

The Origin of the Riedesel Name in the Former County of Wittgenstein: What Is Known and New Theories

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Originally published as "Die Entstehung des Namens Riedesel in der Grafschaft Wittgenstein: Bekanntes und neue Theorien" in the periodical *Wittgenstein*, Volume IV, 2007. This English version was prepared by Paul Riedesel. A few general historical notes have been added for the benefit of the American reader. The former German *Grafschaft* (best rendered as County in English, as its rulers were Counts) of Wittgenstein was a small, poor and isolated region ruled by the Sayn-Wittgenstein family since the 1200s. It was the ancestral home of virtually all the Riedesels in America, and home to a branch of commoners by that name since the 1600s. If there is one dominant question in Riedesel genealogy and history, it is how, when, and where the American and Wittgenstein Riedesels connect to the ennobled Riedesel families from the adjoining state of Hesse. This paper was written to address that question, originally to readers very familiar with the local German history and geography.

Introduction

"Riedesel" is one of a number of family names distinctive to Wittgenstein. No other district in Germany is home to as many Riedesels, and an examination of the origins of emigrants to America further confirms this geographic concentration. Through emigration, Census and family records, we know of 53 Riedesel men, women, and children who came to America. Their ancestry can be traced back to Henrich Riedesel from the Wittgenstein hamlet of Melbach with only two exceptions, and their origins are simply unknown.

In contrast to other local names such as Homrighausen, Strackbein, Bald, Sassmanshausen, or Dickel, however, Riedesel is known to have originated in Hesse. The question is, how are the peasant Riedesels of Wittgenstein related to those in Hesse, who were of the minor nobility? We cannot provide a conclusive answer. Our purpose, rather, is to review what is known about the Riedesels inside and outside of Wittgenstein, and to propose a plausible theory.¹

The Riedesels in Wittgenstein

The starting point for all of our analysis is the Riedesel family that lived for several generations in the house known locally as "Herjes" in the hamlet of Melbach (near the village of Balde, and south of the town of Bad Berleburg). The progenitor of all the subsequent Riedesels in Wittgenstein and America so far as is known was Henrich Riedesel (~1615-1680). One child of his first marriage was Johannes Riedesel (born 1634), who married into the village of Girkhausen and was the ancestor of all the Riedesels in Girkhausen, Wunderthausen, and Diedenshausen, and a large majority in America. Henrich's second marriage produced the master builder Mannus Riedesel (1662-1726). His descendants may be found in Erndtebrück and Wingshausen in Germany, and in the state of Texas, among other places.

Like some of his descendants and his presumed ancestors in Melbach, Henrich Riedesel was no common serf. Around 1640—during the Thirty Years War—Henrich Riedesel served the Count in Berleburg as a coachman. Werner Wied has documented a few previous generations that lived in Herjes house. Their family names are lost to history, but they may well have been Riedesels. We particularly want to note "Henrich from Melbach" who is mentioned in a document from 1575 as a militia captain (*Rottmeister der Schützen*), and elsewhere as one of the biggest taxpayers at the time.

The definitive history of Wittgenstein was a doctoral dissertation published in 1927 by Günther Wrede. He wrote that the settlements at Melbach and Balde had been abandoned in the early 1500s, but were important enough by 1543 for the Counts of the northern and southern Counties of Wittgenstein to squabble over their possession.² Tax documents between 1521 and 1545 include various entries for a "Henrich" in Melbach.³ It appears likely that the house that became known as "Herjes" was established some time between 1510-1520. Existing records strongly suggest that the father of our coachman, Henrich, was also called Henrich or Heyrich.

The first, certain mention of the name Riedesel in the documented history of what became the Riedesels of Wittgenstein appeared in the year 1618. From then on, the genealogical record is largely intact and we will not reproduce it here; the first author has as complete a database as anyone extending down to the present. There were, however, documentary mentions of other Riedesels in Wittgenstein prior to 1618.

Wrede cites a "Wilhelm Rietesel" as *Schultheiß* for the town of Berleburg and its rural hinterlands in 1541.⁴ While a *Schultheiß* was no nobleman, his was an important and respected office that required the trust of the nobility. He was a kind of community overseer in the town in the employ of the Count, and outside the town (i.e. in the peasant villages) he was both policeman and judge.

Two centuries earlier in the town of Feudingen in southern Wittgenstein, we again meet the name Riedesel, and this time borne by a member of the minor nobility. In 1351, a man-at-arms (*Wappner*) named Bernhard Riedesel married Gertrud von Feudingen.⁵ This Bernhard Riedesel belonged to the family of the Riedesels of Josbach, of whom we will hear more later.⁶ A few years later (1369), another document tells us of five Riedesel brothers and their uncles, Johann and Einolf von Feudingen. Their father Bernhard was already dead, but the brothers were still just boys. They are listed as: Wygant, Richart, Johann, Bernhard, and Gylbracht; a sister named Else is also known.⁷

By 1382, "Wyandt Ryddesil" and "Johann von Voydingen" had become vassals of the Landgrave of Hesse.⁸ It must be remembered that knights and other minor officials at this time rarely had hereditary lands, so there is nothing surprising about Wygant/Wyandt having left the town of Feudingen and the County of Wittgenstein. In the same year of 1382 we again encounter the brothers Wygant and Gilbrecht in a deposition for the Landgrave of Hesse in a legal matter regarding the debts of Eynolf von Feudingen and Johann Riedesel.⁹ It is clear from this document that Johann Riedesel was deceased at this time. The remaining brothers Bernhardt and Richart are not mentioned, so it may be surmised that they too were dead. After this point (1382), all traces disappear of these Riedesel brothers from Feudingen, or their descendants.

The absence of evidence cannot prove anything, but it can still suggest certain conclusions. We believe it unlikely that the sons of *Wappner* Bernhard carried on the Riedesel line in Wittgenstein. We discern no direct connection between the family in Feudingen in 1369 and that in Melbach in 1618—at least in within Wittgenstein.

While much of the early history of the Sayn-Wittgensteins is shrouded in darkness, it is well known that the Counts maintained constant pressure on other minor nobility through feuds,

negotiation, and legal action to increase their own power and influence. The idea of the sovereign state separate from personal family domains lay in the future. An individual noble ruled an ever-changing patchwork of towns and villages, with different rights in different places. Peasants in a village might owe services and taxes to several different lords. One lord might have hunting rights in a given forest while another had a right to the wood. In a process that accelerated over the centuries, stronger lords sought to reduce the status of smaller ones. The Sayn-Wittgensteins were never more than minor nobility, but natural boundaries and the limited resources of the area kept larger powers from bothering with them. However, they were keen to squeeze out any and all local rivals.

