided us with a background for Simon's staying put, even when contemporaries of his, such as the family of Jost Henrich Sassmannshausen, departed for Pennsylvania.

Yet the Simon Dreisbach family did eventually make the journey to Pennsylvania, but only after a painful interlude that began in 1735 and that brought severe hardship to the whole family. The records of Simon's doings up to the year 1735 are scant. Some facts and some assumptions will follow.

Simon and horses.

The first personal trace Simon Dreisbach left of himself, apart from events found in church records, was a letter he sent to Count August of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein dated 15 January 1727.¹ From it we learn that at that time Simon's work or profession, in addition to farming the lands he rented from the Count, was that of carter. Simon protested to Count August that he was being unfairly fined for not having appeared at a session of the court. He had not received the summons, being at that time away, hauling a load of bark to Cologne. Here we learn that Simon had a horse capable of making the long overland journey to the Rhine and back. Since most forests – the source of the bark – belonged to the Count, Simon was probably not acting as a hauler in his own right, but had been ordered to take a load of the Count's bark to a tannery in Cologne, probably as part of a convoy of bark-filled carts.

This is the first record of Simon's owning a horse. Certain villagers, based on the amount of their annual taxes, were required to own a horse or two which could be summoned to work for the Count's administrators at any time. The villager and his horse or horses could thus be put to work in the Count's forests or on his large farms, especially at plowing and harvest times. Records have been preserved which give the names of those villagers required to keep horses. Simon is for a time among them.

¹ Treated at length in DERR no. 6.

From the extant records we can see that in 1731 Simon had 4 cows, 1 ox, 2 sheep, 1 lamb, but no horse.² The following year Simon is shown to have two horses and is listed among those who are required to use their horses in the Count's service.³ No list for 1733 seems to have survived, but in 1734 Simon has one good horse and one incapable of service.⁴ (Fig. 1.)

1734: Jagd- und Dienstdienste
 feindlicher Diensteils.
 Oberndorf.
 Spannienfer. Tüfftiger. Untüfftige
 Pferde.

Simon Dreyßbach.	1.	1.
Tobias Walch .	2.	—
Joh. Paulsen .	1.	—
Christ. A. H. .	2.	—
Bernhard Straub .	2.	—
Joh. Caspar H. .	2.	—
Bernhard M. .	1.	—
Joh. Adam H. .	2.	—

Fig. 1. Count August's subjects in the village of Oberndorf who were required to use their horses in the Count's service in 1734. The first name on the list is Simon Dreyßbach. He is shown as having one horse capable of work and one incapable of work. Photo courtesy of Heinrich Imhof.

In 1735 Simon was no longer among those in Oberndorf who had horses for the Count's needs. Instead, he is listed as a *Handdienster* or manual laborer.⁵ As such he could be required to do any kind of agricultural, forestry or construction work the Count's administrators required. (Fig. 2.)

² Princely Archive, Bad Laasphe, holding W 56, pages 12a/13a (1731).

³ *Idem*, W 57, page 4b (1732).

⁴ *Idem*, W 51, page 61b (1734).

⁵ *Idem*, 1735: W 57, p. 116b (1735).

Continuatio Im Jure d. D. 1735					
Oberndorf	1. Tobias Zald	t.	2	t.	t.
	2. Jost Pöckler	t.	2	t.	t.
	3. Jost Thier	t.	2	t.	t.
	4. Jost Dabmannsauer	t.	2	t.	t.
	5. Simon Thier	t.	2	t.	t.
	6. Simon Marx	t.	1	t.	t.
	7. Johann Bernd Winderhof	t.		t.	t.
Hand Dienster	1. Simon Treißbach			t.	t.

Fig. 2. Count August's eight householders in the village of Oberndorf in 1735 and the services they had to provide. To the right of the householders' names, the mark in the first column shows that they possessed horses, and the fourth column gives the number of horses fit to work. There are four householders with two such horses each and three with one horse. Simon Treißbach stands alone, below, being the only householder without a horse. He is listed in the second column as a Hand Dienster, required to do manual labor for the Count. Photo courtesy of Heinrich Imhof.

