68. October 1, 1710. A letter from Runckel to the Committee: He asks for an answer to his writing of August 30 and informs them of the decision of the Great Council of Bern about the proposal of the King of Prussia. He points out problems connected with the ostensibly good proposal. He discusses the possibility of representatives from the Swiss congregations and others first visiting the land offered by Prussia.

 He tells the Committee that he has received money to use for helping the imprisoned Mennonites and relates in detail his three-hour visit to the various prisoners. He fears there is great opposition among them to colonization in Prussia.

[page 1]

Bern[[1]](#footnote-1) October 1, 1710

Worthy, etc.

My especially highly honored Sirs,

[In a letter] dated this last August 30[[2]](#footnote-2) I gave myself the honor to offer you information up to that time about what was the state of affairs with the unfortunate Mennonites in the land here; also what kind of project some well-disposed persons here have formulated in order to keep these poor people in the country—if it is yet possible and practical. Further, what kind of elucidation and explanation the said well-disposed persons request from my highly honored Sirs in order that they could so much the better take measures to carry out their formulated plans and otherwise guide themselves accordingly. In the same letter I further asked my highly honored Sirs that you might be responsible as soon as possible to make available a quantity of copies of the Mennonite Confession of Faith and whatever [page 2] is connected further with the same. Then, from time to time, wherever it is needful, the confessions could be distributed in order that those prejudiced views of the opponents of these poor people possibly be somewhat mollified, etc. Because up till now I have not received an answer on these two points from my highly respected Sirs, and not till then will I finally know how to proceed, so again I shall inquire most politely for your decision, and in any case I am subjoining a duplicate of my mentioned

letter as enclosure “A.”

The 20th of this last month, September,[[3]](#footnote-3) I gave myself the honor by my communication to you, my highly honored Sirs, on the day mentioned, to make a most compliant, secret report to the High and Mighty Lords of the States General, further to present the plan which some local, well-intentioned gentlemen, along with Lord de St.-Saphorin and me, have formulated for the poor Mennonites. The first proposal concerning keeping them in this country, [I wish] to bring to realization, if possible, or, if that should fail, at least to create better conditions through the sale of the possessions of those poor Mennonites leaving the country [page 3]. Along with this, it was further reported why it is considered advisable in this matter at present not yet to act openly, but only to do as much as possible quietly.

From the accompanying copy, marked with the letter “B,” of my most compliant, secret report sent with the last mail to the High and Mighty [Lords], and from an extract from the minutes of the Great or Sovereign Council [of Bern] added further to the same, with the letter “C,” would you, highly honored Sirs, observe the following: What has further befallen the unfortunate local Mennonites since my last letter mentioned of the 20th of the past month and what decision the present Sovereign Council has made about turning over the Mennonites to his royal Majesty in Prussia, and what answer his royal Majesty in Prussia gave concerning them. We have postponed finding a complete resolution for this matter until after the vacations, and also learning how this all would be viewed by the gentlemen in the government who are favorable to these good people.

From the said extract out of the present Great Council’s minutes the following now becomes clear that

1) the Illustrious Canton of Bern intends, according to the notification provided, that those Anabaptists [page 4] would be granted their possessions, freely permitted to dispose of the same in the best manner possible, and to take their value away without any deduction other than the usual emigrant tax and the removal of local and citizen rights.[[4]](#footnote-4)

2) That the Anabaptists still imprisoned at present will be placed in the same category as the rest with regard to selling their possessions.

3) That the Illustrious Canton of Bern at its own expense will deliver the impoverished Anabaptists as far as Frankfort; but those with means should provide for such a journey at their own expense.

4) That the Illustrious Canton of Bern does not find it advisable or practical that the local Anabaptists could form a deputation to his royal Majesty in Prussia.

5) Finally, that the Illustrious Canton of Bern desires to wait for instruction previous to, and before, it announces further fees, etc.

