

A Young Person's Guide to Survival in 18th Century Wittgenstein: Part 2. Strategies 5 – 7 (and an 8th).

The first four survival strategies as presented in DERR no. 4 were:

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|---------------------------------|--|
| 1. Find work elsewhere | 3. Marry the house |
| 2. Sign up for military service | 4. Exercise a trade or have a source of extra income |

Strategy no. 5. Borrow!

One means of meeting practical and financial needs, at least for a time, was borrowing. Given the heavy burdens placed on the villagers by the Counts, life was at times lived on the verge of personal economic crisis, even, at times of poor harvests, near the edge of survival. Some of Simon's borrowing was practical and limited. However his borrowing also took forms of a more serious nature. This is under study, and the serious borrowing may have led to complications which influenced Simon's decision to emigrate.



Fig. 1. Title page of the important group of documents in the Princely Archive of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein, Bad Laasphe, ref. no. and title: WA D 53, "Dreisbach, Simon, deßen Guth zu Oberndorf betr. 1743". Found by Heinrich Imhof in 2011, this is the most significant archival source concerning Simon Dreisbach thus far identified. Photo by Heinrich Imhof.

Simon Dreisbach's debts, part 1: the borrowed items.

It is only recently that we have become aware of the debts Simon Dreisbach was struggling with when he left Wittgenstein secretly in 1743. It was in early 2011 that Wittgenstein researcher Heinrich Imhof discovered a large body of Dreisbach-related documents in the Princely Archive in Bad Laasphe. Suddenly the apparently unexceptional Simon Dreisbach of Northampton County, Pennsylvania, could be seen as having had a full and at times a dramatic previous life in the County of Wittgenstein-Wittgenstein. This set of documents, "*Simon Dreisbach, concerning his property in Oberndorf. 1743*", was the record of how the Count's administrative and judicial Chamber dealt with the property that Simon had abandoned, the items that had been 'removed' from the house by others, and other issues, including problems arising from Simon's borrowing. (Also – a minor sensation – these documents contain two accounts of the Dreisbach family's departure, one of them by an eye-witness!)

The sheriff (*Schultheiss*) sent to investigate the situation some weeks after the Dreisbachs' departure, made a detailed report of the objects that had been illegally removed from Simon's abandoned house and hidden in another part of Oberndorf. Here were also found four items Simon had borrowed but had not returned before leaving. All were of a practical nature. The sheriff noted these borrowed items in his report, along with the lenders:

- one grain sieve, lent by Christ Wied of Oberndorf
- one musket barrel, lent by the same Christ Wied (to be commented on in DERR #6.)
- a rat trap, lent by Jacob Wunderlich of nearby Rùppershausen
- two used iron stove plates, belonging to a stove lent by Johannes Wunderlich of Volkholz.

The sieve and the trap would have been small items to which Simon, preparing for the most decisive journey of his life, probably gave no notice. The value of the gun barrel was perhaps in a middle range. The stove plates, and indeed the rest of the iron stove, would have been another matter, cost-wise. This could have been an upright, free-standing stove radiating heat to the room and also producing hot air that could reach an upstairs room through an opening in the ceiling. Many stoves had metal plates that were cast with skillful decorations in relief.



Fig. 2. Stove plates in the collection of the Erndtebrück Heimatmuseum. Many more stove plates have survived than the stoves they ornamented, as many of them are handsomely decorated in medium to high relief. This is only a small part of the Heimat-museum's collection. Detail of a photo by Marcia Dreisbach Falconer.

It has emerged in the documents of WA D 53, that Simon had 'helpers' at his house the night he and his family left. What his instructions to them were, and what happened in the weeks when the house stood empty, is not clear. In any event a great many items were removed by certain villagers from what had been Simon's house. All of the items Simon had borrowed were eventually returned to their owners by order of the authorities.

In contrast to this mainly small-scale borrowing, there was a substantial debt that Simon had contracted earlier, and that would weigh on him for years to come.

Simon Dreisbach's debts, part 2. A sizeable debt – in a tight situation.

The documents in WA D 53 provide information on transactions of a more crucial sort than the borrowed objects just mentioned. In the records we find a series of complaints and judicial decisions occasioned by financial transactions Simon had made in 1737 and later, and that were still unsettled when he emigrated in 1743.