We do not know why in such a short time Simon went from having two horses, one of which was not fit to work, to having none at all. Did this mean that he had descended a notch on the village social scale? Possibly.

There is another possible explanation, though we cannot know if it can be applied here. The Wittgenstein villagers, required by law to do unlimited service for the Count, and severely fined if they did not perform such obligatory work, nevertheless devised methods of protest. Those doing manual labor sometimes used "go slow" tactics. Those with adult horses might sell them just before harvest time and buy foals. For their own farm work they could use oxen, which were not suitable for use on the Count's properties.⁶ However, this form of passive resistance, which could be expected in more rebellious areas such as the village of Elsoff in north-east Wittgenstein-Wittgenstein, has not left any noticeable traces in the Oberndorf records. All the Count's villagers were living in what was unquestionably an oppressive system; some of them resorted to questionable means of redress.

⁶ Pp. 96f in: Werner Trossbach, "Widerstand als Normalfall: Bauernunruhen in der Grafschaft Sayn-Wittgenstein-Wittgenstein 1696-1806", *Westfälische Zeitschrift*, vol. 135 (1985), pp. 26-111.

Agriculture, old German style.

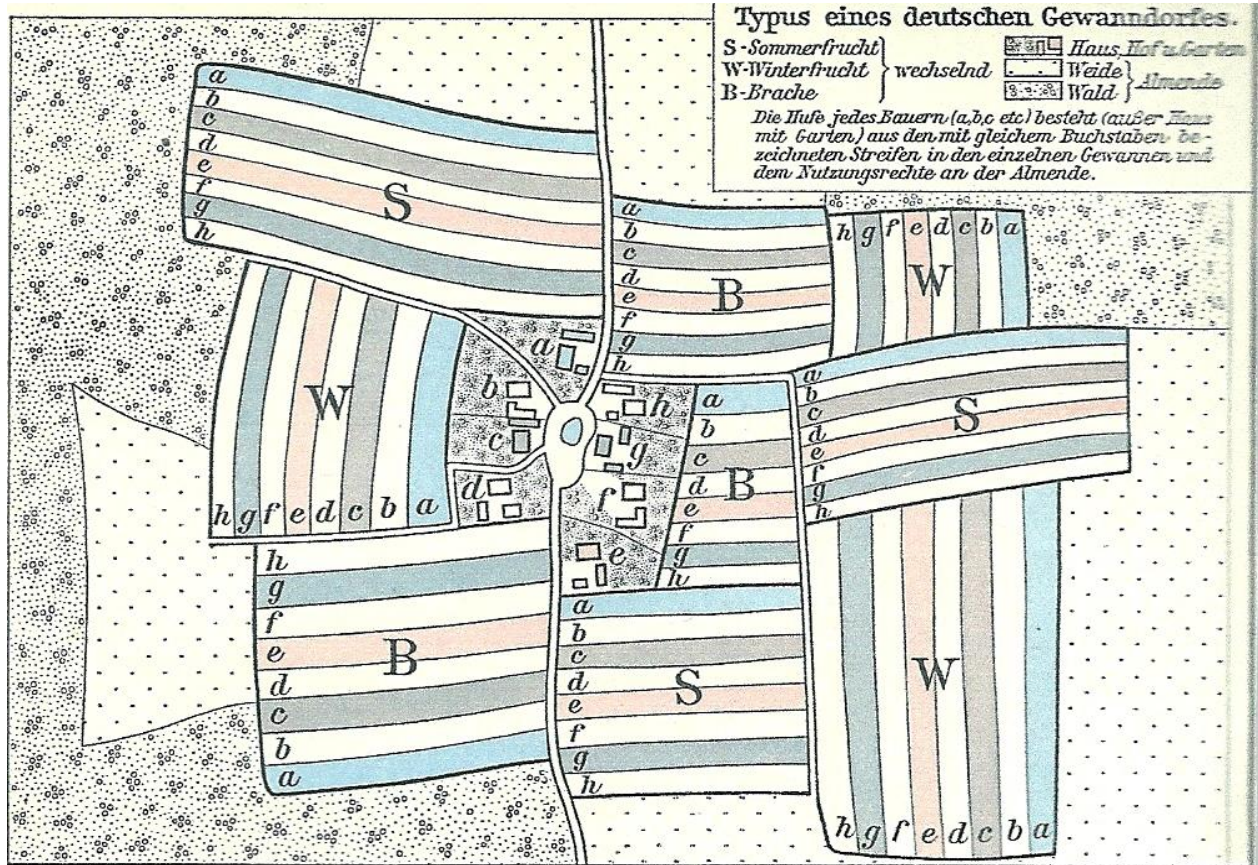


Fig. 3. Schematic representation of distribution of farm land in a hypothetical German village. In the center are the farmhouses, a to h, each with its barn and vegetable garden. Each house has strips of land in the surrounding fields of types S, W and B, where S stands for summer crops, W for winter crops and B for fallow land (rotation of crops was practiced). Areas with small dots are meadows or pastures and the darker patterned areas represent forest.⁷

Figure 3 is both informative and misleading. What many North Americans may not know is that in the two Wittgenstein counties, as in many parts of what is today Germany, farmhouses were not situated on the lands to be farmed. They were close together in villages, which meant that the farmers had shorter or longer ways to their scattered plots of land. Figure 3 is thus basically correct. However, in Oberndorf as in all other Wittgenstein villages, land distribution and land ownership was more