

# Out-Edisoning Thomas A. Edison

Electrical Wizard Otten Works  
Weeks on One Invention  
Without Leaving His Laboratory,  
But Christian J. Zeiting  
Worked  
23 Years  
Without  
Stopping



## The Many Odd Turns In The Life Of Christian Zeiting



In October 1938 an obituary appeared in the St Louis Post Dispatch for Christian J. Zeiting. Referred to as an inventor, promotor and hydraulic engineer, he was 73 years old and died at his Hickory Street home from "the infirmities of age". It also mentions that he often appeared in bankruptcy court, having used a string of financial schemes to develop and market his gravity flour mill invention.

I first happened upon Christian Zeiting while researching Retta Reed, who lived for years at 35 Benton Place in Lafayette Square. She bought a home across from her, at 40 Benton Place, and had it razed. Curious about who had lived there, I began a long expedition backward through the papers.

in 1889, Zeiting, the 24 year old co-founder of the Chicago Novelty Manufacturing Company has a great idea. He understands the hydraulic principle that states the suction created in a closed tube by a flow of water is proportional to the momentum of that flow. Therefore, you could create enough suction to power a turbine at the top of a water flow by constantly flowing water through at a high speed. This brainstorm led him to Niagara Falls, where more water flows per minute than anywhere else in the U.S.

The idea presented some challenges, in that he'd be attempting to build power plant turbines in the middle of the Niagara River. He approached the problem like James Eads would have, proposing that huge triple wall steel coffer be built and sunk into the river, attached to the limestone riverbed, and filled with concrete. Then an 18 foot diameter shaft would be dug through 90 feet of limestone, and run horizontally downstream, opening at the precipice of the falls. The water running past the opening would create suction sufficient to drive turbine wheels powering 500 horsepower dynamo near the surface of the coffer.

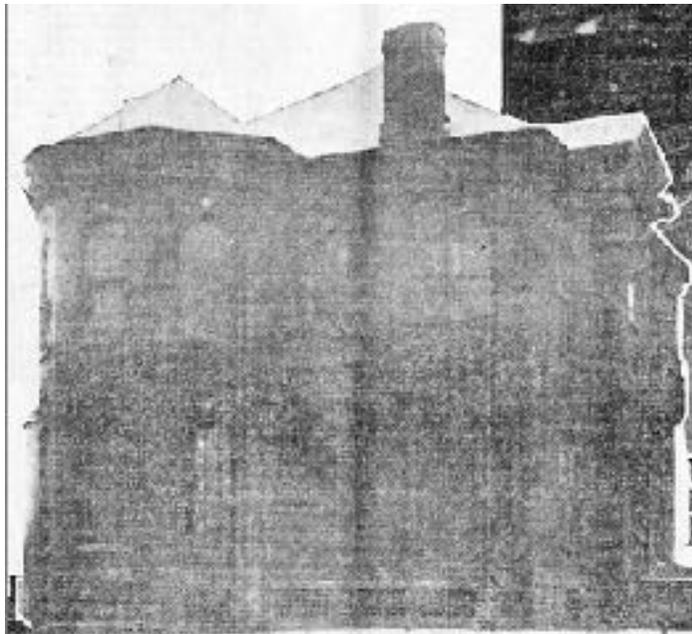


The idea never bore fruit for Zeiting, but convinced him that there was a fortune to be made in exploiting physical principles toward practical needs.

Move ahead to 1891 and Christian Zeiting is now a postmaster in Frederick County, Maryland. He happened to come across an unsealed letter from Miss Florence Keith of Plainfield, New Jersey, writing to her mother in Indiana. The letter arrived as intended, but several days later, Miss Keith was “astonished” to receive a letter from a party named “Long Forgotten”, requesting her photograph. When Keith complained to the US postal authorities, the letter was easily traced to Zeiting, as he had addressed Ms Keith as “Flossie”, which was how she referenced herself to her mother. There followed some lame excuses, and a confession from the 35 year old Zeiting. The accused was “lectured severely and bail was fixed at \$1000.00. Unable to pay this fee in Baltimore, Zeiting was released from service, paid a reduced \$100.00 fine, and migrated home to Missouri.