The holdings and authority of the knights of Girkhausen and of Diedenshausen, and the Counts of Dersch, von Winter and von Grafschaft were all taken over either by means of the sword or contract. Afflerbach reports that the lords of Feudingingen had a good relationship with the house of Sayn-Wittgenstein, yet the Feudingingen line disappears before 1400.¹⁰

Moving ahead again to the 1600s and the dawn of what some call the modern era, there are various indications that the Riedesels in Melbach belonged to a somewhat higher stratum of society than the ordinary peasant. Taken together, these historical facts support the theory that they had their roots in the nobility, though by 1700 few signs remained of any noble privileges. We have already mentioned the role of Henrich Riedesel as a coachman for the Count, the relative prosperity of the earlier residents in Melbach (whose family name is unknown), and *Schultheiß* Wilhelm Riedesel (1541).

The master builder, Mannus Riedesel, fascinates us to this day. A recent paper in the periodical *Wittgenstein* by Burkhardt describes an elaborately written petition to Count Casimir in Mannus' own hand. Though not all peasants were illiterate, few had the command of the written word or the penmanship evident in this document. Burkhardt writes that Riedesel's petition stands apart from all others in the archive by its meticulous formulation. In contrast to the language and form of similar requests, Mannus' petition addresses the Count in a manner that suggests he stands closer than other subjects.¹¹

We know nothing of how Mannus Riedesel learned his craft as a builder or his letters. The most parsimonious explanation would be family tradition, and only in families of higher standing would literacy at this level have been the norm.

Birkelbach, for one, remarks on the significance of who served as godparents of Mannus' children, noting that they were drawn from the largest and most prosperous farmers in the area. Below the thin level of the nobility, they were certainly the highest stratum of the population. At least through Mannus' generation, the Riedesels in Melbach belonged to this stratum.¹² The names, and sometimes the family connections, of godparents were recorded in the church register at the time of a baptism. While regarded as important in theological terms, who served as godparents for whom was an indication of the social networks that existed. Most often, they were aunts and uncle of the child. The presence of a high-status non-relative among the godparents speaks volumes. Wealthy farmers, officials, or even members of the ruling family would be very desirable to have as godparents and could thus be selective about who they honored with their presence—and presents.

Furthermore, Mannus Riedesel was widely traveled, which was very unusual for his time. He was engaged by the House of Orange in Siegen-Nassau and reportedly in other regions. Being on familiar terms with the Sayn-Wittgensteins (for whom he built both the forest-house at Dambach and the magnificent Ludwigsburg in Berleburg) was to his advantage, but he appears, in addition, to have been well connected with the other prosperous families in the region.

In summary, he not only bore the surname of an ancient noble family, but was literate with a remarkable degree of self-consciousness. Very few of his contemporaries had such gifts.

Wilhelm Riedesel, born about 1687 in Girkhausen, was the first member of the family to live in Wunderthausen, and was the ancestor of a large majority of the American and living German Riedesels. He was a nephew of the great builder, Mannus. In their contribution to the 1978 village book for Wunderthausen and Diedenshausen, Lauber and Lauber describe Wilhelm Riedesel as the second-largest taxpayer in Wunderthausen as of 1710. This is a direct measure of his possessions and tenant holdings.¹³ Wilhelm Riedesel had married Margarethe Spieß the oldest child and hence heir to the house known as Gundermanns. It is noteworthy that one of the godparents of their first child was the then *Schultheiß* from Girkhausen, one J. Georg Spieß. (The godparents of their remaining children appear to have been more ordinary villagers).

The 1978 village history also repeats the fairytale-like story to the effect that the Riedesel name came to Wittgenstein when a noble officer gave up his rights to become a huntsman (*Jäger*) for the Count.¹⁴ A nobleman couldn't and wouldn't "walk away" from his privileges, nor would he lose them by marrying a commoner (as other fanciful legends have suggested). Nevertheless, there appears to be a kernel of truth to the first story that we will explore in good time.

Mannus Riedesel had well-connected friends serving as godparents, as did the first child of Wilhelm Riedesel in Wunderthausen. They were not alone. Our research has established that a Georg Wilhelm Riedesel, born 1702 in Girkhausen, moved outside of Wittgenstein to marry the daughter of the *Schultheiß* in the Hessian town of Winnen (near Marburg) in 1734. His descendants include Riedesels in that area, the Low Countries of Europe, and some in the United States. What is important to our argument is that he not only married into one of the most prominent families, but that the godparents of the children of this marriage came from the lower nobility (e.g. von Rau, von Rabenau) and prosperous commoners.¹⁵

The hypothesis that arises from all of these anecdotal facts is that the connection to some noble branch of Riedesels was not ancient, but relatively recent. It would be quite plausible if *Schultheiß* Wilhelm Riedesel or *Rottmeister* Henrich were in fact only a generation or two removed from a member of (one-time) knightly family who came to Wittgenstein. By this period—the 1500s and early 1600s—the class of free knights was something of an anachronism. The invention of gunpowder removed the advantage of the mounted, armored knight, and the greater lords continued to consolidate their power at the expense of the minor nobility. The romantic idyll of the knight with his sword, horse, and squire was a thing of the past. Their role in the feudal system was as hired soldiers in the employ of those with the only things that mattered—land and peasant labor. As employment opportunities dwindled, the sons of these old families had little choice but to seek other means of living. Armed now with old names, perhaps

a degree of literacy, and some familiarity with the surviving aristocratic orders, they were at least suited for employment as sheriffs or huntsmen or toll collectors.

There can be little doubt that the Riedesel name came to Wittgenstein in the course of this historical diminution of the small knights. The first known bearers of the name were indeed minor officials, and in the person of Mannus Riedesel a century later we observe talents, connections and self-consciousness that could only be expected of a member of what had been a privileged class.

The Riedesel name is ancient with its origins outside of Wittgenstein. The deeper historical question is, from which of several lines of knightly Riedesels do we descend?

The Earliest Generations

Even professional historians find it challenging to separate fact from legend in the study of noble lineages. While genealogical tables from the Middle Ages are abundant, their veracity is always open to question (and appearing on the Internet does not make them any more reliable!). The purpose of family histories in earlier centuries must be properly understood. They were, as a rule, created to burnish the reputation of the family and enhance its standing. Claims of noble ancestry stretching back to antiquity was a given. If facts were missing, they could be fabricated. Germany became a cradle of modern historiography and meticulous scholarship, but that was relatively modern development. Old manuscripts claim to have identified Riedesel knights in the 1100s or before, but the supposed sources are missing—if they ever existed at all.