complicated. In the first place, many subjects of both the northern and the southern Counts, did in fact own some tracts of land which could be inherited, sold or passed on to the next generation. However, the major part of the arable land in both counties was owned by the Counts and farmed by their subjects who were tenant farmers with eight-year rental leases on the village houses with their associated pieces of land. Indeed, the entire system was far more complicated than would appear in Figure 3.

⁷ Excerpted from Plate 15b in F. W. Putzgers, *Historischer Schul-Atlas zur alten, mittleren und neuen Geschichte*, 37th edition, Bielefeld and Leipzig, Verlag Von Velhagen & Klasing, 1914.

In the *Salbuch* records in the Princely Archive in Bad Laasphe there are descriptions going back to the 1570's of the types and amounts of lands associated with each of the Count's village properties. The *Am Aberge* house does not appear in the 1572 *Salbuch*, but in 1610 its lands are listed as comprising two meadows or pastures, eight fields, one garden and one cabbage patch – a rather small "fief". Local historian Werner Wied has written that this farm was so small that the householder would have needed a second source of income, and he has further identified in the records of 1607/8 a householder who had produced, and presumably sold in that period, four wheelbarrows, two manure containers and a plow.⁸

A later householder in *Am Aberge*, Johannes Sassmannshausen, the grandfather of Simon Dreisbach, also worked in wood. He was a master cooper, and probably made his barrels and vats in a workshop at *Am Aberge*. What is more, he was also a master-builder and is known to have built at least one impressive half-timbered house outside Wittgenstein, in neighboring Nassau-Siegen. (See the photo of that house in DERR no. 4, p. 7.) It is conceivable that Sassmannshausen may have enlarged or otherwise enhanced the *Am Aberge* house during his lifetime (*1648 - †1722). Moreover, he appears to have had the economic means to acquire various pieces of land, which were in turn inherited by his three children, one of whom was Simon Dreisbach's mother, Margreth. After her death, these lands became a source of disagreement among the heirs, and this seems to have been a contributing cause to Simon's decision to emigrate.