A real estate listing in the September 3, 1905 Post Dispatch offers 40 Benton Place for sale “at a bargain”. The 11 room residence on a deep lot “is a snap for a quick buyer”. At \$7500.00, the ad advises acting fast, by “transferring to the Park Avenue car and getting off at Lafayette Park”. Somehow this was an ad that appealed to the now 40 year old Zeiting.

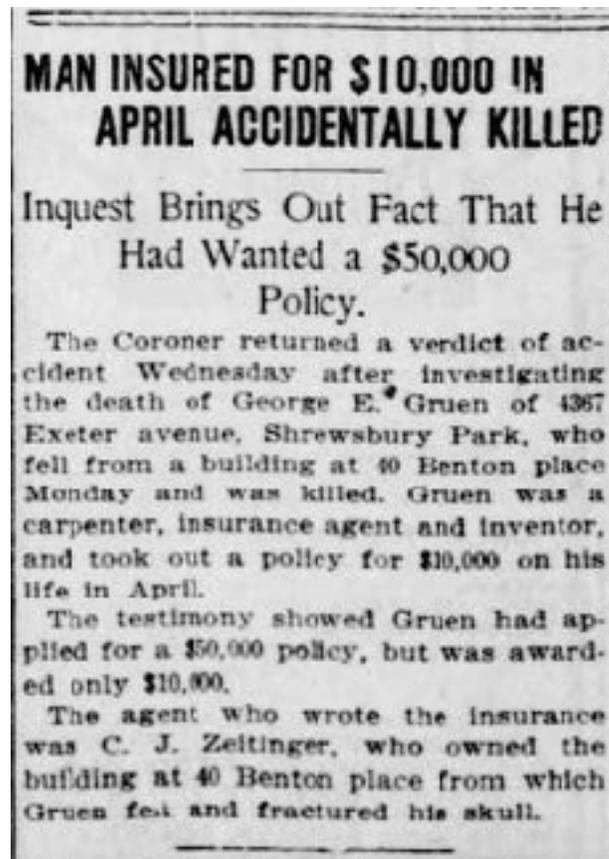
Three years later 40 Benton Place had become known locally as “the house of mystery”. On April 3rd of that year, in a story captured by the national news wire, the vacant house at that site was destroyed by a series of explosions and fire. The owner of the home, Christian Zeiting, was “absent from the city”. The Post Dispatch speculated “firebugs” may have dropped photos as “clews”, found in the only furnished room. Interestingly, upon



inspection, the doors and windows to the house were found to have been locked. According to neighbors, the house was unoccupied, and rarely visited by Zeiting or his brother George. Police used a charred letterhead from a lumber firm in Zeitonia, Missouri to locate and notify Zeiting of his loss.

The house had been the oldest on Benton Place, originally built by Richard Ludlow, a wire manufacturer, around 1878. It had been occupied only by Ludlow's widow for eight years, then sat empty until sold to Zeitinger. Christian "had advertised it for sale, then declined to occupy it". Over the following four year period, policemen on the beat knew it best as "the house of mystery".

As well as I can determine, Zeitinger rebuilt the house, for out of the blue, with no connection made to any earlier history, the Post Dispatch in July 1909 reports, well.... have a look:



Yikes! Well, believe it or not, the paper trail runs out until a long feature article appears in the Dayton Daily News of February 22nd 1914. It compares Zeitinger favorably with Thomas Edison and says that "in common with other inventors, he has denied himself all the pleasures of life because he had faith in his plan of cheap water power." It portrayed Christian as a boy growing up on his father's water powered grist mill, sharing his fathers frustrations with shut-downs caused by driftwood, floods and ice floes. To enable Christian to address these problems, the boy was sent to Washington University, where he was taught by Calvin Woodward, a nationally respected engineer. Woodward took an interest in young Christian, and they often worked long hours of research together. After graduating, Zeitinger sold his fathers inheritance, bought the property at 40 Benton Place, **"and plunged into the problem of conserving water power. Before his house was completed, he ordered the building work stopped so the noise would not disturb him. The windows were boarded up and the house remained unfinished."** The article added that Zeitinger was a strict vegetarian, preparing his own meals and



living alone in the house, having “never had time to look around for a wife” as he put it. **“He is shy and reserved...Neglected, the large yard around his house has grown up with tall weeds, through which paths are worn... The wooden steps to the house have decayed and been unnoticed by the proprietor”**. By the use of ox-bow formations and their elevation difference in major rivers, Zeitingner proposed to create clean unlimited hydroelectric power, and proposed having a prototype operational by the end of 1914. The Dayton Times seemed rapt by the inventor and his work ethic in faraway Benton Place.