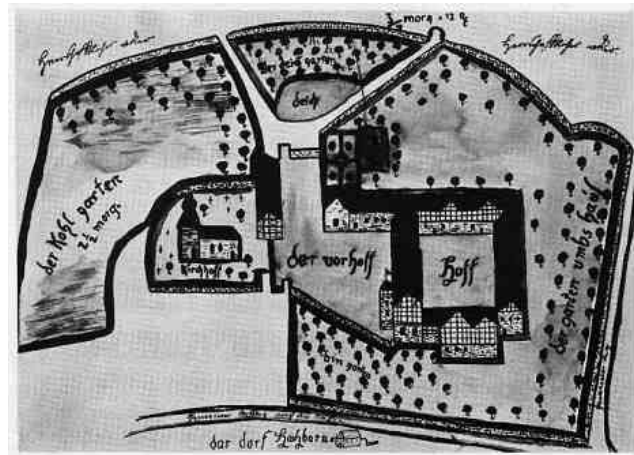
Those who would understand the history of the Riedesel name and the knights who bore it have two credible sources. The first is a series of now seven volumes by several authors, subsumed under the title of *Die Riedesel zu Eisenbach* (the Riedesels of Fortress Eisenbach). Note that the preposition is *zu* and not *von*. Of most relevance to our purposes are the three volumes written by Dr. E. Becker and published between 1923-1927.¹⁶ Becker scrupulously studied the documentary records within both the Riedesel family archives and others in Germany to fashion a plausible chronology of the Riedesel knights from 1200 to the 1400s. Their descendants eventually secured hereditary land rights around the town of Lauterbach/Hessen with an historic seat in the ancient fortress called Eisenbach. Becker's work is the undisputed cornerstone for all later research on this family.

The second foundational source is an extended paper by Dr. E. Wagner covering a parallel Riedesel line centered around Josbach.¹⁷ While members of this line flourished for several centuries, they disappeared from the ranks of the nobility by 1700s and have thus received scant scholarly attention.

A third source may be mentioned as it is useful despite some obvious flaws. Published in 1888 by Rudolf von Buttlar, this family tree purports to describe the genealogy of the principal members of the (noble) Riedesels back to 1200.¹⁸ However, the more-recent and more-critical analysis by Becker finds many of the connections to be erroneous and unsupported by documentary evidence.

So—when and where did the first documented member of the Riedesel family make his entrance?

On the basis of credible historical evidence, the forefather of all living Riedesels was a knight (*Ritter*) named Dietmar. The earliest known document naming a Riedesel comes to us from about the year 1200.¹⁹ Dietmar Riedesel is mentioned in connection with the founding of a cloister of the *Prämonstratensern* monastic order at Hachborn, near Marburg (in the present community of Ebsdorfergrund). The foundations of the cloister walls may still be seen today. *Ritter* Dietmar is mentioned a second time in a document from 1226, dealing with a dispute over taxes.²⁰



Sketch of the Foundations of the Cloister at Hachborn

Although old genealogies report other Riedesel men before 1200 and immediately after, no known document attests to their existence, and such reports are probably spurious. An intriguing exception may be the case of a reported Konrad Riedesel. According to one family tradition, this Konrad Riedesel came to Hesse with Elisabeth of Hungary (1207-1231), who was to become the revered Saint Elisabeth. Widowed at a young age from Ludwig IV, Margrave of Hesse, she devoted her remaining life to the care of the sick and poor. The same Konrad is said to have accompanied Elisabeth back to Marburg when her husband died.²¹ A "Konrad of Marburg" (assassinated 1233) is a well-known, though controversial, figure in local history who served as a teacher, an Inquisitor, and the Father Confessor to Elisabeth.

We suggest the possibility that Konrad Riedesel and Konrad of Marburg were one and the same person. Several facts point to this supposition.

- As was Konrad of Marburg, the Riedesels of that time had close ties to the *Prämonstratensern* order and their cloisters.
- Konrad of Marburg is said to have come from an old and wealthy knightly family from around Marburg.
- The Riedesels had considerable influence and held important offices in the Order of Teutonic Knights, which had a powerful chapter in Marburg and was closely associated with church dedicated to St. Elisabeth. The coats of arms (*Wappen*) of several Riedesel knights may still be seen in the church.
- Centuries later a handwritten, prose chronicle of St. Elisabeth was found among the effects of a Johann Riedesel.²²

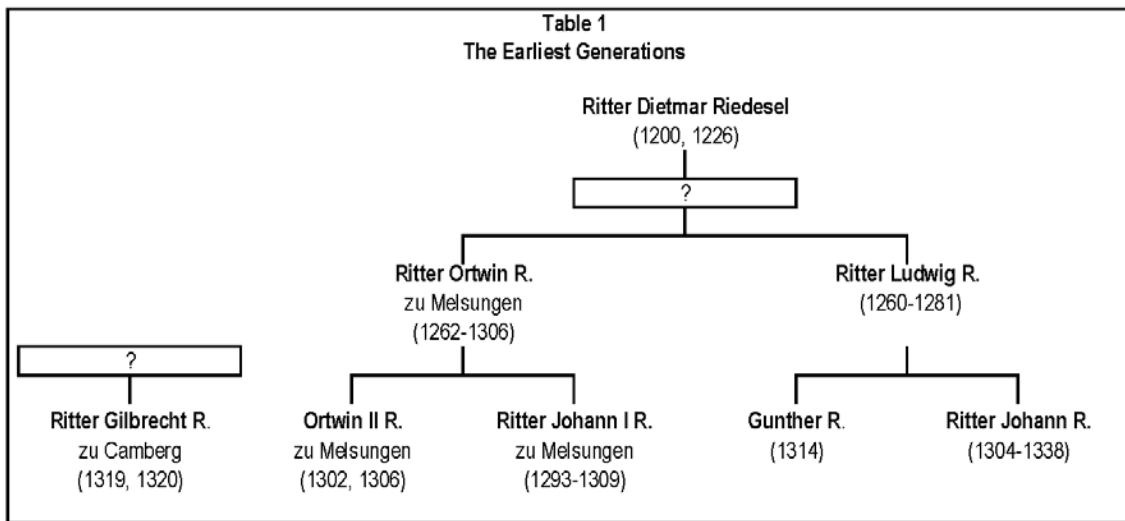
Definitive proof of the identity of Konrad Marburg is lacking and will probably remain so.

The next documented bearers of the Riedesel name after Dietmar appear in the last decade of the 13th century—the brothers Ludwig and Ortwin/Wortwin Riedesel. The gap of years makes it

unlikely that they were Dietmar's sons, so the assumption is that they were his grandsons. Becker argues for the close family relationship as follows (our translation):

*It is not just because Dietmar is the first Riedesel we meet in the old documents from Marburg, or that he once sold forest land in the same area around the cloister at Hachborn near Marburg. The second document that mentions Ludwig says he held an office (Schöffe) that would have required him to live in Marburg. It is thus highly probable that the original seat of the Riedesel is to be found in the vicinity of Marburg.*²³

Four known offspring of these brothers appear in the next generation. They were Ortwin II, Ritter Johann, Gunther, and a second Ritter Johann, who were bestowed with offices in Kassel, Melsungen, Frankenberg, and Grünberg. In the early 1300s when these men were active, the founder of the line known as the Riedesels of (zu) Camberg, Ritter Gilbrecht, was also alive. In the decades that followed, the Riedesel family tree split into many branches throughout Hesse. The fragmented documentary evidence does not show how they were related, but there can be little doubt that they shared a common root.



