

### **The making of an emigrant, part 3. Simon Dreisbach's last years in Wittgenstein**

#### **Simon in "greatest distress".**

In the months following Simon Dreisbach's return from prison in April 1737, the scattered pieces of farm land belonging to his *Am Aberge* house in Oberndorf would have required much work. The slow machinery of Count Friedrich's administration meant that Simon's spring plowing and planting had been delayed, not to mention all the other things needing to be done after Simon's absence of a year and a half. In addition, Simon and Kette were no doubt smarting at the hard financial terms imposed by the Count and his administrators to compensate for Simon's early release from forced construction labor at Wittgenstein Castle. The burden of payment which now lay upon Simon could scarcely be borne by a small village farmer, for the villagers' economy was largely of the produce type and not primarily cash based.

On the other hand, given the harsh punishment meted out by some German authorities for counterfeiting, however minor and unprofessional the crime may have been, Simon can have considered himself fortunate to have avoided banishment or worse. A similar case of small-scale counterfeiting in the northern territory, Wittgenstein-Berleburg, had been brought to court there twenty years previously. Seven persons were accused of conspiring in various acts of counterfeiting; two were sentenced to six years' exile, three were made to do one-half year of forced labor and two were given the choice of going to prison for one quarter year or paying a fine of 50 gulden. It would appear that Simon's punishment was harsher than that meted out to the 'northern' counterfeiters. However, their punishments could have been far more severe, for some members of the Berleburg court strongly insisted that three of the accused be subjected to torture, or that they be condemned to die by the sword!<sup>1</sup>

In Simon's case the extra weeks or months of freedom he obtained were acquired at the price of heavy and extended economic obligations to the Count's exchequer. Indeed, financial difficulties soon made their appearance. About five months after Simon's release we find him and another Oberndorf man, Herman Marx, owing forty-two reichstalers to two men in the neighboring territory of Nassau-Siegen. Simon then had to turn to his uncle, Jost Sassmannshausen (1688-1747), a respected villager of Oberndorf, who agreed to stand security for this sum, and in fact to take the debt on himself until Simon and Marx could repay him. As security Simon pledged the only assets he had – some pieces of land he and his brothers had inherited from their maternal grandfather, the master builder Johannes Sassmannshausen (1648-1722). It may be that this agreement was a contributing factor leading toward Simon's emigration five and a half years later.

*Fig. 1* is from the first page of the agreement or promissory note signed by Simon and by Herman Marx on 2 October 1737. Only the signatures are in their own hand, as the text was obviously drawn up and penned by a notary. It is also signed by a witness, thereby adding further judicial weight. The exact circumstances behind this document are not known, but it is evident that Simon and Marx were not able to meet their financial obligation to the two men in Siegerland and were rescued by Sassmannshausen.

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<sup>1</sup> Johan Karl Mehldau, "Falschmünzer in Berleburg 1715/1716", Wittgenstein, Vol. 64, no. 3 (September 2000), pp. 92-103.



Fig. 1. 2 October 1737: Simon's uncle, Jost Sassmannshausen, has assumed responsibility for a debt of 42 reichstalers contracted by Simon Dreisbach and Herman Marx, who are in "greatest distress" (lines 5 and 6: "in unßern höchsten Nothen"). Photo: upper half, page one of two, courteously supplied by Heinrich Imhof from addendum no. 10, holding WA D 53, in the Princely Archive of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein.

The essence of the two-page notary-type document is made clear from the start, including the critical situation in which Simon and Marx find themselves:

*I Johan Simon Treisbach  
and Hermann Marcus of Oberndorf  
confirm and acknowledge herewith that  
the honorable and respectable Johan Just  
Sassmannshausen of Oberndorf, in our  
greatest distress, has on our behalf, regarding  
the honorable men Jo[hann]es Böcking and Engel-  
berth Schäßfern of Wilden, given them a guarantee*

*for 42 – forty-two – reichstalers, the  
which afore-named sum he has  
truly taken upon himself to pay for us...*

Wilden is a small town in south-eastern Siegerland (Nassau-Siegen), and is not near Oberndorf. The area had long been noted for its iron mining and had a number of forges, but this is probably irrelevant in the present context. We do not know what kind of dealings the two men from Oberndorf can have had with the two men of Wilden. It is not clear whether Simon managed to repay his uncle, but as we shall see below, Simon and Marx later accumulated further debts which in 1742 taxed Uncle Jost's patience.