CJ Zeitingner reappears the following year in the local papers, now connected with a possible suit to be brought against Hargadine McKittrick Dry Goods Company (McKittrick). The company was alleged to have wasted its assets over the preceding nine years in the financing, building and eventual liquidation of the Railway Exchange Building, a 22 story beauty at Sixth and Olive Streets. Long the headquarters of Famous Barr, it was the tallest building in St Louis when built in 1914, and is still the second largest in volume.

Due a distribution from capital stock totaling \$2.5 million, 17/20ths of the net proceeds from a court ordered liquidation should have gone to McKittrick investors, with Thomas McKittrick to get the remainder. In the event, investors received nothing, and Christian Zeitingner, since 1908 the owner of 100 shares of preferred stock, took the lead in court

of pressing the investors case that they’d been swindled.

In December 1915, suit was filed in Circuit Court, asking that a receiver be appointed. The petitioners were Christian and George Zeitingner. They named 37 defendant individuals and companies. The suit claimed that McKittrick had raised capital stock of \$4 million, and wasted it on purchase and mismanagement of the William Barr Dry Goods Company, that was eventually torn down to enable construction of the Railway Exchange Building.

The language of the suit is colorful, even for the day. From the Post of December 19:

**“The plaintiffs allege that all of these operations were designed to draw the assets of the McKittrick Company away from their rightful owners “through diverse and sundry sluices and channels, subterranean and submarine”.**

Though the suit claims McKittrick, when pressed, said investors should just “kiss it goodbye and forget it”, McKittrick defended himself vigorously in court. A maze of transactions, transfers and accounting records made the actual cash flow from the enterprise nearly incomprehensible.

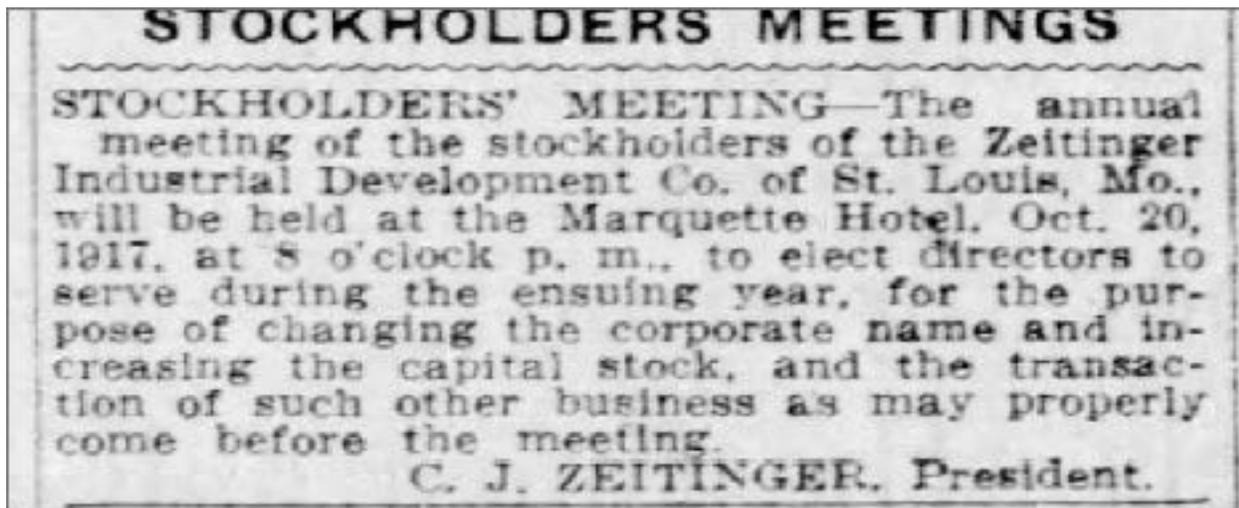
In court, R. McKittrick Jones, CEO of the firm, depicted the struggles associated with running the business through wartime, and the closing off of capital from big Eastern banks. He claimed the venture had to seek liquidation when debts reached \$1.2 million, and that debt had been mostly paid, adding that all members of the board had endured substantial pay cuts to economize along the way. Financial officer Walter McKittrick also said the books were opened to Christian Zeitingner, with whom he had ten meetings, each lasting three hours or more.