Simon's borrowing in 1737 involved a debt to two men who lived in Wilden in Nassau-Siegen. It was a shared debt, 42 Reichstaler in total, of which Simon's was the lion's share, 31 Reichstaler and 5

Albus, while another Oberndorf man, Herman Marx, owed the remainder. Simon's maternal uncle, Johan Jost Sassmannshausen, served as guarantor, and the document confirming this, drawn up by a notary, still exists in the Princely Archive in Bad Laasphe. Being a guarantor for the two debtors was perhaps an act of mercy on Sassmannshausen's part, for Simon and Marx state at the outset in the document that their arrangement with him was made "*in unßern höchsten nöthen*" (in our greatest need/distress).¹ What was Simon's and Marx's "great distress" of 1737? How was it related to their debt and their need for a guarantor? A partial answer will be sought in a later DERR.

The years passed, the two men from Wilden wanted satisfaction, and the Sassmannshausen uncle found himself in the middle. He made an official complaint in 1742, and the Count's Chamber ruled that Simon must pay his debts.² The case then became complicated by tax issues connected with the pieces of hereditary land used by Simon as a bond, but which were only his in part, being shared by others. After Simon's departure this tax aspect was taken up in earnest by the authorities, and a list of fourteen tracts was established, showing each tract's ownership or shared ownership.

Num		
1	-	18
2	-	30
3	-	5
4	-	18
5	-	2-30
6	-	6
7	-	2
8	-	16
9	-	1-30
10	-	2-18
11	-	6
12	-	2
13	-	8
14	-	15
		69-9

Fig. 3. A 1743 tally sheet of the amounts owed by emigrant Simon Dreisbach, drawn up after he had left. The total owed is a quite considerable 69 Reichstaler and nine Albus, on fourteen scattered tracts of land. On the reverse are the locations, names of persons associated with the tracts, etc. The heading says "Dreisbach's part in the assessed pieces (of land)". From Appendix 7 to the proceedings of 10 September 1743, in WA D 53. Photographed by Marcia Dreisbach Falconer in the Princely Archive of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein, Bad Laasphe.

These pieces of hereditary land were in private ownership, and were taxed as such by the Count. It appears that Simon's mother and her two Sassmannshausen brothers had inherited considerable hereditary land from their father, master carpenter Johannes Sassmannshausen, whom we met in DERR no. 4. After her death, Simon and his two brothers became heirs to their mother's third of the hereditary parcels. The story of these land issues and how Simon tried to keep financially afloat, is only beginning to be understood. After Simon's departure, the property disputes continued to be

¹ This document, dated 2 October 1737, is an unnumbered addendum to the deliberations of Count Friedrich's *Kammer* (administrative and judicial chamber) preserved in WA D 53, and was probably brought forward in the course of the proceedings of 10 Sept. 1743, four months after Simon's departure for PA.

² From further addenda to the Chamber's proceedings of 10 Sept. 1743 in WA D 53:

contested in the Count Friedrich's Chamber for several years. They had no repercussions for Simon, however, who was by then dealing with new challenges in Pennsylvania.

How shall we rate borrowing as a survival tactic? In Simon Dreisbach's case it led not to a lighter load but to more burdens, burdens that were increased in connection with Strategy no. 7.

Strategy no. 6. Improving one's circumstances, by means fair or foul.

In this strategy we shall look at certain methods – necessary, 'creative', or even less-than-legal, that were employed by some to have a roof above their heads, by others to augment their income, and by many to embellish the objects of everyday life. Most basic of all was meeting the need to have a place to live.

Finding a place to live

In the early 1700's the scarcity of housing was a growing problem. Families were generally large, and housing was limited. Even if one had the means, it was not possible to buy the necessary land, for the principal land owner was the Count, and most of the land was 'locked into place', as it were. Where could a young family live? The immediate solution was, of course, to live with parents or a relative. The technical term for anyone doing so, was to be a *Beisitzer*. It was also possible to live in a separate house on someone else's land, becoming thereby a "behoused" *Beisitzer*. These were strategies used by many, for shorter or longer periods of time.