*Dates shown are not births and deaths, but dates when they were mentioned in documents.

It must always be remembered that while knights such as the Riedesel cousins were a privileged class, their livelihoods still depended on employment by more powerful lords or free cities. The honorific of being called *Ritter* (knight) was not hereditary, and was bestowed under more or less formal conditions by a Margrave, Duke, King or even the German Emperor. Knights and their un-knighted brothers sought and held positions as men-at-arms. Some engagements were for the short-term in the endemic feuds of the day, while others were for more-permanent postings in the various fortresses or city ramparts. Some may have died of old age, but those who survived the rigors of combat, tournament and the hunt were as vulnerable as the peasantry to other accidents and disease.

We will now review the major families of Riedesel knights, beginning with the best known (and only surviving) line.

The Riedesel zu Eisenbach

The life and accomplishments of Hermann II Riedesel (1407-1463) form a watershed in the history of the family. Before his time, the Riedesels from all branches were minor officials and men-at-arms with few or no hereditary holdings. His ancestors were based at Melsungen, to the north of Lauterbach. In contrast, Hermann and the lineage he spawned were reckoned among the most important and influential nobles in the service of the Landgrave of Hesse. Hermann proved himself to be an able advisor and administrator, and on the strength of these accomplishments was able to marry Margarethe von Röhrenfurt in 1415. Their son Johann was betrothed as a child to marry the heiress to the fortress Eisenbach, and considerable other property and privileges. Hermann controlled these assets and gained the title of *Erbmarschall zu Hessen*, which has been passed down to this day to the oldest male member of the family.

While the actual territory associated with Eisenbach was relatively small, both it and the *Erbmarschall* title (essentially "Hereditary Marshall") guaranteed the status and influence of the Riedesel zu Eisenbach. The nearby town of Lauterbach had some municipal rights and was not fully subject to the Riedesels, but the latter were nevertheless very powerful. The family divided into three, then four, named lines with residences throughout Hesse. Income from their land holdings could not support a noble lifestyle for all family members, so they typically served greater nobles as military officers and court advisors. However, a committee of the eldest members served as stewards of the common possessions. Detailed contracts were written and re-written to assure the integrity of their possessions; for instance, daughters were explicitly proscribed from inheriting landed property. Dowries might be generous, but no son-in-law would have claim to the family's properties, privileges, or feudal services.

In 1680, the German Emperor raised the four senior male members of the family to the status of *Freiherr* (Baron). Specifically, they were given the title of *Freiherr zu Eisenbach*. All male descendants who reached majority were (and are) addressed in this manner. Note that 1) no one was ever the Baron, as all men of this family had rights to that title, and 2) the Emperor did not designate them as "von Riedesel", and with rare exception that is not a title family members ever used.

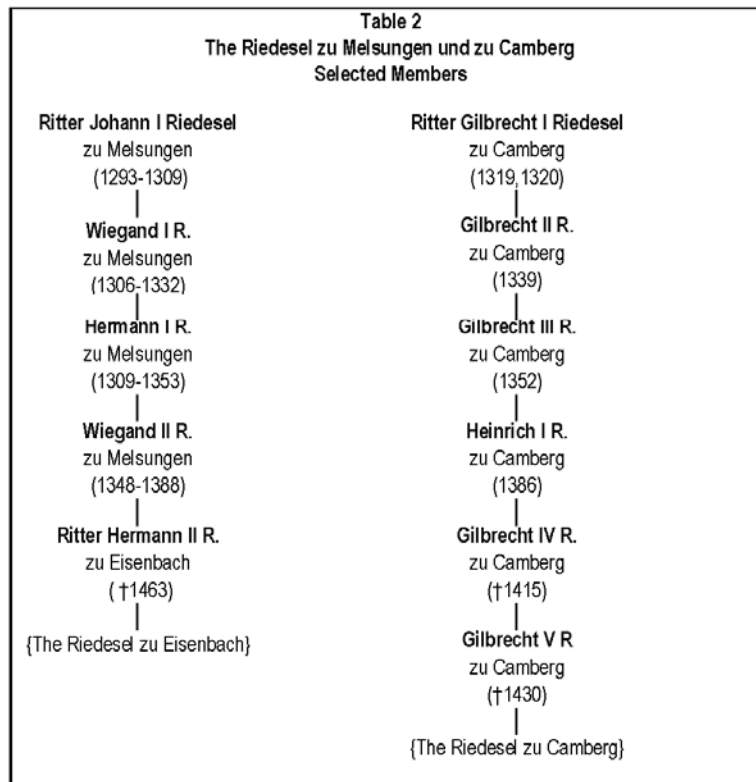
What is important for our purposes in clarifying the origins of the Riedesels in Wittgenstein is that the genealogical record of the Riedesel zu Eisenbach has been studied and documented in meticulous detail. There is no realistic chance that some Prodigal Son of the family slipped—or was driven—away to Wittgenstein. It is true that not all sons had property to speak of or were able to marry (which required property, in their social circles). They still lived lives of relative comfort. We believe that the history of the Riedesel zu Eisenbach is solid enough to preclude any possibility that an ancestor of ours—or more generally of any Riedesel from Wittgenstein—rode through the gate of the fortress of Eisenbach.

The Riedesel zu Camberg

A second line of early Riedesel knights was based in what is now the city of Bad Camberg in the Taunus mountains north and west of Frankfurt. As noted in Table 1, we do not know the connection between them and *Ritter* Dietmar, but our assumption is that the Riedesels of Camberg shared the same roots as the other houses. The Riedesels of Eisenbach spoke of them as "cousins", and (with the other lines yet to be discussed) shared virtually the same heraldry.

These Riedesels maintained small properties within Camberg, but also held offices in Reiffenberg, Butzbach and Staufenberg. At least one of their line was a master of the *Johanniter* Order, another influential body of free knights. Several different Gilbrecht Riedesels were active in Camberg in the century following the first documentary mentions in 1319 and 1320.²⁴ According to Rudolf von Buttlar, the line died out with Philipp Eberhard Riedesel in 1622.