At this point it is to be remarked that the Illustrious Canton of Bern certainly has explained itself favorably enough about the release of the value of the possessions sold by the Mennonites, and yet has named no definite or sufficient time period in which possessions handled in this manner may be sold or otherwise [page 5] disposed of. The Canton has placed the actual prisoners in the same category as the others with respect to this point. However, [second] it has not yet explained whether it wishes to release such prisoners in the time before their departure in order that they themselves could oversee their possessions and dispose of them to the best advantage, or whether they should remain imprisoned until their departure. In the third place, the Canton wants pay to deliver the impoverished as far as to Frankfort; but those with means would pay such a trip at their own expense and accordingly they would consume their own slender means.

Under these present circumstances, in my opinion, it would be not unserviceable, indeed much more highly necessary, that my highly honored Sirs should endeavor to bring the matter before the Prussian court through the royal Prussian minister living in Hamburg, Lord Baron von Schmettau.[[5]](#footnote-5) It should be recommended that the Prussian minister living here, Lord Bondeli, arrange with the present Illustrious Canton that a sufficient and adequate length of time for selling possessions be allowed to the poor Mennonites going out of this country to Prussia and in this matter they not be driven unfairly.

Those actually imprisoned should be set free up to the time of their departure [page 6] and they should be allowed to ask for their confiscated goods, to locate them, and assert their right to them, and, after the example of the others, to dispose of them and turn the same into cash. Then those with means as well as the poor would be sent to Frankfort at the expense of the Illustrious Canton of Bern and in this manner the former would not be made equally poor with the latter. Furthermore these poor people in the case of the emigration tax as in all other matters should be treated most supportively and be offered a helping hand as much as possible in recovering their possessions. Also it would not be unserviceable if his royal Majesty would please recommend graciously to the minister Lord Bondeli living here that he would proceed concerning this subject in full communication with me and in mutual agreement to be able to negotiate and manage this matter with so much better success.

Regarding the deputation of some local Mennonites requested by his royal Majesty in Prussia, I scarcely believe that the Illustrious Canton of Bern would ever give approval because of the extract reported [from

the minutes] and other causes. Since such a deputation appears to me for various important reasons especially[[6]](#footnote-6) to be highly necessary, [page 7] because the settlement of these good people under the lofty protection of his royal Majesty in Prussia can and must be considered as something real and certain, but their continuation here in the country from this time forward as nothing other than a matter of business and consequently as something uncertain and unsure.

So, open to correction, I would consider that such [a deputation] could perhaps most properly be commissioned and entrusted to Bernese Mennonites—to certain ones previously banished from the country, from that time on staying with my highly honored Sirs, as I learn—and indeed entrusted to Bendicht Brechtbühl and Hans Bürki, among others, as men well experienced in this land’s custom and manner of living, as well as to some other alert Mennonites from Hamburg.

[The deputation could] regulate matters in regard to settlement of their fellow brothers (who are yet in this land). [They could do this] both in a preliminary way for prevention[[7]](#footnote-7) of any disquieting confusion as well as at their reception and establishment [in the new land] (if indeed as reported at the beginning of this letter and in the enclosed duplicates, the said project of their continuation in this land [Bern] should turn out to be impossible economically to bring everything into a proper condition).

The sum of the transmitted bill of exchange, [page 8] 200 rixdollars, I received in good order the 22nd of last month, and now I will plan to employ the same in the best way possible according to my highly honored Sirs’ wishes on behalf of the poor Mennonites who are imprisoned here. Their number has unfortunately increased greatly, as is to be seen from the accompanying list marked with the letter D drawn up by me. With [the

money] they may be somewhat comforted and revived in their prisons and misery, especially by means[[8]](#footnote-8) of necessary winter clothing.

On[[9]](#footnote-9) the day before yesterday, I was finally able to accomplish so much as to visit the said prisoners in their bonds and comfort them, as far as I could, in their affliction and speak some encouragement to them so that they might reconcile themselves more easily to the will of God and their government and keep quiet. In this, a certain very God-fearing citizen here named Mr. Knopf[[10]](#footnote-10) as well also a certain Mr. Wagner[[11]](#footnote-11) gives not a little support. In the so-called Island[[12]](#footnote-12) I met eleven men and six women, each sex to be sure in a separate, especially well-guarded room, and yet all quite loose without chains or bonds; with the first I found three sick persons. [page 9] The men are quite idle, but the women spin hemp and flax to relieve boredom. In the so-called Upper Hospital I found sixteen men and fourteen women, among whom likewise some are sick and weak. The men are shut up similarly all in one chamber, free from all bonds and chains. They must earn their bread by carding or combing wool and other handwork as much as they can. The women, not so severely confined as the men, are also in a special room, yet not alone, but along with other women imprisoned for different reasons, and have to spin wool and so pass their time.

