78. October 25, 1710. Letter from Runckel to the Committee in the Netherlands: the engineer Bodmer has advised unfavorably about the swamps so that the whole matter must be given up, but Runckel reports that between Romainmôtier and Romont on the boundary of Burgundy a large tract of uncultivated land is becoming available for Bernese use, so that a person could ask for it as a place for the Mennonites to live. Refugee Waldenses had earlier made use of this land. He hopes before long to send a plan and estimate of costs and asks for news about the deputation to Berlin. He reports that again some Anabaptists have been imprisoned and expects that the one hundred copies of the confession of faith should arrive within a few days since they have already passed Stuttgart.

[page 1]

Bern,[[1]](#footnote-1) October 25, 1710

Worthy, etc.

My especially highly honored Sirs,

Following my last letter of the 4th of this month, which, I hope, has been delivered to my highly honored Sirs, grant me the honor with this to be of further service [in telling] how that I have very diligently informed myself since then about the difficulties brought up by my honored Sirs and the worrisome inconveniences touching the proposed clearing of the previously mentioned morasses and their excavation and drainage. In this same matter I have endeavored to discuss everything completely with a man well versed in the same matters, to whom the circumstances of such morasses were known and, if possible, to get a calculation of the expenses perhaps required for the accomplishment of this plan. On the first point by the grace of God it turned out well for me that I came to know an alert, pious, very kindly man, hating all compulsion and force in matters of conscience. [page 2] He is not only an excellent engineer, but also especially in regard to these morasses has often been employed by the government. Because he does not reside here in the city, but six or seven hours farther toward the mountains, precisely at Amsoldingen[[2]](#footnote-2) toward Thun, at the beginning of this week I made a tour over there with him concerning this projected plan and

discussed the problems discovered in this matter and also how extensive the expenses might be for this.

From him we received so much in answer that he, in his humble view, is also of the opinion that the poor Anabaptists should not be oppressed or persecuted because of their concept of faith, much less should they be driven from house and home and sent into other lands. Further, he could not, nor would advise that these good people be banished into the proposed morasses, specifically for the following reasons:

1.) Both morasses under discussion belong not to the Illustrious Canton of Bern alone, but at the same time to the Canton of Freiburg. Also, both cantons have been in conflict over the boundaries now already for a hundred years and more. He himself has already been employed in the investigation of the said boundaries, and also will actually be further used in that.

2.) The Canton of Freiburg [page 3] will never sell, nor exchange, nor cede its share of the said morasses.

3.) The remaining land does not belong to the Illustrious Canton of Bern, but to those communities lying in and around the said morasses, which belong to their summer pastures.

4.) The Aare River, into which the draining of the morass between Aarberg and Murten must occur although it lies a good bit higher than the morass itself and that it [is the same] with the morass between Yverdon and Orbe[[3]](#footnote-3) with regard to the Lake of Neuchâtel into which the draining must occur and has the same characteristics. Although by means of the preparation of several sluices, if no expenses were spared, these last difficulties could finally

be overcome, yet the main problem would not be solved.

5.) Because the said morasses lie so low that with a downpour or heavy rain coming up and the rushing forest water from the surrounding mountains, against which no sufficiently strong dams could be built, in spite of all the canals constructed, everything would be under water, and these good people would be indeed placed in the extremist danger of their lives.

6.) Because in both of these districts wood is not available either for building or for heating, the transportation of the required lumber alone [page 4] would cost an excessive amount of money.

7.) Finally, if all the difficulties mentioned could be removed and everything brought to a desirable solution, nevertheless it is greatly to be feared that the inhabitants of the neighboring villages and places, the nastiest scoundrels in the whole land, might once be so bold as to set on fire these good people with their constructed houses in order to profit themselves and to make their own use of the fruitful land, etc., gained by such great effort and expense.

I admit readily that all these explanations [by the engineer] have made me not a little dismayed, especially since he laid before my eyes the actual plans for these morasses completed by himself. But I was at once again somewhat comforted in that he assured me that the Illustrious Canton of Bern had land otherwise as yet uncultivated, and in fact its own, and sufficient belonging to it, where it could place the poor Mennonites and yet separate them from the other subjects. Indeed, if it were so desired, it could almost shut them in, without needing to quarrel or dispute with either the neighboring cantons or neighboring communities which did not have the

slightest right in the matter. This arable land, consisting of fruitful mountains and valleys, but now overgrown with trees and accordingly unimproved, lies [page 5] between Romainmôtier und Romont[[4]](#footnote-4) on the boundaries of Burgundy, from which the Illustrious Canton of Bern previously had given the exiled Waldenses a good portion to clear. Such land they still use and enjoy to the present hour, although they have returned back to their fatherland.