In Fig. 3, the German text states that the meadows or pastures and forests were held in common. This was not the case in southern Wittgenstein, or Wittgenstein-Wittgenstein as it was more properly called. Practically all of the territory's forests were owned and regulated by the Count. It was Count August in particular who deprived his subjects of their ancient forest usage rights and privileges. As for pasture land, there were some larger villages which employed a shepherd to oversee grazing for the whole community, but the norm was for meadows and pastures to be part of most houses' farmlands.

A downhill trend at *Am Aberge*?

Master cooper and builder Johannes Sassmannshausen was almost fifty when in 1697 his daughter Margreth married Georg (Gurg) Wilhelm Dreisbach from the village of Steinbach, northeast of Oberndorf. Georg Dreisbach was for a few years householder at *Am Aberge*, though his father-in-law was still alive. Georg died relatively young, at some time before 1712, leaving his wife Margreth with three young sons. In 1712 the eldest, Simon, was fourteen, and his Sassmanshausen grandfather, the patriarch in the house, was in his early sixties and was perhaps not capable of taking on heavy farm work.

Margreth remarried in September 1712, but was soon a widow again. Her second husband, Conrad Wied of Oberndorff, died in 1716 or shortly thereafter. Thus the *Am Aberge* fields had two periods prior to 1720 when they lacked a strong farmer to lead the work.

In the following decade, the tenancy of the house and lands was not immediately confirmed. By 1722 both of the elder Sassmannshausens had died. Official tenant or not, Simon, who had married in November 1720, would have had to shoulder the major part of the field work. His mother, however, was now the senior person in the household. Whoever had the final voice in the household, it can hardly have been Simon's bride, Maria Katharina Keller, even though she was older than her husband. Nor do we know much help could be expected from Simon's two younger brothers, born in 1701 and 1706, though it is documented that later in the 1720's both would be employed elsewhere.

Simon, as we have seen, was working as a carter in 1726, mainly to augment his income, one assumes, but probably also as part of his obligatory service to the Count and his administrators. As yet the exact date

⁸ Werner Wied, *Die Feudinger Höfe*, published by "Auf den Höfen", Bad Laasphe-Rückershausen, 1991, p. 405.

of his officially becoming the tenant-in-fee of *Am Aberge* has to be established, but according to Wied it was in or before 1729.⁹ Whether the household was better or worse-off after master cooper Sassmannshausen's death is not known. What is certain is that August and his administrators continued to tighten their hold on the villagers, requiring ever more obligatory work and higher fees and taxes, and imposing increasingly stiffer fines and punishments. As the 1730's began, the villagers of Wittgenstein-Wittgenstein had little to look forward to.



Fig. 4. 1739 map of Oberndorf, taken from the Forstatlas, or Forest Atlas of southern Wittgenstein, commissioned by Count Friedrich. The mapmaker did not include the Dreisbach house, Am Aberge, on the slope of the Aberg hill, perhaps because it lay somewhat isolated, west and south of the village center. The point of the arrow shows approximately where, according to local tradition, Am Aberge stood until it burned down in the 1840s. Detail of a photo taken by Marcia Dreisbach Falconer at the Princely Archive of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein.

In the private life of the Simon Dreisbach family there were two deaths and three births between 1730 and early 1735. Both Alexander and Elisabeth died in early 1731 at ages 5 ½ and 3 respectively. Sons Simon, Georg Wilhelm and Johannes were born in 1730, 1733 and 1735. Their christenings in the 1730's may reflect the economic situation in Simon's household. Simon Jr. and Georg Wilhelm had many godparents who arrived from a number of different villages, and the accompanying celebrations must have

⁹ Wied, *loc. cit.*

been large and festive affairs.¹⁰ Johannes, born probably in late January 1735 and christened on February 2, had only two baptismal sponsors, one of which was a Sassmannshausen cousin. Was life in the *Am Aberge* household becoming more difficult?

Dark clouds begin to gather.