*Fig. 2. Signatures of Simon Dreisbach and Herman Marx on page 2 of the promissory document. Above the signatures one sees the document's place of writing and date: an abbreviated spelling of the town Feudingen followed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> (ii<sup>ten</sup>) October (8bris) 1737. Photo: Heinrich Imhof.*

The first signature is that of Simon, the principal debtor. It is written in a confident hand, with a few flourishes of the pen. Marx' signature on the fourth line from the bottom, is in a smaller but nevertheless competent hand, *Ersam Joh herman marcs.* (the honorable Joh[ann] Herman Marcs).

As far as we know, from the time of his release until the time of his emigration, Simon Dreisbach was never able to become debt free.

Thus far no records have come to light concerning Simon's first winter at home after his release. Was he physically marked by one and a half years of hard labor on the new wing of Castle Wittgenstein, or by the nights he may have spent in the castle's dark, dank underground cell? His later career in Pennsylvania,

where he established two homesteads and is documented as having undertaken a long trip the length and breadth of Northampton County at about age sixty on behalf of the church he had founded, speaks for itself.

One thing is certain: Simon can have had no further doings with the unscrupulous Adam Milchsack, who was apparently the cause of Simon's brief excursion into amateur counterfeiting. Moreover, as mentioned in DERR no.14, the information found in the judicial records concerning Milchsack's misdeeds and his interrogation (holding WA P 464 in the Princely Archive), leads us to deduce that Milchsack misled the authorities. To mitigate his own guilt, he had blamed Simon for the theft of the Count's grain, and this eventually led to Simon's condemnation and imprisonment. From April 1737 to May 1740 Milchsack led a fugitive's life in Siegerland and perhaps elsewhere. Imprisoned in June 1740 and sentenced to a term of three years and eight weeks, Milchsack would have been released at the end of the summer of 1743. At about that time the "*Lydia*" was nearing Philadelphia with the Dreisbach family on board.<sup>2</sup>

### **A daughter is born and the baptismal celebration is youthful and festive.**

After the births in 1721 and 1722 of Jost and Adam, their first two sons, Simon and Kette lost three children in a row. Maria Katherina died in November 1725 at thirteen months. Alexander and Anna Elisabeth died within just one and a half months of each other in the spring of 1731. First Alexander died at five and a half, and then Anna Elizabeth followed him when she was only three days short of her third birthday. Three more sons were born to Simon and Kette in 1730, 1733 and 1735. If Kette wished for the company of a little daughter, in 1738 she would have her wish. Indeed, by early 1738 it would have been no secret that Kette was expecting another child, and on a day at the end of April or very beginning of May, a daughter was born. Mother Kette had recently had her forty-second birthday.

Baby Anna Catharina would come to be known as Katharina, or perhaps Kette, but she was also given a 'church' name, Anna, just as most of her brothers bore the church name of Johannes. We can picture a small crowd around the baptismal font of the parish church in Feudingingen on May the fourth. In addition to the Reformed clergyman and father Simon, there were six baptismal sponsors, three of whom were named Anna Catharina. Like other new mothers, Kette would have remained at home, where she must have depended on the help of neighbors and relatives to prepare for the serious eating and drinking that would soon take place.

The choice of baptismal sponsors is interesting and has implications for Simon Dreisbach's situation in 1738. Rather unusually, there was only one married couple among the sponsors, Anna Katharina Franck and her husband Johannes Franck, of Grossenbach. They belonged to a family that was of some importance in Grossenbach, a relatively prosperous Wittgenstein village. The other five sponsors were single and seem to have been young adults. All five are listed along with the names of their fathers and their place of residence, making it possible in some cases for us to identify them. A preliminary assessment leads to the conclusion that here the choice of baptismal sponsors differs somewhat from that of previous baptisms of the Dreisbach babies.

Thanks to the detailed baptismal records of the Feudingingen church we can compare the composition of the various sponsor lists. At all the Dreisbach baptisms, relatives from both sides were of course frequent as sponsors, and there was also a large component of various married couples. There were also single persons, though not usually in the majority. The sponsors came from numerous widespread villages in Wittgenstein-Wittgenstein, suggesting that Simon and Kette had a wide network of friends. Many of these

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<sup>2</sup> Ten years after the Simon Dreisbach family came to Pennsylvania, Milchsack arrived in Philadelphia on the "Halifax" on 29 September 1753. He is presumed to have made his way to what is now the city of Lancaster to join his only child, August, who had preceded him in 1751, sailing on the "Elizabeth".

persons can be identified as tenants-in-fee of the Count, thus with an assured, though not necessarily elevated position in the local village structure. Young unmarried persons were of less social consequence and were listed last among the sponsors.