This honorable man further assures me that enough wood and water are there, the land is good, and if the forests are cleared, quite suitable for farming, hay crops and wheat. These good people themselves could gradually accomplish the work without great expenses and so get everything into the desired condition if only the government would allow them to manage that, etc., etc.

Because now under these circumstances it would not be advisable or practical to insist on the first project and [because] on the other hand the opportunity brought to light by this honorable man is known to very few or even none of the gentlemen here, I have asked him that he in return for a modest honorarium and in the greatest confidence complete a plan for the area under discussion. With that he would make an approximate essay as to how he perhaps supposes the matter might best and easiest and most conveniently be undertaken, in case the Illustrious Canton of Bern might move in the direction [page 6] of conceding this piece of land to the poor Anabaptists. He promised me not only this, but also that he would make a tour expressly to Vaud soon on this account, and [that he] wishes anew to make a quick inspection very exactly so that he might prepare a much

more complete plan and note of the land,[[5]](#footnote-5) yet everything roughly speaking because of the shortness of the time and the present season.

As for me, I want to allow myself in these affairs to inform the well-meaning gentlemen rulers and others of the problems brought to light concerning the morasses proposed for [the use of] the unfortunate Mennonites and at the same time try to get them to dismiss this in order that they might not only retreat from such a project, but also further, when the time comes, that they approve the plan given into our hands by the engineer Bodmer,[[6]](#footnote-6) to whom it will be proposed by the Illustrious Canton that it may be brought into execution. Then, as I want to hope, the said gentlemen will not wish to oppose advancing the execution of it.[[7]](#footnote-7)

And meanwhile the previously mentioned holidays and vacations are soon coming to an end, and then the matter of the unfortunate local Mennonites may shortly again be brought under discussion. Then it will be necessary that I receive a sufficient and complete report from those who were approved by my highly honored Sirs [to go] to Berlin as a deputation, [page 7] also [including] whatever will be perhaps transacted there or however the affairs perhaps otherwise turn out. Then the good friends here and I may take measures in a timely manner.

The dispatched one hundred copies of the Mennonite confession of faith, so far as I have word, have indeed arrived at Frankfort and passed Stuttgart, but they have not yet arrived here. Yet I expect them toward the coming Thursday or Friday for sure.

I have learned in an incomplete way that a few days ago some unfortunate Anabaptists have been brought again as prisoners to the

Hospital here and shut up. But I want to inform myself properly about this in order to report further. I am no longer much in doubt that they would not release them, as soon as officials understand that they will be able to travel to Prussia, and that officials could [not] agree to such a journey in order that the Anabaptists would see after their own affairs.

With this, my highly respected Sirs, I commit myself in the all-powerful, gracious protection of the Most High, and to your devout prayer, and besides a warm greeting, remain always,

my most highly honored Sirs,

most devoted servant,

Johann Ludwig Runckel.

1. 78 This document is translated into Dutch in Vorsterman’s Relaes (A 1392) on pp. 84-86, where it notes that this was received [in Amsterdam] on November 3. Another, independent translation into Dutch is included with Document 78 (but not given here since the German is the original). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Plainly written Amseldingen, but the current spelling is Amsoldingen. Amsoldingen lies 3 miles (5 kilometers) southwest of Thun. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Yverdon and Orbe are in the Canton of Vaud in Switzerland. See note in Document 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Romainmôtier is almost 2 miles (3 kilometers) southwest of Orbe, also in Vaud. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The word estat could not be located in German or French dictionaries. This meaning, “ interest in the land,” comes from an archaic form found in the Oxford English Dictionary. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Plainly written Bodmar, although standard spelling is now Bodmer. Samuel Bodmer (1652-1724) had part in different Bernese engineering projects. For more information see Jecker, “Der grosse berner Täufer-Exodus,” p. 127 and especially note 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The grammatical construction of this paragraph is quite difficult. Vorsterman, who apparently also found it difficult, translates it into Dutch as follows: “…jk sal ondertussen van mÿn hand tragten, de bovenstaande Swarigheden, wegens de geprojecteerden moerassen aan de voor de arme Mennon[i]ten wel meenende heeren Regenten, en anderen te kennen ~~te~~ geeven, en te gelÿk tragten te beweegen, om niet allen van dat Project aftestaan, maer Dit van den Hr. jngenieur Bodmar aen de hand gegeevene toe te stemmen, en dien volgens wanneer het de tÿt sal sÿn om het selve by het loffelyke Canton jn overweeging te brengen, sulx ter uÿtvoering aen te dringen, ‘t welke ik wil hopen, dat gedagte Heerren dan niet sullen willen wederstreeven...” (A 1392), pp. 85-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)