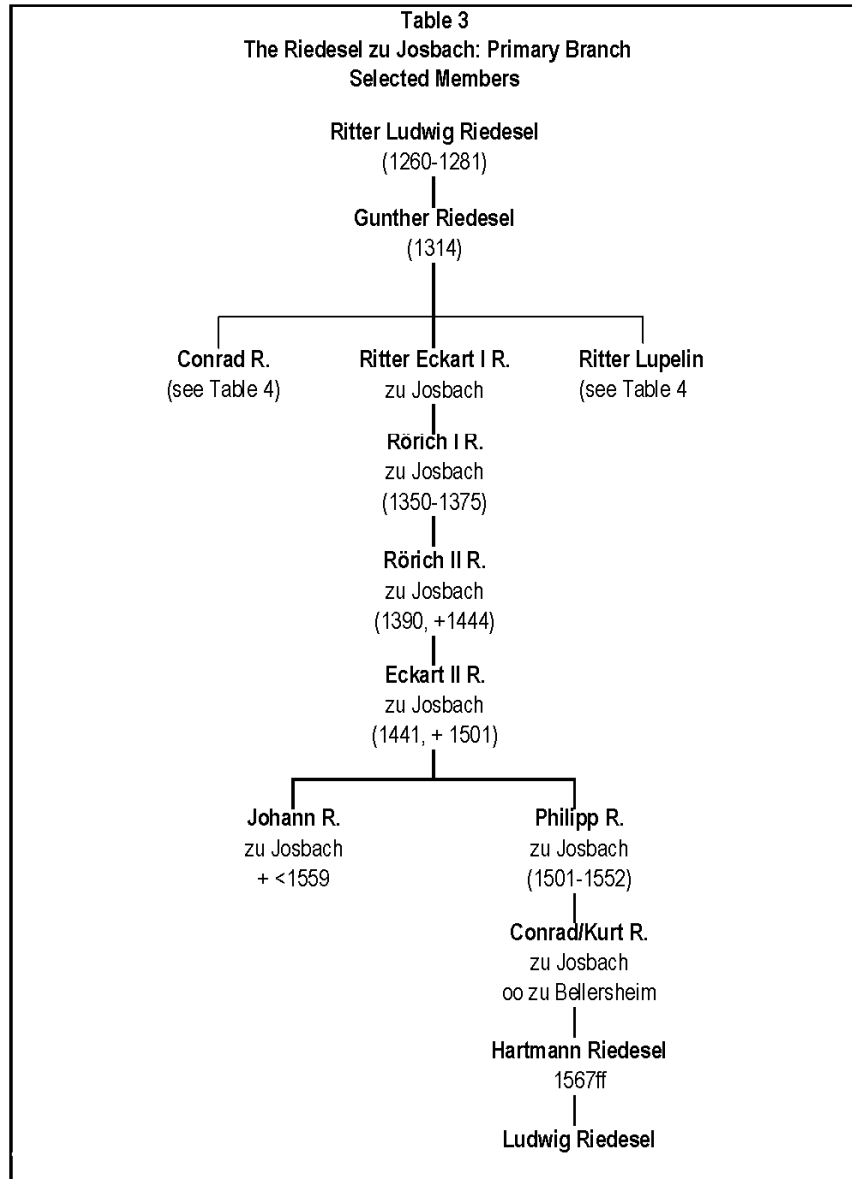
Because of the relative distance between Camberg and Wittgenstein as well as the topographical barriers, we believe that a direct connection with the Wittgenstein Riedesels is highly unlikely. The Riedesels of Camberg were known to exist for a while after the first appearance of the name at Melbach, but their area of operation appears to have been limited to the area between Camberg and Limburg.



*Dates shown are not births and deaths, but dates when they were mentioned in documents.

The Riedesel zu Josbach and Related Lines

The most fragmented branch of the Riedesel family began with *Ritter* Gunther, as shown in Tables 3 and 4. Little is known of him, but the evidence is that he was the progenitor, through his sons, of the Riedesel zu Josbach, zu Vers (now the town of Kirchvers), zu Königsberg and zu Bellersheim. Beginning in the early 14th century and continuing to at least 1590, the Riedesel zu Josbach are mentioned in a variety of surviving documents. Their primary seat was the town of Josbach, but over the course of the centuries, members of the line held positions in other locations including Gemünden, Rosenthal and Niedling. Dr. Wagner's conclusion is that the Riedesel zu Josbach were descendants of *Ritter* Eckart I, a son of *Ritter* Gunther. Father and son are documented in various records between 1326 and 1350. The last of the core Josbach line was dead by 1673.

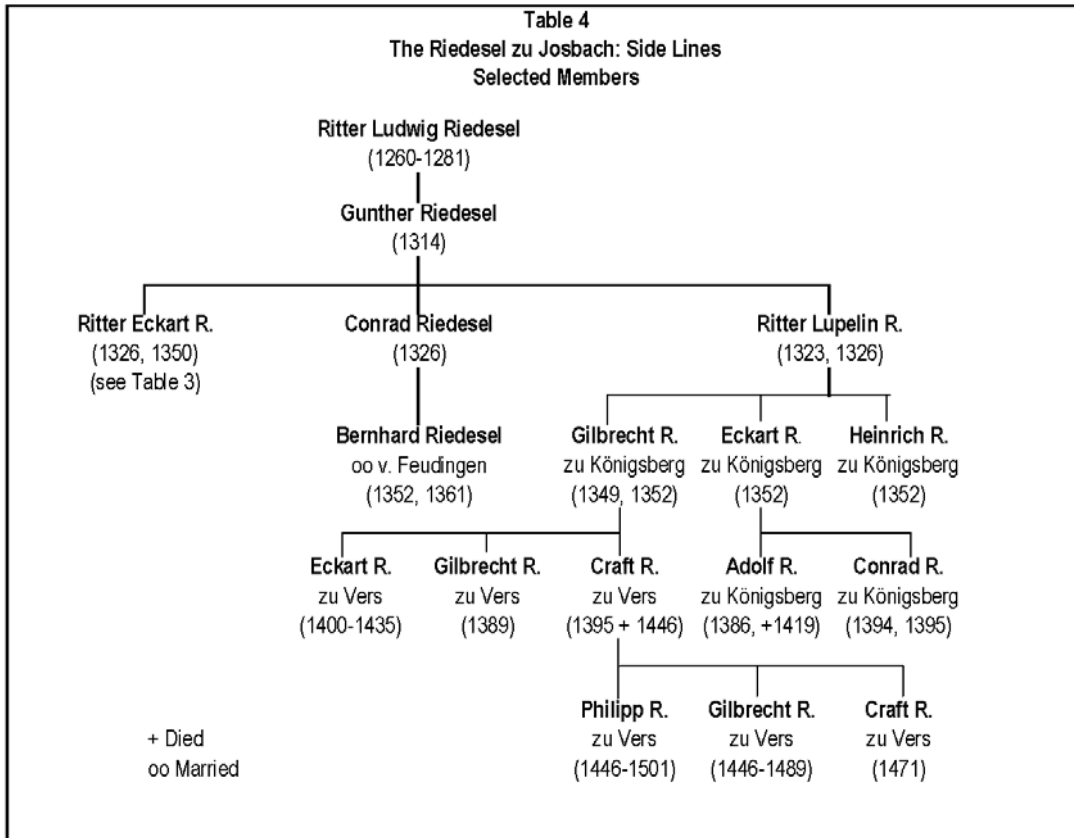


*Dates shown are not births and deaths, but dates when they were mentioned in documents.

