

**The Story of [Wilhelm Lautenschläger](#), the Infamous Wizard of the Odenwald, who was Charged with Wizardry and Practicing Devilish Arts. Wilhelm was Arrested and Imprisoned in 1628 in the Tower of Michelstadt in Michelstadt, Odenwaldkreis, Hessen, Germany.**



Figure 1: Prison Tower in Michelstadt, Odenwaldkreis, Hessen, Germany  
Picture taken by: Charles F. Kerchner, Jr. in Oct 2013

As you will see Wilhelm Lautenschläger, my 9th great-grandfather, was charged and arrested in 1628 but was punished comparatively lightly. People accused of similar crimes at this time during the 30 Years War which raged in that part of what is now s.w. Germany were often given lengthy prison sentences or quite often even burned at the stake. Thousands so died. But the authorities in the Odenwald where Wilhelm lived were in general not as harsh.

The following story is a transcription and translation and summary of the original story from the book: *Documentation for the Story of the German Criminal Law System at the Time of the German Empire*. The book was published in the 1800s using Old German Black-Letter (Fraktur) type font. I was made aware of this book and Wilhelm's 1628 arrest by a historian in the Odenwald named Heidi Banse. She gave me copies of [the relevant pages from the book about Wilhelm's arrest and trial](#) when I visited Michelstadt in the Odenwald in October 2013. When I got home to Pennsylvania I scanned the book pages into my computer and [transcribed it into Modern German type font](#) using specialized computer software - along with some manual verification and tweeking. I also googled on the story and found a summary of the same event in modern German font online at Ancestry.com. I then sent these Modern German font documents to my friends in Germany for translation. The final translation below from German to understandable English was done in November 2013 by my good friends, Gerhard & Meli Kircher of Schwäbisch Hall, Germany, with help of their son Joachim Kircher. Published: 16 Nov 2013 - Last updated: 03 May 2014 08:00 P.M.

## The Story of the Wizard of the Odenwald

Wilhelm Lautenschläger was known as being “from Günterfürst”, and since 1614 “of Güttersbach”. In the vernacular they called him the “Wise Man of Güttersbach”.

In the time before and after the Thirty-Year War the population of the “Odenwald” (low mountain range in Germany) was very superstitious. All those who had exceptional skills, who were able to cure people and animals in a not quite ordinary way, were suspected of witchcraft and chased by authorities and mostly punished, too. Compared to the neighbouring Kurmainz and Hanau areas, not many witch-hunts and burning of witches occurred in the “Odenwald” area. Nevertheless there was no lack of witches and wizards.

At the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Wilhelm Lautenschläger, the Wise Man of Güttersbach, was a notorious magician and wizard, well-known far over the borders of the Odenwald area. However he cannot be considered as a wizard in a common sense rather than as a man who was extraordinarily familiar with the country’s medicinal herbs and knew their impact on people and animals.

His profound knowledge for that time he partly owed his mother, whose reputation as a midwife also was to be a wise woman, and who was consulted in cases of illness even from the manorial family. She provided Wilhelm with the knowledge of lots of “good herbs”. Furthermore he was in possession of a herbal book, which he turned to. Other parts of his knowledge he owed Gypsies and other wise people.

Lautenschläger’s success must have been quite significant as the popularity he enjoyed was huge. On some days more than 20 people came to ask for his advice and help. Besides his success based on the application of natural remedies Wilhelm possessed all kinds of other secret skills. He could tell someone’s fortune, heal wounds and diseases just speaking to them, exorcise demons and analyze people’s ailments by examining their clothes only.

Concerning his activities and success, a bunch of statements are available. Some of them are instanced below:

Brosius Fuchs from Sandbach village reports that in 1627 he has been with the wise man to ask for cure of his sick child. Lautenschläger demanded Fuchs that either he should bring the sick child itself or at least a piece of clothing of the child. As a shirt of the child was presented to him he put on his eyeglasses and determined that the child is infested by ‘dead blood’.

He found out that the defect must first “shrink” and then be “split open”. As remedy he prescribed “bear’s breeches herbs” boiled in 1 ½ litres of water to give the little child to drink. In addition he administered them to pray diligently on their knees.

Another man from Sandbach named Lenhard Karch, who had horrible pain in all his limbs for a long time, also asked for a cure by Lautenschläger. After all sorts of mysterious acts he gave him a “Hollerstock” (elderflower) into his hand, applied a fire stone on the painful limbs and muttered the following blessings: “Hollerstock, agitate yourself, I have the “Landengeriß” (pain in the extremities), I suffer day and night. I tell you that for penitence. On behalf of God, Father, Son and the Holy Ghost.” After that Karch became fresh and healthy again and bequeathed the wise man a coin.