Only one of the Dreisbach infants had a baptism that departed from the pattern, and that was Johannes, whose only sponsors were a Sassmannshausen cousin and the daughter of a man in the next village who, like Simon Dreisbach, had roots in the nearby village of Steinbach. Johannes was christened in early February 1735, and the paucity of sponsors could suggest that Simon was in straightened circumstances and could not afford the large-scale feasting often associated with baptisms. (Or, perhaps, the weather that February Sunday was fierce and roads were impassable; we simply do not know.)

It was about two and a half months after Johannes's small christening party that Simon accompanied the unprincipled Adam Milchsack on a nighttime expedition to the Count's farm to help Milchsack 'appropriate' some grain. Was this act related to Simon's financial need and his lack of success in producing falsely minted coins? The Milchsack escapade, as we have seen, eventually led to Simon's

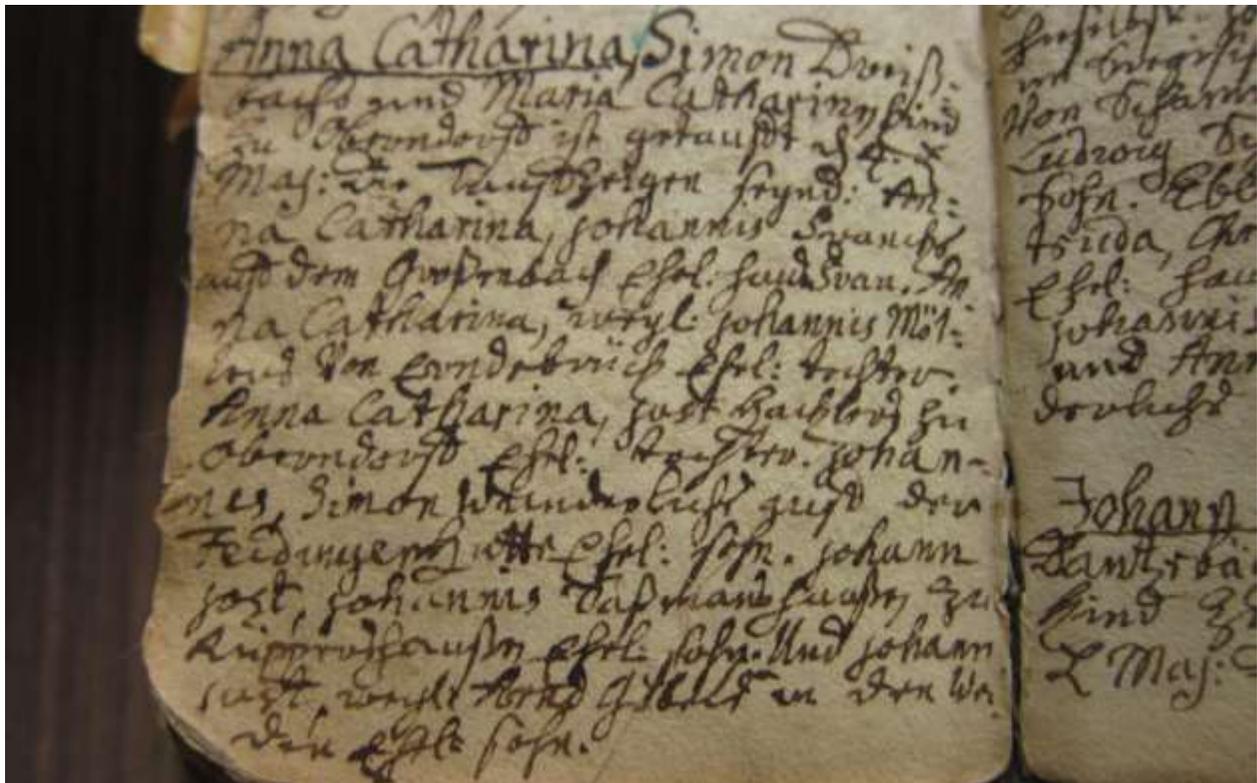


Fig. 3. The baptism of Anna Catharina Dreisbach on 4 May 1738 in the baptismal record book of the Feudingen church. This was a large and festive event with six baptismal sponsors plus the husband of the principal sponsor. Photo: Marcia Dreisbach Falconer.

incarceration on the grounds of counterfeiting. Obtaining his early release from prison had cost Simon dearly, and this may be related to the debt that Simon and his fellow borrower, Herman Marx, had contracted, but could not honor. Though we have seen that Simon's maternal uncle, Jost Sassmannshausen, took over the debt in October 1737 (Figs. 1 and 2), Simon was not relieved of the obligation to reimburse

his uncle. Then, with the approach of April 1738, it was time to plan for the new baby's baptismal celebration. Would Simon's history impinge upon the event?