So far as could be seen, they allow them to have the Bible, as also a few other books, and, as far as I could observe, they have no particular lack of food and drink, although everything, including their beds, could easily be

considered rather wretched. Among all these poor prisoners there are very few who possess any special means, and when they did have something, it is yet to be feared that the extra expenses of capturing them and related costs [page 10] have already consumed such means. Persons who associate most with these poor people assure me that among those present prisoners there are really not so many and so well off as those who were sent away last spring.

I spent more than three hours among them and conferred with them. As a result I could perceive that those actually willing to leave their fatherland and go somewhere else were not fully inclined to forget and say farewell to it forever. Moreover, it is not a little to be feared that it would make extreme difficulties if they should hear that his royal Majesty in Prussia wants to transplant them into a place depopulated by death from a contagious epidemic and pestilence. Since persons here have already mightily protested to me again and implored that they should be spared that, and rather they would aspire to be sheltered elsewhere, I as well as the above mentioned two kindly and God-fearing citizens have done our best to disabuse them of this misgiving and yet will do our best.

Moreover, I request most urgently, my highly honored Sirs, [page 11] that you would be so good as to give me confidentially, without delay, and fully not only what you will decide in the matter of the deputation to Berlin as well as what will be negotiated and determined there about the aforesaid deputation, as also all particulars perhaps otherwise related to this

matter that might contribute something to its better success. Then the local gentlemen and rulers favorable to the poor Mennonites as well as Lord de St.-Saphorin and I can take our measures and guide ourselves and shape our further negotiations accordingly.

Closing with that and warmest greeting and my kindest commendation to fervent prayer and mutual commitment in the mighty power and grace of God, henceforth always remaining,

My most highly honored Sirs’

Most devoted servant,

Johann Ludwig Runckel.

Inselspital where Bernese Anabaptists were imprisoned, here marked with an encircled 1.

1. 68 This document is translated into Dutch in Vorsterman’s Relaes (A 1392) on pp. 76-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Document 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This refers to Document 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Document 98 n 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Writer of Document 76 as envoy of Prussia in the Hague. He is mentioned as well inclined toward the Mennonites in “Uit de geschiedenis van de overkomst der vervolgde Zwitsers in 1710 en 1711” by A. van Gulik in Doopsgezinde Bijdragen (1909), p. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Vorsterman’s Relaes, A 1392, p. 77, line 38, for in specie has “jnsonderheÿt.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Vorsterman’s Relaes, p. 77, line 47, translates vorkommen as “voorkoming” meaning “prevention.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Vorsterman’s Relaes, (A 1392), p. 78, line 4, translates in specie aber ratione has “jnsonderheyt van wegen” here given as “especially by means of.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Beginning here Ernst Müller quotes this letter to the end of the second from the last line on page 10 of the original. Although Müller largely preserves the meaning, he modernizes and paraphrases frequently with no indication of having done so. Müller, pp. 292-293. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Müller gives this name as “Knoll” although “Knopff” is very plainly written. Daniel Knopf (1668-1735), son of a governor at Interlaken, chancellery treasurer, but blamed for pietistic leanings, possession of forbidden books, and helping pietist refugees, had to give up his government position. He was translator of Staffel des Geistlichen Lebens by Theodor a Brakels (1698). Jecker, “Der Grosse Berner Täufer-Exodus,” p. 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bernhardt Wagner. See Document 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This prison, also called “Insel,” was used for keeping Anabaptists already in 1583. Hanspeter Jecker, “Test Everything: Hold Fast to What Is Good,” MQR (Jan. 2000), 21. See also the introduction to Document 67 and note 3 there to the text in German. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)