Another sick person named Geörg Holtzapffel, also from Sandbach, had a terribly suffering wife, who complained about big pains in her body. He prescribed her to drink "Issob", leaves of the walnut tree and 5 "Eichendollen" potted in wine. This recipe also cured the woman, she had become completely healthy again. The grateful husband donated one guilder to the Wise Man.

Hans Breit from Breuberg (small village in the Odenwald) who had a lame sister, brought Lautenschläger clothing of the sick person from which he should determine the ailment. Breit reported that the Wise Man again put on his eyeglasses, unfurled the clothing on the table, opened the window two fingers wide and began to talk about the sickness as if he was with the sick person. Finally he turned the dress, caressed it with his hand, crossed and spoke: "it should vanish like the sun and the moon will creep into the silence, like the coals in the ashes. Like the coals don't glow any more. In the name of God, the father, the son and Jesus" The Holy Ghost is not mentioned. Then he prescribed wraps of herbs and announced the little maid never to become lame again, which indeed came true.

In other cases Lautenschläger cured livestock which was previously harmed by witchcraft. He found lost or stolen things and identified people who harmed others' lives and goods. The so accused people complained about the Wizard of Güttersbach. Concourses, conflicts and frays occurred in the small village. In such a fray Lautenschläger, who was supposed to have extraordinary physical strength, badly injured a man from Hüttenthal, called "the Old Egg-Buyer". He supposedly had to stay in bed for 18 weeks. Because of these concourses and conflicts the disconcertments in the village increased day by day, until finally the Priest seriously warned him calling him a quack and forbade his godless actions. As his warnings made no impact, he complained to the sovereignty. Then the wizard was brought to the Michelstadt Tower (prison) and there was extensively interrogated, "because he was suspected of fortune-telling and fault-sayings for many years".

The three judges who were charged with the interrogation of Lautenschläger submitted him a number of questions referring to his wizardry and witchcraft. Questioning him about the origin of his science, he answered that he would be nothing but honestly godly and god-fiering, that he could heal people and livestock with good herbs. He had a herbal book to read all about it. The book was at his daughter's, Katharina Schwinn in Güttersbach. The next question of the judges was, whether and how he was able to find out about the lacks or misdoings of other humans just by examining their clothes. Lautenschläger said that the crosses sewed on the shirts indicated someone's constitution. That way he could supposedly also find out about an impure path of the witches and rifferaff and how they made their devilment.

Questions about how he knew about who had stolen goods or where these goods were deposited, how to get rid of witchcraft in someone's house, or how to get to know the witches, he answered: "I myself have never tried it, but I've heard about it from others, who thusly summoned witches."

There were numerous other questions the wizard was confronted with. He always knew an answer. He was also requested to prove his skills by presenting him clothings of sick people, whose afflictions he should determine. However, most of his statements were inapplicable and not correct. He had to confess that his skills were superstitious, idolatrous and from the devil. The penalty of the judgement was though very lenient. Lautenschläger became sentenced of "committing idolatrousness and sin" A special Sunday's sermon was held for him where the normal church penance service was undertaken for him. Furthermore he had to apologize in written form and vow not to avenge his prison/tower sentence. In his apology was written:

“I, Wilhelm Lautenschläger of Güttersbach hereby declare to be inveigled by evil and profane people, particularly by fraudulent Gipsies. I have been misled by these people so far away from God to follow the devil. I have cursedly disobeyed God’s words and commandments. The sinful fortune-telling for people and leading people into superstitious beliefs caused big trouble to many of them. I hereby repent the supernatural way of making a diagnosis by analyzing a piece of clothing and declare to refrain from such methods. I was characterized as the far and well-known one who gave the superstitious world access to bewitchment in a pact with the evil fiend which I was marked and objurgated. Although the baronial clemency had enough reason to punish me and my body and life with life sentence or capital punishment, they let me on the loose and out of prison imposing a big fine on me so I should not inveigle to flagitious bless, fortune-tell any more. Also I must resist forbidden medicaments in the future and all past nuisances here in Michelstadt and the Parish Church of Güttersbach I shall repent.”

Michelstadt, June 21th 1628

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For more on my Laudenslager Family research: <http://www.kerchner.com/laudenslager/lauden.htm>

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