Questionable tactics: recruiters' helpers, and the Feudinggen 'counterfeiters'

Among those using some of the less ethical strategies, there were a few local individuals, even two women, who helped the Prussian recruiters capture unsuspecting young men.³ There were also highway robbers, often violent and ruthless, but they were not likely to be local people.

There were, further, those who tried to engage in counterfeiting. The existence of this small network was discovered by Heinrich Imhof in the Princely Archive in Bad Laasphe in the early months of 2013.⁴ The village of Feudinggen was the center of this activity, but there were associates elsewhere, such as an elderly, well-off teamster in the village of Grossenbach (we shall meet him again in the next strategy). It seems no one in this loose group was an expert at producing coins that looked authentic, despite attempts at experimenting in their various houses. Simon Dreisbach was even said to have installed a hidden workshop in his house in Oberndorf.⁵

The documents that Heinrich Imhof discovered in the Princely Archive give no evidence of any extensive professional 'underworld' in Wittgenstein. Counterfeiting was not a profitable way of life, and we may ask if there was more to this activity than an attempt to make easy money. In later DERRs we shall discuss extensive archival research indicating that throughout the 1700's there was continual resistance, both passive and active, against the injustices imposed on the villagers by the Counts and their administrators. The counterfeiting in question here, apart from a hope for gain, was perhaps felt to be justified as an act of insubordination. At least two of those involved in the counterfeiting activities were owed money by the Count but had little or no hope of redress.

³ Information mentioned in the case against Johann Adam Milchsack, in WA P 464, pp. 66a and 68a-68b, in the Princely Archive, Bad Laasphe.

⁴ The relevant documents in the Princely Archive are WA P 464 and WA D 14, for the period 1735-1740.

⁵ From the interrogation of Johann Adam Milchsack as found in WA P 464, p. 72a.



Fig. 4. Die "Gasse" (the Street) in Feudingingen, as sketched by Helmut Richter at some time prior to 1975. Reproduced with the permission of the Wittgensteiner Heimatverein.



Fig. 5. This photo of "De Gasse" taken in 2012 shows little change in the historic center of Feudingingen after almost four decades. Photo, Marcia Dreisbach Falconer.

Embellishing one's surroundings

The half-timbered houses we can see in Figures 4 and 5, so characteristic of the two Wittgensteins and neighboring regions, will show the pleasing variety of this ancient style of building. As in many so-called traditional societies, the ornamentation of daily surroundings, from stoneware jugs to four-storey facades, was a source of personal pride and of visual pleasure. The styles and patterns in traditional dress, as well as the shape and decoration of tools and receptacles for use in house and barn, gave expression to both that which was accepted (and therefore 'right'), and that which was creative (and therefore unique and special).

One of the most widespread creative activities was working in wood. In this forested environment the 'winter whittlers' were legion, and the items they produced while passing the colder months indoors continue to delight us. An example of the woodworkers' mastery is the carved and painted chest in Fig. 6, from the village of Balde, the earliest known place of Dreisbach residence in Wittgenstein. There were intricately carved wooden yokes for oxen, and a variety of other decorated items, not only in wood – floral designs on earthenware dishes, fanciful metal door hinges and many other expressions of creativity. If such things are not strategies for survival in the strictest sense, they are definitely a means of making a restricted and toilsome life more bearable.

Have any such items survived among Dreisbach descendants in North America? There is at least one – an intricately carved 18th century pipe brought over by a later Dreisbach arrival, "Oscar" Christian August Dreisbach (1864-1936), which will be presented in a later DERR.