We cannot gauge the effect Simon's legal history may have had on his social status. As noted in a previous DERR, the illegal acts performed by Simon (dabbling in false coinage and abetting a grain thief) could have been approvingly viewed as protests against the boundless exploitation of the Wittgenstein peasants by their feudal lord, Count August. Other villagers, however, would not readily have condoned Simon's actions. One cannot expect these opposing attitudes to have changed much in the year since Simon had returned from prison.

Did Simon adopt a strategy for the approaching christening? The list of baptismal sponsors suggests that he did. Simon must have been assured of the good will of principal sponsor Anna Katharina Franck and her husband Johannes. They were not, however, mature and well-established, though that was to follow after some years. Recently married, they had as yet no house of their own. Can Simon have asked other more or less established persons to be sponsors, who declined? In any event, the predominance of unmarried young women and men suggests that there were social forces at work to which we do not have access.

When all had arrived at *Am Aberge* after church, and Anna Katharina was back in Kette's arms, the party could begin. Some of Kette's many Keller siblings may have been present; furthermore it was the custom for the whole village to consider itself invited. The sponsors themselves would have helped set the tone. We found recently that the principal sponsor herself, Anna Katharina Franck of Grossenbach, was not yet eighteen, and her husband of ten months was twenty-three.<sup>3</sup> Though older and more socially imposing sponsors were absent, this assembly of youthful celebrants must have been most agreeable for eldest sons Jost and Adam, then sixteen and fifteen.

Given Kette's age, there would probably be no more christenings after this one. This celebration was a chance for Simon to reestablish himself in the accepted patterns of Wittgenstein village life and, for a day or more to live in the present. He was back at home with his family, he and Kette now had a little daughter, spring had arrived and this year he was able to plow his fields at the right time. *Am Aberge* was full of youth and festive high spirits.

### **The last five years in Wittgenstein. What horses can tell us.**

Simon Dreisbach's life prior to emigration is probably better documented than that of most German-speaking settlers in the American colonies. There are of course inevitable gaps, and the five years following Anna Katharina's baptism have left few traces. Apart from a set of investigative documents from the Count's chancelry dating from the months after Simon's departure, we have only a few short lists to go by. They are of two kinds.

There are lists of the Count's subjects, or *Untertanenverzeichnis*, in the village of Oberndorf for the years 1738 – 1741. They consist mainly of names and ages of the persons inhabiting each of the Count's houses, with occasional information when someone is employed elsewhere. Here we learn that brother Mannus was not listed in *Am Aberge* in 1738, but that he was part of the household in 1739. In 1740, when he was twenty-nine he was working as a day laborer. In 1741 he was still listed as having *Am Aberge* as his home base, but he was working as a hired man at Wittgenstein Castle and grounds. Consequently he cannot have contributed much to the farm work at *Am Aberge*.

The other type of list is less frequent but is nevertheless informative as to Simon's prosperity or lack thereof. These lists show the number of horses certain householders were required to own and to present

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<sup>3</sup> Detailed information on the Franck householders of Grossenbach are found in Werner Wied, *Die Feudinger Höfe*, Ortsheimatverein "Auf den Höfen", Bad-Laasphe-Rückershausen, 1991, pp. 371-373.

for *Spanndienst* (obligatory service with harnessed horses on the Count's properties). In 1734 Simon had one horse fit for doing harnessed work and one horse unfit to do such work. In 1735, the difficult year when his troubles with the law started, Simon had no horses at all, and had to drop down a notch in the householder hierarchy, doing manual labor for the Count instead.

The next list known to the present writer is that of 1741.<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 4.) In that year eight of the Oberndorf householders were recorded as having horses available for the Count's service.