Johann Riedesel zu Josbach and both of his wives are entombed in the church at Josbach with a memorial stone. His exact date of death is not known, but one of his wives died in 1573. In the extant literature, he is described as being the last of the Riedesel zu Josbach. However, it is possible that his blood coursed in the veins of some of the Riedesel zu Bellersheim. When this branch of the family came into being is not clear, but it appears in the records for a good century.

An Eberhard Riedesel (not shown in these tables) married Margarethe von Bellersheim, and they are mentioned in documents between 1450 and 1475. Wagner reports four sons from this marriage who held positions at Wolferode, Ernsthause and Heimersdorf. None of these brothers apparently lived past 1540. Conrad or Kurt Riedesel (Table 3) married a woman from Bellersheim who could have been a cousin, or at least close to his Riedesel zu Bellersheim kin.

An interesting historical scrap relates that in 1577 the Landgrave of Hesse suggested that Johann Riedesel zu Eisenbach call together the Riedesel zu Camberg, Bellersheim, Königsberg, and Vers.²⁵ This is evidence of the sense of kinship—centuries old as it was—of the various Riedesel lines and their parallel existence in the late Middle Ages. Whether the gathering actually took place is unknown, and this was one of the last clear mentions of the splinters of the Riedesel zu Josbach. By Zschaek's reckoning, all the noble lines except the Riedesel zu Eisenbach were extinct by 1673.²⁶



As shown in Table 4, another son of Gunther Riedesel was called Lupelin. He is cited in documents from 1323 and 1326, and his sons and grandsons held offices at Königsberg. The Riedesel zu Vers were also descendants of Lupelin. German archives contain references to numerous sons and daughters of the Riedesel zu Josbach line who lived throughout Hesse. Among their many residences were Frankfurt, Marburg, Solms, Schröck, Cleeburg and Butzbach. They appear to have had respectable relations with the Hessian court in Marburg, and intermarried with comparable families of the minor nobility.

But by 1600, the archival record becomes largely silent. The disastrous Thirty Years War (1618-1648) devastated the German states, and it is possible that the Josbach-based lines died out in Hesse as a direct result. The credible historical sources (*viz.* Becker, Zschaek and Wagner) report no noble Riedesels other than those of the Eisenbach line past 1600. There are nevertheless two important realities suggesting that the other lines lived on. We know that the Riedesels of Wittgenstein were solidly established by 1700. And we have found evidence overlooked by other

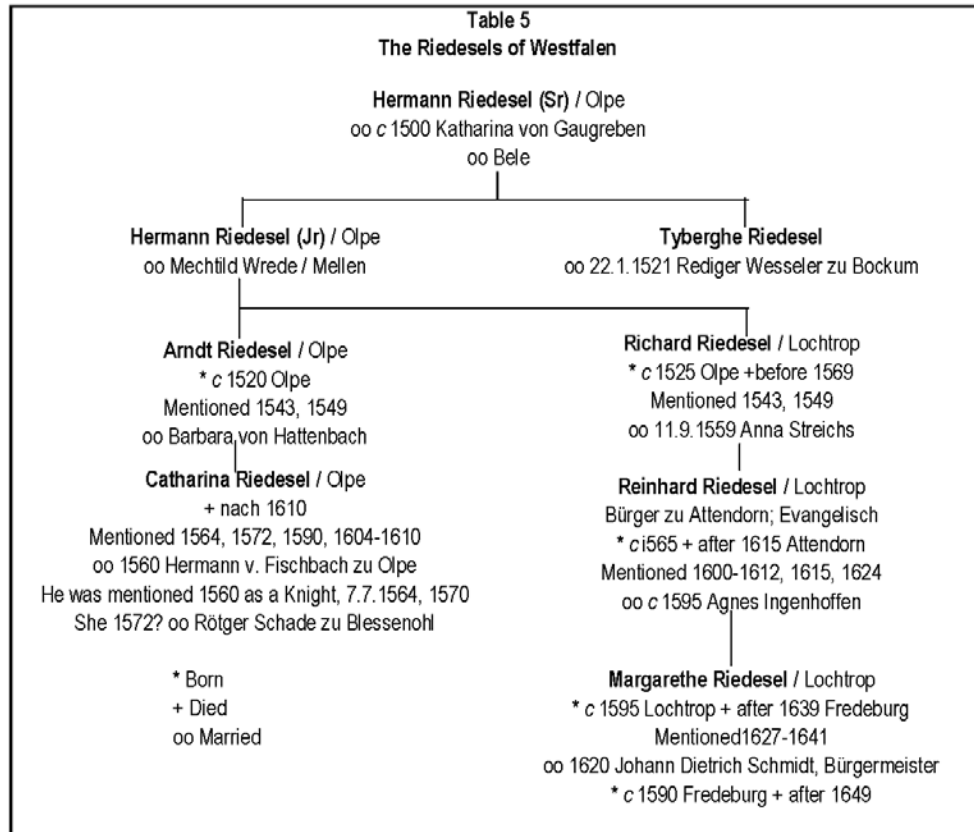
researchers of a noble branch of Riedesels living not in Hesse but in southern Westphalia (a region west and north of the Marburg area).

The Riedesels of Westphalia

While the various branches of the Riedesel knights in Hesse have been studied extensively, scholars seem to have overlooked the presence of another branch that held property in the area known as Westphalia (*Westfalen*) in northwestern Germany. The origins of this group are a mystery, though there can be no doubt that they were part of the same historical family.

The earliest documented member of the Westphalian line was Hermann Sr., who was endowed with a small property (*Rittergut*) at Olpe (now a village west of the larger town of Meschede). While the history of this property is not well-documented, the house of Olpe was mentioned in documents as early as 1400.²⁷ A century later, we meet Hermann Riedesel as the master of this small estate and a member of the knighthood of the Duchy of Westphalia. His *Wappen* (coat of arms) features the same donkey's head holding a set of thistle leaves as those of the Eisenbach and Josbach Riedesels.

Table 5 describes the known members of this family, which, according to Von Spießen and Hömberg, died out in the male line about 1625. One of the sons of Hermann Jr., Arndt, remained at Olpe where the latter's daughter, Catharina, carried on for at least another generation. The other known son of Hermann Jr., Richard, moved to a *Rittergut* called Lochtrop near present-day Eslohe. The latter's son, Reinhard, followed his father at Lochtrop, but eventually sold that property and moved with his family to Attendorn where they had a variety of possessions.