In February, 1916 testimony by Edward Lewis, a former director of McKittrick Dry Goods provided store vs store comparisons, making it clear that in the period from 1905 - 1909, Famous Dry Goods and Union Leader were gaining market share at the expense of the Barr Store. Thus

failing, Barr was eventually merged with Famous in 1911. Implying that McKittrick was getting wealthy while simultaneously undermining and pouring money into the Barr store, Zeitingler was questioned by counsel for the company. When asked if he was aware he was charging McKittrick with a federal crime, Zeitingler admitted his charge was based upon rumor. He said he had only sworn to the facts, and made a “mental conclusion” in arriving at his allegation of illegal rebating. If he had realized the McKittricks were engaged in real estate deals rather than dry goods, he would not have purchased stock in it. He added that his knowledge of any building plans was limited to newspaper articles he had read, until looking at their records during the previous May. He said that in 1914, he’d gone to the McKittrick offices and asked to see the books. He was told by Thomas McKittrick **“There have been 40 lawyers here; you can’t do any good. For two cents I’d choke you and throw you out into the street.”**



Working a newfound interest in financial enablement, Zeitingler placed an item in November of 1917, notifying the public of a stockholder meeting of the Zeitingler Industrial Management Company. Despite the press acclaim for clean abundant water power, Zeitingler’s roots lay back at his father’s grist mill. He had been working more, but with similar lack of success, to develop and commercialize a gravity flour mill. Much as McKittrick was luring investors, so to was Christian Zeitingler. Business is business, after all.



On June 14th 1919, Zeitingler petitioned a Circuit Court judge to vacate an order approving someone other than himself as trustee of the McKittrick firm. Zeitingler said it was his understanding that in return for agreeing to a compromise judgement, he would be made a trustee of McKittrick, and in that capacity, be compensated for the time and expense involved in his four years of litigation. Having been stiffed on this appointment, he complained to the court that it was he who had dug out the facts of the case, put the evidence in chronological order and led the court to appoint a receiver, but had not benefitted one cent from it. The three attorneys representing the plaintiff meanwhile, were each paid \$25,000 from the McKittrick



funds. The judge ruled against Zeiting, who must have wondered by then about the utility of his last four years in court, other than to feed the system.

So doubling down, on June 19th 1919, Zeiting, still listed at 40 Benton Place, filed a motion in Circuit Court alleging that attorneys for both sides had compromised to end his case against McKittrick for their own financial gain. Zeiting sought to rehabilitate the original charge. Fees totaling \$113,000 had been paid to the receiver, referee and plaintiff's attorneys in the matter, and were all charged to the defunct company. By this time, Zeiting was acting as his own lawyer. Within a month, the judge in the case awarded an additional \$50,000 to the attorneys representing McKittrick. Zeiting must have seethed.

It's interesting how life adds its own unplanned subtleties to a story. A Post Dispatch article from June of the following year features one Christian Zeiting, 55, a hydraulic engineer living at 40 Benton Place alighting from a streetcar at Armstrong (now MacKay Place) and Chouteau, and being struck by an automobile, breaking his right leg, and causing some internal injury. Hyman Horowitz, a grocer on Chouteau told the reporter that two young men were in the car, with one urging the other to increase the speed of the car in a fairly clear in-

stance of hit and run.

By May of 1921, recovered and again ready to do battle with the justice system, Christian and George appeared in Circuit Court, asking the judge to invalidate the stipulation that moved the McKittrick firm's finances from receivership to liquidation. The brothers claimed that, as original plaintiffs, they never agreed to, nor ratified a settlement. Christian said he had signed an agreement on legal fees only in the understanding that he would be made a trustee, but that this outcome had never come to pass.

Professor Elmer Lacey, a penmanship teacher at McKinley High School, was called to the stand on behalf of the petitioners and he examined the signatures of the Zeiting brothers under a microscope. In his judgement, the signatures did not seem genuine, but rather traced and transferred to the paper by a rubber stamp. The counterbalance to this was a former attorney for the Zeitings, who testified for the plaintiffs that his clients had indeed signed the document. The court ended up finding for the plaintiffs, the judgement stood, and Christian was aced out yet again.