Oberndorf	
Johann Joh. Witt.	2
Herman Marx	0
Joh. Dreisbach	1
Simon Dreisbach	1
Johann Joh. Witt.	2
Simon Dreisbach	1
Joh. Dreisbach	1
Lorenz Witt.	1

Fig. 4. The distribution of horses in the village of Oberndorf in 1741. Detail of a page of the "Spanndienst" list for the Feudinggen district, showing the number of horses available, village by village, for the requisite service to the Count. Simon, third from the bottom, has only one horse. Herman Marx, the second on the list, has no horse at all. Photo courtesy of Heinrich Imhof.

Only two of the Oberndorf villagers had two horses each. Five, including Simon Dreisbach, had but one horse. One had no horse at all, and that was Herman Marx, Simon's co-debtor in 1738 at the time of their "greatest distress". It should not surprise us that in 1741, with only one horse, Simon Dreisbach was not among the more prosperous householders in Oberndorf. On the other hand, thanks to this list we learn that Simon had at least managed to acquire one horse after his release in 1737, thereby increasing his capacity for transport and for field work. This was a situation that remained static, for it is documented that in 1743 Simon still had only one horse.<sup>5</sup>

As incomplete as this archival material is, it suggests that Simon Dreisbach was never able to regain whatever social stature he had once had in Oberndorf. By 1741 Simon may well have been discussing with his family the possibility of emigrating to Pennsylvania. Increasing debt in the coming years would contribute to confirming this decision.

### **The decision to emigrate takes form.**

The aftermath of Simon's time in prison and the harsh financial terms he had to accept in order to be released, would have weighed in favor of his emigration. If Simon saw his future as that of a permanent state of debt to individuals and to the Count's exchequer, if, he was in danger of losing his tenancy of *Am Aberge*, and if he was understandably concerned about the future of his family, then there was much to be said for starting over in a new country. Nearly all departures for Pennsylvania were initiated in the spring, and to begin serious planning in 1741 for an exodus two years hence was by no means premature.

Through the years, letters and other information had been reaching Wittgenstein of the opportunities in Pennsylvania awaiting newcomers prepared to work hard. Simon and Kette had only to think of the

<sup>4</sup> The *Spanndienst* lists are found in the Princely Archive in Bad Laasphe as follows: 1734 and 1735 – holding W 51; 1741 – holding W 56.

<sup>5</sup> In 1743, at the time of his secret exit from Wittgenstein, Simon still had only one horse, which he took with him for pulling a cart with the family's belongings. More on this in the next DERR.

reports circulating in the Feuding church district of a family now in Pennsylvania that they knew, and whose relatives they would see regularly in church. By 1737, after only ten years in Pennsylvania, Jost Henrich Sassmannshausen, originally from the village next to Oberndorf, had acquired three contiguous tracts of land containing a total of 250 acres.<sup>6</sup> Such news would have filtered back to Simon in about 1738 at a time when he was struggling to cultivate the neglected, scattered fields of his small farm.

### **Bad news from Germantown.**

By the early spring of 1739 a report of a very different sort would have reached Wittgenstein. It was a letter dated 18 October 1738, intended for wide distribution, and was written by the versatile former Wittgensteiner, Christopher Sauer of Germantown.<sup>7</sup> At the time, Sauer was in the process of acquiring the necessary equipment to begin the German-language printing activities that would soon make him famous in the mid-Atlantic colonies. In October, deeply disturbed by what he had seen and heard in the port of Philadelphia and among the Germans of Germantown, Sauer felt impelled to write a letter of warning to some of his many connections in Germany. He said that times were difficult in Pennsylvania and the economy was hard hit by a serious drought. Large numbers of immigrants arriving in a short space of time made things worse. Moreover, many became ill and died at sea. Some captains exploited the passengers who survived. "Many regret it pitifully and with tears that they had made the voyage".<sup>8</sup>

The autumn of 1738 was indeed a time of illness and death on many ships headed for Philadelphia. Even captains and crew members were said to have succumbed to contagious fevers on board. The "Davy", which docked in Philadelphia a week after Sauer dated his letter, had carried an estimated 257 passengers. According to a report in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 160 of the passengers had died.<sup>9</sup>

The influx of German immigrants did not lessen, however, and in succeeding springs Wittgensteiners would continue to head for the Rhine and sail downstream to Rotterdam on boats and barges. Some had paid to the Count's administration the requisite exit fees and a percentage of what they could expect to inherit, thereby leaving with their papers in order. Many others stole away without permission, "in the night and in the mist", as those who stayed behind put it.