Perhaps Simon had trouble making ends meet. After a total of seven costly christenings, we have seen that that of Johannes was modest indeed. Simon having gone from owning one fit and one unfit horse in 1734 to none in early 1735 also seems to indicate harder times. In March 1735 Simon allowed some grain 'filched' from one of Count August's farms to be stored at his out-of-the-way house on the edge of Oberndorf – some of it intended to be used for food and some for seed. Unpleasant consequences would result.

On a somewhat larger scale there are indications of an informal network of would-be counterfeiters operating in several of the villages.¹¹ The distance can be short between using passive resistance to combat an oppressive feudal system, and choosing to participate in unethical or forbidden actions. According to a historian familiar with the archival sources,

*"...the demoralization of the Count's subjects through the consequences of the system of unlimited obligatory service led to an increase in crime, especially counterfeiting..."*¹²

At a distance of some 280 years, our main hope for making sense of this situation lies in the records still preserved in Wittgenstein archives. In recent years these archives have proved remarkably fruitful.

January 2013 – a month of major and surprising archival discoveries.

Our knowledge of Simon Dreisbach's life in Wittgenstein is no longer scanty, though that was certainly the situation prior to early 2011. For the information of DERR readers, the gradual emergence of records shedding light on Simon Dreisbach's adult life is outlined below, in Research Notes. This is the first time this list of documents is being made more widely available.

Our concern at this point is with the discovery of documents related to the events of the 1730's. A chance find in August 2012 opened the way.

In August 2012 Heinrich Imhof came across an undated letter in the Princely Archive in Bad Laasphe, sent to the Count by one Johan Herman Kröger, his huntsman in the Feudingin district. Kröger informed his employer that Simon Dreisbach of Oberndorf had told him of an incident when Kröger's predecessor as huntsman, Adam Milchsack, had tried to burn down the house in Feudingin which served as residence for the Count's huntsman, and how Dreisbach had ripped the flaming torch from Milchsack's hand.¹³

This isolated letter was the first small sign of unsuspected archival records detailing events in and around Feudingin in the 1730's, events that would snowball and lead to catastrophe for Simon Dreisbach and his family. Imhof, a very distant cousin of the descendants of Simon Dreisbach, was baffled and intrigued, and kept an eye open for what might be related documents. And emerge they did, starting in early 2013, thanks to Imhof's thorough acquaintance with the Princely Archive. In fact, we now have Simon's own description of the incident with the firebrand, as spoken and recorded on 31 March 1735. We also have

¹⁰ See DERR no. 5, p. 7, for a listing of the baptismal sponsors at the christenings of all of Simon's and Maria Katharina's children. See especially Fig. 7 there, which shows the many godparents of little Georg Wilhelm who came from far and near on 22 June 1733.

¹¹ Such forbidden activities will be discussed in a later DERR.

¹² Trossbach, *op. cit.*, p. 98. (Cf. note 6.)

¹³ This letter is found in holding P 464. Its contents suggest that it can have been written as late as 1740.

Simon's dating of that incident – 22 March 1735, and his account of other actions later that same evening that would lead to disastrous consequences for himself.

By the end of January 2013 Heinrich Imhof had made available to the present writer sixty-eight pages of photocopies of court records from the period 1735-1740 which he had found in holding P 464 in the Princely Archive in Bad Laasphe. Though Simon is mentioned at only a few, though significant, places, we find highly interesting information on some of the people he knew, and also on their activities as recounted at length by a small-time criminal who seems to have had neither a conscience nor any moral sense, Johann Adam Milchsack.

In future DERRs we shall try to make sense of Milchsack's statements in court, as recorded in the holding P 464, and we shall concentrate on what he had to say about Simon Dreisbach. It makes surprising reading, to say the least.