Christian J Zeiting fades from view and dedicates himself to the gravity flour mill scheme for the next seven years. He does associate with the Socialist Party of the US, and runs for Presidential Elector for the 12th District on the LaFollette-Wheeler ticket. This slate easily lost to Coolidge and Dawes in the general election. When Zeiting again appears in the news, it is on the short end of his own failing business. In a situation remarkably akin to what so infuriated him earlier, the Post Dispatch of December 19, 1928 featured this headline:

# INVESTORS SEEK RECEIVER FOR MILL INVENTOR

Declare They Put \$35,000  
in Enterprises of C. J.  
Zeitinger and Allege He  
Is Now Broke.

Christian J. Zeitinger, still listed as living at 40 Benton Place, was charged by eight creditors who sank an aggregate \$35,000 into a "huge flour mill with which he sought to revolutionize the milling industry of the world". He had informed them the business was a bust due to lack of funds for further development. Zeitinger countered that they'd only invested \$12,000, and that his total assets amounted to around \$33,000. A hearing began, and the primary petitioning creditor turned out to be George Zeitinger, who said he had spotted his brother \$5500.00. The paper noted that the flour mill had been "standing in Christian Zeitinger's old-fashioned home and business in Benton Place since 1917". The mill itself extended from the basement up to the ceiling of the third floor.



By this time, Zeitinger was referred to as "an elderly man of spare build, trim with neat grey hair and beard and light blue eyes". In 1928, his business empire extended to Zeitinger's Gravity Mills Of North America, in addition to Gravity Realty Company, which owned his Benton Place residence and two adjacent lots, the Zeitinger Industrial Development Company, set up to finance the mill, and an ill-defined Capitol Trust.

When he took the stand in Circuit Court, and was asked to inventory his assets, the first thing he mentioned was \$2000.00 in Railway Exchange Building bonds, in addition to 170 shares of three oil companies stock, four \$1000.00 bonds, real estate securities worth \$4750.00, and his house, worth \$5500.00 (presumably without the gravity mill). The judge asked why, with these assets, Zeitinger could not complete his mill, and he replied;

**"lack of cash...lack of money is the only thing that hampers a man of ability in this false monetary system".**

Zeitinger defined the Capital Trust as eight men who subscribed \$150.00 each, for a total of \$1200.00. The trust then had certificates of interest printed and two steel safes purchased to hold them in the Benton Place residence, for a total outlay of \$1600.00. The judge was

stunned. "You mean to tell me that you spent more than was subscribed for certificates and safes?!" Zeitingler replied, "I invited four more gentlemen to come into the trust to make up that deficit". When an attorney asked what the purpose of the trust was, he was told, "it was to finance the development company". "How did you expect to finance anything in that way?" asked the judge. "Well, your honor," replied Zeitingler, "this was an elastic financial system." The judge asked Zeitingler to explain the principle of operation of the mill, and Christian proceeded to talk for half an hour, leading the Court to order him three times to stop.

Less than six months later, Christian J Zeitingler found himself in bankruptcy court, disclosing that he had raised about \$14000.00 from more than 90 small investors in his various schemes to support revolutionizing the flour milling world. Interestingly, he had never patented any of his ideas for a mill. Asked what developments he had made to his invention in recent years, Zeitingler replied that he'd been trying to create programs to obtain more funding. He also claimed to have been successful speculating in the stock market, playing with money borrowed against company bonds. When one considers that this was five months before the great crash of 1929, it seems incredible that he was taking such risks with the money of his investors. This from a guy who sued McKittrick ten years earlier, maintaining that suit for years, out of a sense of indignation over a scheme he would later adapt to his own needs. His faith in science had, by now, yielded to his hope for a miracle.

Zeitingler listed assets of \$9788.00, of which \$5500.00 was the value of his home at 40 Benton Place. Three of his four enterprises were declared bankrupt, although he and Gravity Realty were still deemed solvent. Asked if he still thought he had a practical idea with the mill, he answered, "I know I have. I could develop it in 6 months if I had enough money". Maybe that was true, but it probably didn't matter by this time.

On May 2nd 1930, a warrant was issued against Christian Zeitingler by his own brother George, of 1803 Rutger Street, charging embezzlement of \$13000.00 from Gravity Realty Company. George and another investor told the court they had purchased stock in the concern in 1922. Gravity Realty was originally intended to pursue litigation against McKittrick in order to obtain equity in the Railway Exchange Building. The funds had eventually been used in stock market speculation, from which Zeitingler gained \$19,000. He then put much of it back into the company to pay creditors who were originally organized to develop his invention. That represents a long evolution from his earlier actions against the McKittricks. Zeitingler's whereabouts were, according to the paper, unknown.