### **Simon's predicament.**

Simon Dreisbach had no hope of obtaining official permission to leave Wittgenstein. He could not possibly pay his arrears to the Count, nor his debts to his uncle Jost Sassmannshausen, which by this time had increased. Simon and Herman Marx had accumulated new debts involving loans on certain pieces of hereditary property. There was more. We know from the investigation which followed his departure that Simon owed the 1743 rental fees for *Am Aberge*. The Count's administrators were hard taskmasters. They required that the villager who wished to become the next householder in *Am Aberge* agree to pay all the outstanding fees for the months in 1743 prior to his acquiring tenancy.

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<sup>6</sup> See the closing section of DERR no. 9 for a brief account of Jost Henrich Sassmannshausen's origins in Ruppershausen, his possible connections with Simon Dreisbach and his later acquisitions of land in Maxatawny, Berks County, PA.

<sup>7</sup> See the extensive presentation of Christopher Sauer in DERR no. 7

<sup>8</sup> From excerpts of Sauer's letter in: Fritz Krämer, ed., *Wittgenstein*, Vol. 1, Graphische Betriebe Gebrüder Zimmerman, Balve i. W., no date, p. 354.

<sup>9</sup> One of the best sources on mass German migration to 18<sup>th</sup> century North America is Marianne S. Wokeck, *Trade in Strangers*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, PA, 1999. See her appendix, "German Immigrant Voyages, 1683 – 1775, especially p. 241 for the "Davy", and note 51 on p. 260.

In 1742 Jost Sassmannshausen was losing patience and tried via administrative channels to gain satisfaction from Simon and from Herman Marx. Simon was in danger of losing the last straw of support he could hold on to. Nothing came of this action, however, and it was not until after Simon had emigrated that Jost Sassmannshausen obtained satisfaction or at least a settlement with the Count's administration.

Simon, living under the weight of debts and of permanent fees to the Count in the form of money, produce, animals and labor, chose the one path to Pennsylvania that was open to him – to leave secretly as so many others had done and were doing.

### **A hindsight balance sheet.**

Simon and his family made their choice. Instead of a dismal future in Wittgenstein they chose an uncertain future in North America. There all five sons became landowners. Some achieved a certain, or even significant, level of prominence. All produced numerous descendants.

Simon took on new responsibilities, founded a congregation of the German Reformed Church, was the first signer, and probably the organizer, of a petition to the Court of Quarter Sessions of Northampton County, and was for a time tax collector of Lehigh Township. If in Wittgenstein he had been looked down upon, in Pennsylvania he built for himself a new and more respected life than the one had chosen to leave behind.

### **Research notes.**

1. The principal aim in researching this period in Simon Dreisbach's history has been to identify situations and elements that can have contributed to his decision to emigrate to PA. The records present us with various circumstances which need to be interpreted for today's readers. A certain amount of 'unhistorical' speculation has been unavoidable and we hope, therefore, for the reader's tolerance.
2. This text could not have been written without the unparalleled research of **Jochen Karl Mehdau** in the Wittgenstein church records. Readers of the DERR are deeply in debt to him for his generosity in making many of his research results available for dissemination among Dreisbach descendants. Thanks to him we have been able to analyze the baptismal sponsorship of all the children of Simon and Maria Katharina Dreisbach.
3. Once again we have occasion to identify **Heinrich Imhof** as our principal source of documents relative to Dreisbach history in the archives of both Wittgensteins, primarily in the Princely Archive of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein in Bad Laasphe. Without his generosity in sharing numerous photographs of documents otherwise unknown to us, there would be no DERR.
4. What happened to **Herman Marx**, Simon's co-debtor? Marx did not emigrate. Thanks to the information available in the volume of local history edited by Werner Wied (see note 3), we know that he lived to be

almost sixty-eight, and died in Oberndorf in 1753 (Wied, p. 429). It is unclear how long he managed to remain householder in the Oberndorf house called "*Dilmeshaus*". Eventually a cousin of his wife became the *Hausman*, but it is not known if this had any connection with Marx's debts.

5. Much of the background information appearing in this DERR has come from holding D 53 in the Princely Archive in Bad Laasphe. In the next DERR we will print word for word some extraordinary accounts of the Dreisbachs' last hours in Wittgenstein, and other pertinent information on the Dreisbach exodus as it has been recorded in D 53. There can be few if any emigrants whose last hours in the homeland have such eye-witness documentation.

*A.D.G. 3 June 2015*