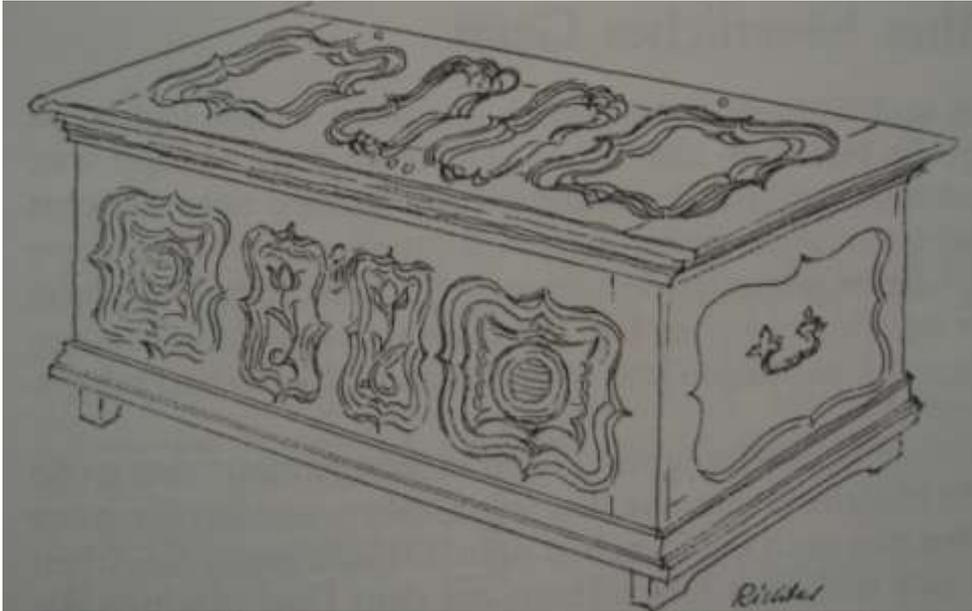


Fig. 6. Traditional chest from Balde with recessed carving.⁶

Strategy no. 7. Enjoy life while you can.

After the Reformation, and particularly after about 1580 when Calvinism, with the Heidelberg Confession, was imposed as the faith to be followed by the Wittgenstein populace, the authorities tried to legislate against some of the ancient customs and practices, and also pleasures such as dancing to music and excessive feasting. The annual markets, however, were quite a different matter, as they were both an economic boost and a social occasion. Twice a year markets were held in Berleburg, and four times a year in Laasphe, and these were major events, often with fifty or more vendors. Tradesmen and artisans from outside the territory, normally forbidden to sell their wares in Wittgenstein, could for a fee set up a stall or offer their goods from a wagon or cart or from a laden horse or donkey, and they attracted many potential buyers. There was a kaleidoscope of wares – foodstuffs of all kinds, livestock, leather goods, cloth, apparel from hats to stockings and shoes, pots and pans, nails and tools, baskets and sieves. There was also revelry with drinking, flirting and brawls. There were smaller local markets as well. All in all, markets were a recurring and welcome occasion for novelty and distraction.⁷ There were of course other diversions closer to home.

There were taverns, not only in the two major towns of Laasphe and Berleburg, but even in large villages such as Feudingen. There were also the 'spinning room' evenings in the winter months, shifting from house to house, where the girls came with their flax and spinning-wheels, and young men came to participate in the singing and merriment.⁸ However, the most basic, traditional and even monumental occasions for excessive eating and drinking were the gatherings that followed the rites of baptism and burial, events that were seen as involving the whole community.

⁶ Drawing by Helmut Richter, reproduced with the permission of the Wittgensteiner Heimatverein e. V.

⁷ From Eberhard Bauer, "Vom Leben in der Stadt im 18. Jahrhundert", pp. 95ff, in *Wittgenstein, vol II*, ed. Fritz Krämer, Arbeitsausschusses Heimatbuch, Balve i.W., no date.

⁸ From "Die Spinnstube", an article by Adolf Claudi, pp. 655-668, in *Wittgenstein III*, ed. Gerhard Hippenstiel and Werner Wied, Verlagsgemeinschaft Wittgenstein Buchhändler, 1984.

Christenings

We know the approximate number and names of the baptismal sponsors at the christenings of the children of **Simon and Maria Katharina Dreisbach**. The sponsors were quite numerous indicating that, as was the custom, the ensuing festivities were extensive, and expensive.

There were probably five baptismal sponsors for firstborn **Jost's** christening on 18 September 1721.

There were also probably five for **Adam**, christened on 7 Nov. 1722.

There were at least five for **Maria Katharina** on 15 Oct. 1724. (She died thirteen months later.)

There were four for **Alexander** on 4 Dec. 1725. (He died at 5½ in 1731.)