On July 10th, Christian Zeitingler was indicted for embezzlement, based on his handling of funds at Gravity Realty. The indictment replaced the outstanding warrant for Zeitingler, who was now listed as living at 1909 Park Avenue. After voting for indictment, the grand jury adjourned for the summer.

In May of 1931, "67 year old inventor" Christian Zeitingler was tried and acquitted of the embezzlement charges. This verdict was based on testimony by Gravity Realty's treasurer that the financial affairs of the company were few and of little note, with no transaction involving more than \$2500.00 and all monies having been either accounted for or repaid by Zeitingler.

Fast forward to June of 1933. In trying to settle the \$2 million estate of deceased chemical manufacturer Edward Mallinckrodt, Sr., it happened that the late Mallinckrodt held 1113 shares of McKittrick Dry Goods Company. The government was attempting to show that, at an estimated \$1.00 per share, his holdings "reflected an attempt to claim the loss reflected by the decline of share value. " A claim against holdings by the Mallinckrodt estate had been in litigation since 1924, when the IRS initiated a deficiency finding. The estate, as its final witness,



produced Christian Zeitinge, who testified that he bought his shares at \$0.025 - \$1.25 per share, and did so to qualify for the filing of a receivership suit against McKittrick. The judge took the case under advisement.

On December 26, 1934, the Circuit Court judge appointed a paymaster to settle claims against McKittrick. Preferred stockholders like Christian Zeitinge were entitled to share the proceeds of a \$300,000 distribution of assets. In the ensuing years since the start of litigation in 1915, many of the stockholders had died. Lucky Zeitinge? No. The court ordered him to turn in his 472 shares of stock, as they were "shown to be owned by the Gravity Realty Company in which Zeitinge is a stockholder". Those proceeds would go instead to Zeitinge's creditors. This man was well and truly payday-proof.

We're not quite done. In April of 1935, the now 70 year old Christian Zeitinge is arrested and put in City Jail for contempt of court. He had refused to surrender the 472 shares of McKittrick stock. Judge O'Malley of the Circuit Court found him not to own. Zeitinge's attorney said Christian spent his first day of confinement "in meditation". As a writ of habeas corpus was prepared by Zeitinge's counsel, Judge O'Malley "declared the white-haired promoter would remain in jail until either he surrendered the stock or gave a reasonable explanation of his inability to do so". O'Malley was obviously unimpressed with the explanation received from Zeitinge that he had given the stock shares to "friends who advanced him living expenses, but he that he could not disclose their names."

"When Sheriff Madden led him to jail Friday, the promoter said he had 'only a couple of dimes'. At this, "the sheriff gave him a couple of dollars for incidental purchases while in jail" . There, Zeitinge made himself unavailable to visitors, asking particularly that reporters be excluded. The man who for so long was associated with the four story flour mill at the house of mystery at 40 Benton Place, gave only a P.O. Box number for an address.

An April 10, 1935 Post Dispatch byline reads;

#### **"Promoter Freed From Jail To Find Missing Stock"**

After Christian had spent the last 27 days in jail, his attorney told O'Malley that Zeitinge believed he could find the missing shares if released to search for them. Although technically in "constructive custody" of the sheriff, Zeitinge was released for a 10 day period in which to find the missing stock. Remarkably, this was the same stock he said he had given to three friends who had advanced him living expenses earlier. Perhaps the system had cut Zeitinge a small break.

The recorded history of this dies out until October 7th 1938. This represents the obituary for Christian J Zeitinge. It seemed nearly charitable, calling him "an inventor and promoter for 40 years". At 73 years of age, he died "of the infirmities of age" at his home at 1501 Hickory Street. A bachelor, it was pointed out that he was survived by his brother George, though there is, again charitably, no comment from that sibling.



In the end, this seems something like life itself; rather long in the unwinding, if you think back, and chock-full of near misses and small disappointments? Yet, it's a true adventure if you play it right, and even the less than angelic can be, at least in the eyes of history, more worthy of the remembering than the accomplished yet dull. Christian Zeitinger was, if nothing more, a character who fit his era of possibility, shenanigan, and consequence.