Even though this branch of the Riedesels had property and enjoyed noble status for over a century, they remained outsiders in an important respect. Westphalia was (and is) overwhelmingly Catholic, while all of the Riedesel lines became Protestant early in the Reformation. An extant document from a priest in Eslohe in 1624 denounces the entire family of Richard Riedesel as "heretics" (meaning Protestant).²⁸ As a side note, a Johann Riedesel of Neumark (related to the Eisenbach branch) may even have been a godparent to a son of Martin Luther himself.²⁹

Our efforts to date have not succeeded in identifying the ancestors of Hermann Sr. We can almost certainly rule out an immediate connection to the Riedesel zu Eisenbach, whose records at this point in history are believed to be complete. Furthermore, the published literature on the Eisenbach family makes no mention of possessions in Westphalia. By process of elimination, that leaves the splintered Riedesel zu Josbach as his likely origin. While they had at least some property or offices that were passed down the generations, it is clear that many of the sons had to seek their fortune (viz. employment) wherever they could find it. They most often moved around Hesse, but while a move as far as Olpe would be unusual, it would not have been without precedent. The knightly class was not that large. Centuries of intermarriage set up a network of allegiances that is not necessarily visible today, but which gave its members entrée to a large social circle.

The heraldry of the various Riedesel families also provides some clues about their interconnections. While more ornamental "crests" such as the one illustrated above, the core *Wappen* ("arms") is no more than a simple shield with prescribed colors and symbols. Common to all versions of Riedesel arms was a donkey's head, and in most, the donkey held three thistle leaves in its mouth. One exception to this rule is found in a table of arms of Westphalian knights from 1651. In this specimen, the thistle leaves are absent from the mouth.³⁰ Rather, twigs with leaves are depicted on the left and right sides of the head. This same peculiarity is found in the *Wappen* of Johann and Craft Riedesel zu Bellersheim (one of the Josbach offshoots).³¹ This shared variation is at least suggestive of a link between the Bellersheim and the Westphalian Riedesels.



There are other indicators of family connections. The wife of the first Hermann Riedesel in Olpe had the surname Gaugrebe(n); the Gaugrebens were important vassals of the Margrave of Hesse. In 1440, Hermann Gaugreben and his "dear uncle and brother" (literally, *Oheim und Schwager*) Hermann II Riedesel of the Eisenbach line set their seals to a contract.³²

The presence of Riedesel knights in the vicinity of Meschede (close to Olpe) is significant to our argument. While the crest of the Rothaar mountains lies between that part of Westphalia and Wittgenstein, the distance is not so far. As the proverbial crow flies, the distance between Attendorn (where Reinhard became a citizen) and his origins at Olpe/Lochtrop is just as great. Hand-written notes by von Spießen refer to other children of this line (for instance, a Wilhelm and a Johann), but with no citation to sources. Had there been younger, surviving sons of this line, they would have had to find employment of some other kind.

A final, intriguing note from Westphalia concerns the Rump family from Wenne. They were intertwined with the Riedesels in Westphalia, and the *Rittgergut* at Lochtrop was once held by them. We meet this family name again in southern Wittgenstein, where they were described as being influential and prosperous in the 1500s—the same time that we believe the Riedesel name came to stay.³³ Further research would be needed to confirm (or disconfirm) that they indeed tie back to Lochtrop or Attendorn. If so, that would be an additional strand connecting the long-overlooked Riedesels of Westphalia with those in Wittgenstein.

The Uprising of 1539

Leaving the small but potentially significant branch of Riedesels in Westphalia, we return again to an incident in Wittgenstein known as the *Bauernaufstand* (literally, peasant uprising) in 1539. The particulars that are known point to the role of a Riedesel hitherto unremarked on by scholars.

At this time, the subjects of Count Johann began to protest increases in their taxes and services and restrictions on their rights, and had appealed for help from the Margrave Philipp of Hesse. A group gathered together and secretly traveled out of Wittgenstein to meet the Margrave at Rosenthal (in the vicinity of Marburg) to present their grievances.

While the county of Wittgenstein was by now a sovereign member of the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation and in no way subordinate to its more powerful neighboring state, Philipp was nevertheless an influential and important ally of the Sayn-Wittgensteins. As the party returned to Wittgenstein, they were arrested by the order of the irate Count. Philipp (hailed as "*der Großmütige*" or Magnanimous by posterity) immediately requested that the prisoners be freed. And they were, though subjected to large fines.³⁴ The story is all the more curious because only a few years before, Philipp had put down a similar uprising by his own subjects in a brutal fashion. Why would he have received the delegation from Wittgenstein, much less weighed in on their behalf with Graf Johann?

Surviving accounts of the episode name one of the prisoners and perhaps a ringleader as "Henrich von Melbach." Officials of the powerful Landgrave of Hesse came to his aid, and other free farmers assisted with his bail. It is reasonable to conclude that Henrich was himself a free farmer (i.e. he had some property in his own right, rather than being a feudal dependent of the Count).

We have already discussed the likelihood that Herjes house at Melbach was occupied by several generations of Riedesels before 1600, "Henrich von Melbach" being one of them. Furthermore the seemingly audacious request for help from Margrave Philipp was not made solely because of the latter's reputation as "the Magnanimous." We know that the Riedesel zu Josbach were close to the house of Hesse. Philipp Riedesel zu Josbach had been the *Hofmeister* for the Margrave himself, and then to his son. Other offices included *Burggraf* in Marburg (1512), *Hofmeister* to Margrave Philipp's wife (1516), and an advisor to the Margrave (1527). A grandson, Hartmann Riedesel zu Josbach, was a *Schultheiß* and official in Marburg.³⁵ The younger brother of Philipp zu Josbach, Johannes, had served as an emissary between a relative and the Count of Wittgenstein-Berleburg in negotiations over the payment of feudal dues in 1538.

All of these facts point to relationships between the Counts of Sayn-Wittgenstein and the Riedesel zu Josbach—either in their own right or as retainers of the powerful house of Hesse to which the Counts had strong ties. If Henrich von Melbach were in fact a Riedesel, the intervention by the Margrave and his officials is easier to understand. His kinsmen Philipp, Johannes or Hartmann Riedesel zu Josbach could well have prevailed on Philipp of Hesse to help set Henrich (and the other protestors) free.

Even without invoking aid from the inner circle of the Marburg court, the actions of Henrich von Melbach speak to an unusual social position. How many common peasants would have raised their voices (and possibly swords) against the Sayn-Wittgensteins? Or surreptitiously lead a delegation to plead for help from a neighboring sovereign? How many would have been able to pay the large fines that were imposed on the protestors? Very few had the property, experience of leadership, initiative and verve. A member of the Riedesel zu Josbach would fit the bill; so would any other stray scion of a knightly clan, but it was the Riedesel name that was rooted in the Melbach within a few generations.