There were at least six for **Elisabeth's** christening on 15 Feb. 1729. (She died in 1731, 1½ months after Alexander.)

There were probably five for **Simon Jr.** on 24 Jan. 1730. (Uncertain; the page is damaged.)

There were at least six for **Georg Wilhelm** on 14 June 1733. (See Fig. 7.)

There were only two for **Johannes** on 6 Feb. 1735, perhaps owing to some special circumstance.

There were probably six for **Anna Katharina**, the last to be born, christened on 4 May 1738.

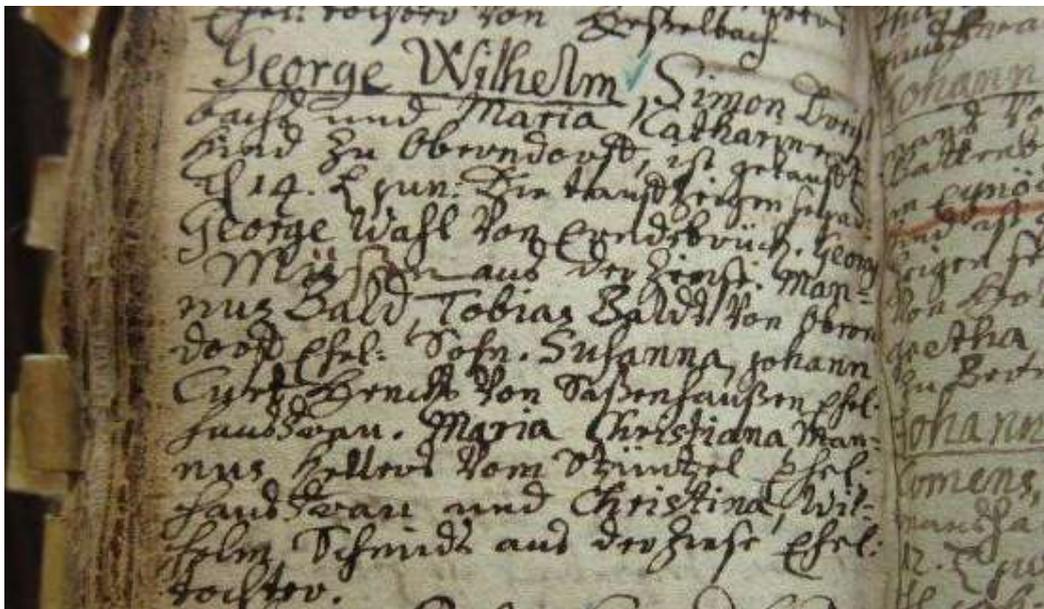


Fig. 7. The Feuding church's baptismal record of 22 June 1733 for George Wilhelm Dreißbach, with sponsors George Wahl, George Müßen, Mannus Bald, Susanna wife of Johann Curt Henck, Maria Christiana wife of Mannus Keller, and Christina daughter of Wilhelm Schmidt. They came from the following places, respectively: Erndtebrück, Zinse, Oberndorf, Sassmannshausen, Stünzel and Zinse, (p. 334, 6th entry.).

With so many sponsors, along with numerous relatives, neighbors and indeed the entire village, the eating and drinking which followed baptisms could, while enhancing the family's social standing, be economically crippling. According to Wittgenstein historian Ulf Lückel, this feasting often continued for three days, and many host families went into deep debt occasioned by christenings or funerals.⁹ The northern and southern counts both issued strict rules concerning christening excesses, in part to save the villagers from themselves, but social practices surrounding christenings were hard to change, even when infractions of the rules were stiffly fined.

⁹ Dr. Lückel's communication of 15 February 2012.

Wedding celebrations were also costly, though their guest lists were limited to invited persons. There were no weddings celebrated in the Simon Dreisbach family while still in Wittgenstein, but there were the deaths of three young children, as seen above. After these deaths there were surely visits of condolence and the required refreshments, but it is not likely that Simon was expected to host the lengthy wakes or huge funeral repasts associated with the passing of adult villagers. That being said, Simon's household nevertheless did have to bear the costs associated with nine christenings.