RESEARCH NOTES

The *Dreisbach Emigration Research Report* would never have come into being without the selfless cooperation of Wittgenstein researchers. Andreas Sassmannshausen and Jochen Karl Mehldau have been mentioned previously, with our thanks, as has Heinrich Imhof. At this juncture, however, it is especially "distant cousin" Heinrich Imhof who deserves our particular recognition for rescuing Simon Dreisbach from a long sleep in the Princely Archive of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein, high above Bad Laasphe, in Castle Wittgenstein's *Rentkammer*.

In DERR no. 10, pp. 10-12, we discussed the communications of 1928 from Prof. Canstein, consultant on early documents in the Princely Archive of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein, to Harald Hippenstiel, who was acting on behalf of the Dreisbach Family Association. Canstein did not mention where, in the Archive, the information he cited was located. DERR no. 10 reveals on p. 11 that it was Heinrich Imhof who identified the holding where Canstein had found the most significant piece of information on Simon Dreisbach: that he had left Wittgenstein secretly, without Count Friedrich's permission. This was the first of Imhof's discoveries concerning Simon Dreisbach in the archival records.

The following is a chronology, for DERR readers, of Heinrich Imhof's archival discoveries relative to Simon Dreisbach.

Early 2011: Holding D 53 -- Simon's emigration and its aftermath in Oberndorf (1743-45).

28 March 2011: reception of an e-mail from Andreas Sassmannshausen saying that Heinrich Imhof had identified the holding in which Prof. Canstein had found information on Simon Dreisbach's secret emigration. It was in **D 53**. E-mails with excerpts followed, and by 23 May 2011, Andreas had transmitted the entire holding **D 53** via e-mail.

August 2012: A first find in holding P 464 – a mention of Simon Dreisbach in a letter, possibly written in 1740.

20 August 2012: E-mail from H. Imhof with the text he had found by chance in holding **P 464** a letter in which Simon Dreisbach said he had taken a burning stick away from the Count's former huntsman, Johann Adam Milchsack, who intended to commit arson.

Early 2013: 1737 documents from prison in Castle Wittgenstein, found in holding D 14.

17-20 January 2013: Receipt from H. Imhof of two letters written by Simon Dreisbach and an agreement with the Count's authorities on conditions of freedom. (To be discussed at length in a future DERR.)

Early 2013: Documents 1735-1740 relative to a court case against Johann Adam Milchsack, P 464.

25 January 2013: H. Imhof sent to the present author, by post, copies of the lengthy court interrogation record of Johann Adam Milchsack as found in **P 464**. Information here forms the basis for our present understanding of Simon Dreisbach's life in the years preceding and following the pivotal moment of 31 March 1735.

February 2013: A glimpse of Simon Dreisbach's life in his late twenties as a carter. W 65 I.

14. February 2013: H. Imhof e-mailed his photo of Simon's letter to Count August written in January 1727, which Imhof had found in **W 65 I**. Simon explains why he should not have been fined for not appearing in court. We learn here that he was a carter and had been away delivering bark to Cologne, and thus had never received the summons.

To sum up:

We are now in possession of archival information relative to moments in Simon Dreisbach's life from his trip to Cologne in 1726 (from holding **W 65 I**) to the night of 15 May 1743 when he and his family secretly left their *Am Aberge* house on the edge of Oberndorf (from holding **D 53**). This rich and varied material contains, among other things,

- three letters, written by Simon Dreisbach in 1727 and 1737, to two different Counts
- a transcript of Simon's testimony in court on 31 March 1735 in the Milchsack case
- the sheriff's letter of 16 May 1743 to the Count, reporting the Dreisbachs' unauthorized departure on the previous night
- an eye-witness account of events at the Dreisbach house on the night of the family's leaving for Pennsylvania, 15 May 1743.

Is the life of any other 'ordinary' 18th-century immigrant to Philadelphia as well-documented in his home territory as the doings of Simon Dreisbach in his native Wittgenstein-Wittgenstein? We have no immediate answer, but the question is well worth asking.

Beyond all doubt, in any case, is the large debt of gratitude we owe to our Wittgenstein research contacts, and to Heinrich Imhof in particular.