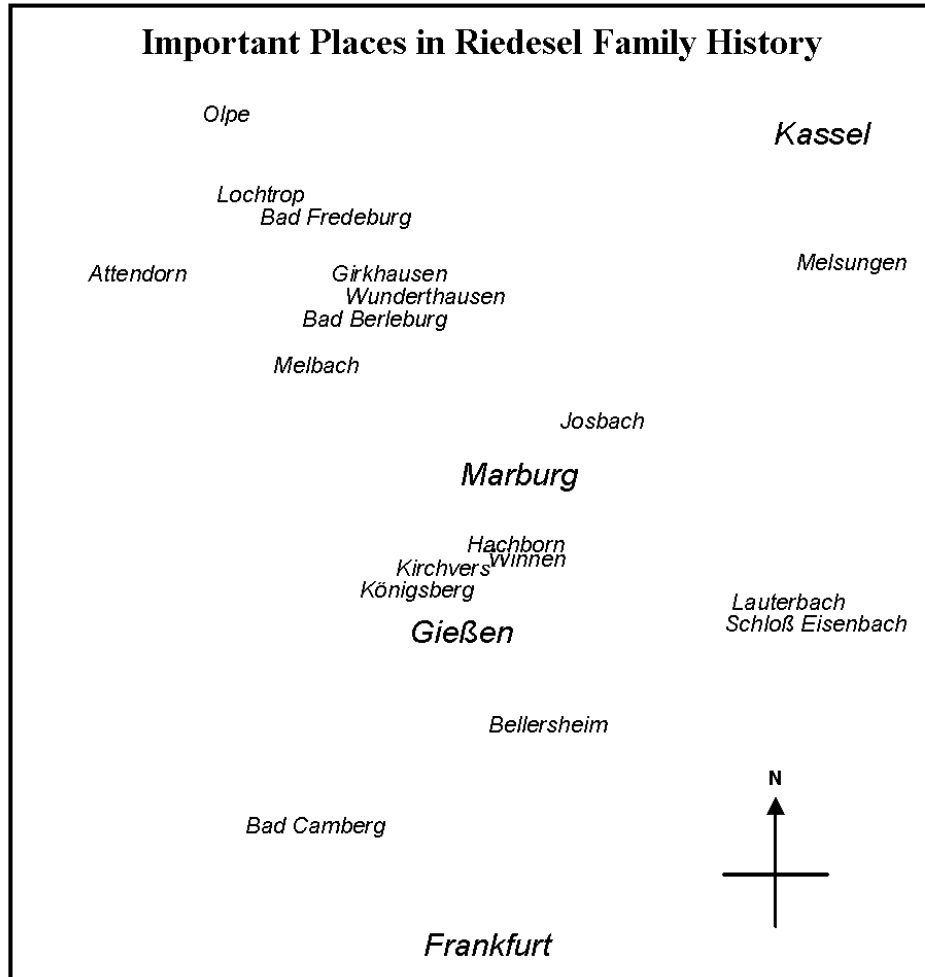
Conclusions

A definitive answer to our question may never be found. Yet the possibility exists that in some dusty chest lies a record of a young Riedesel *Ritter* entering into the service of the Counts of Sayn-Wittgenstein around 1500, and establishing a residence at the Melbach.

Given what the documentary record tells us, we draw the following conclusions with respect to the Riedesel name in Wittgenstein:

- They were an offshoot of the Riedesel zu Josbach, and were established permanently around 1500.
- While they share roots with the Riedesel zu Eisenbach, the lines diverged centuries earlier so that no sense of kinship with that family ever existed.
- *Ritter* Bernhard Riedesel from Feudinggen and his sons could have been ancestors, but the generations that immediately followed them did not live in Wittgenstein.
- The branch that lived in Westphalia was almost certainly of the Josbach line and could have been the immediate ancestors of the Riedesels we meet in the Melbach.

(Since this original article was written, we have collected additional information. We are still sifting and evaluating it, but it is entirely consistent with the theses set forth here).



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- ² Wrede, *Territorialgeschichte*, pages 128, 169.
- ³ Wied, *Beitrage*, pages 428ff.
- ⁴ Wrede, *Territorialgeschichte*, pages 122-123. We would add that the letters "d" and "t" are phonetically very close in both German and English, and in the regional dialect can be even more similar.
- ⁵ Berleburg Archive, Nr. 376.
- ⁶ Wagner, *Die Riedesel zu Josbach*.
- ⁷ Afflerbach, *Die Anfänge*, page 44.
- ⁸ Becker, Volume II, Nr. 218.
- ⁹ Becker, Volume II, Nr. 219.
- ¹⁰ Afflerbach, *Die Anfänge*.
- ¹¹ Burkardt, Mannus Riedesel, page 35.
- ¹² Birkelbach, *die Familiengeschichte*, p. 116.
- ¹³ Lauber und Lauber, *Geschichte der Häuser*, p. 104.
- ¹⁴ Lauber, *Zur Geschichte*, p. 196.
- ¹⁵ Hofmann, *Familienbuch Nordeck-Winnen*.
- ¹⁶ Becker, *Die Riedesel zu Eisenbach*, Volumes I-III.
- ¹⁷ Wagner, *Die Riedesel zu Josbach*.
- ¹⁸ von Buttlar, *Stammbuch*.
- ¹⁹ Becker, Volume II, Nr. 1.
- ²⁰ Becker, Volume II, Nr. 2.
- ²¹ Becker, Volume I, p. 33.
- ²² Fay, *Der Flecken*.
- ²³ Becker, Volume I, p. 35.
- ²⁴ The *Alte Amts-Apotheke* (Old Medicine Shop) in Bad Camberg was built in 1479/1480 by Henrich und Endres Riedesel.
- ²⁵ Becker, Volume III, p. 450.
- ²⁶ Zschaeck, Volume IV, p. 275.
- ²⁷ Hömberg, *Die Entstehung*, Volume VI, p. 44.
- ²⁸ St.A. Münster, Mscr. VII 570 – 4b.
- ²⁹ This supposition is based on a memorial tablet in the old church in Neumark stating that Johann Riedesel was a godparent on behalf of "D.M. Luther", which some have interpreted to represent "Dr. Martin Luther."
- ³⁰ "Die Aufschwörungstafel des Probanden Ludwig von Schade zu Blessenohl" from September 16, 1651. Staatsarchiv Münster, Domkapitel Münster, Wappenbuch III, B. 62.
- ³¹ Becker, Volume I, p. 27, and tablets displayed in the church of St. Elisabeth in Marburg/Lahn.
- ³² Becker, Volume II, Nr. 596, Nr. 602.
- ³³ Wied, *Girkhäuser Bauernschaft*, S. 319.
- ³⁴ Wied, *Girkhäuser Bauernschaft*, S. 319-324.
- ³⁵ Wagner, *Die Riedesel zu Josbach*.

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