Fig. 8. The main room in the house "Stracks" in Grossenbach. Drawing by Helmut Richter.¹⁰

Community-wide celebrations apart, we have seen that many aspects of life in Wittgenstein were burdensome and harsh. As an antidote to such gloom, consider Figure 8, for here is a spacious and comfortable room that would be well suited for holding merry spinning room evenings, or for a village baptism when the weather forbade taking a newborn to the church.

This interior is from the house begun around 1700 in Grossenbach by Leonhard Franck (1669-1736). It probably reflects his growing prosperity. Franck was a teamster or carter, taking loads of locally produced charcoal to the iron works in Siegen and elsewhere, and was thus one of the few villagers who had an income in cash. This did not prevent him from trying his hand at counterfeiting in the last years of his life.¹¹ Instead of uncertain profit, Franck was perhaps seeking the pleasure of revenge: for years he had been trying in vain to get redress from the Count for a piece of land that had been summarily confiscated in 1727.¹² Did the younger and poorer Simon Dreisbach have a similar motive? That is not certain. The reasons for his attempts at counterfeiting may be more complex, though they surely included the hope of financial gain. His participation in this doubtful activity is under study, and will remain for the present listed under Strategy no. 6.

¹⁰ Reproduced with the permission of the Wittgensteiner Heimatverein e. V.

¹¹ From the set of documents WA D 14 in the Princely Archive in Bad Laasphe, to be discussed in a later DERR.

¹² Explained in detail in Werner Wied, *Die Feudinger Höfe*, Ortsheimatverein "Auf den Höfen", Bad Laasphe-Rückershausen, 1991, p. 363.

Our conclusions are predictable. Counterfeiting, however justified from the individual's point of view, was not ethical; it could lead to arrest and imprisonment (coming in later DERRs). Occasions of great communal feasting and merriment which benefitted the host socially, could be economic pitfalls. Finally, though some villagers such as Leonhard Franck, and perhaps master-carpenter Johannes Sassmannshausen, had a marginally better life than others, hard work and serf-like subjection to the Count was the fate of most villagers, and could tempt many a Wittgensteiner to resort to *the 8th and definitive survival strategy: EMIGRATE!*

Research notes

1. *Correction (DERR no. 4):* On page 5, line 9, "**Daniel Dreisbach** (1629-1685), son of Georg", kindly replace "Georg" with "Johannes". (Georg belongs to the previous generation.) A corrected PDF version has been sent to our repository volunteers and the DFA Yahoo group site.

2. *The DERR's survival strategies were of course general cultural phenomena of the time:*

The so-called survival strategies listed in DERR 4 and 5 were not unique to Wittgenstein (with the possible exception of the rule that the eldest child, whether male or female, would inherit the house and lands). They were common to many agrarian and semi-feudal societies. Spinning rooms, for example, were widespread and were depicted in German prints of the early 1500's.

3. *Calculating an approximate time of birth for our ancestors:*

Though we may know the Wittgenstein baptismal dates for our ancestors, we generally lack the actual birth date. Up to 1746 baptisms often took place eight or more days after birth. Count Friedrich's new rule of 1746 ordered baptisms to be performed within 3 or at the most 4 days.¹³

3. *The absence of Martin and Henrich Dreisbach from certain future DERRS:*

Neither Martin nor Henrich Dreisbach had an adult life in Wittgenstein, and therefore they do not appear in the extant records. They are thus absent from this and certain future DERR numbers. (Martin did have a life as husband and father in Krombach in Nassau-Siegen, but our knowledge is thus far limited to entries in the Krombach church books.) It is hoped, in any event, that persons researching 18th century Wittgenstein emigration to North America can find in the DERR relevant background information.

4. *Coming in DERR no. 6:*

We will meet Simon Dreisbach as a young family man with a hitherto unsuspected line of work, and we can examine the first known document produced by him – his letter of protest about a fine he claimed was unjust. On the basis of this letter we will try to figure out what he may have been doing in 1725 and 1726.

A.G.D., 19 June 2013.

¹³ Count Friedrich's new *Kirchen- und Schul-Ordnung ... in der Graffschafft Wittgenstein* (1746), published in facsimile by Andreas Kroh, Heimat-Verlag Hans Wied, Bad Laasphe, 1997, p. 104.