138. February 21, 1711. A letter Runckel writes to the Committee, complaining strongly about the conduct of Anabaptist minister, Peter Gerber, who in spite of promises he had made, has created difficulties in affirming the promises demanded by the Commission. By this he has brought himself and the others into great danger. Runckel asks that a letter of reproof be sent to Peter. Fifteen prisoners have been released on the same conditions with the result that there are now still fifteen in custody in addition to the previously banished Samuel Räber. Runckel fears that the banished ministers Daniel Grimm and Aeschlimann have also secretly returned. Hoping to return to his residence in Schaffhausen before long, he reports the safety of a newly born son and his wife there, but promises to be at Bern when the refugees depart. He remains responsible for the whole correspondence in this matter as there is scarcely anyone among the Bernese Mennonites except for Daniel Rychen able to handle that. He gives some advice about drawing up and distributing a circular which the Committee is planning to send to the Swiss Mennonites.

[page 1]

Bern[[1]](#footnote-1) the 21st of February 1711.

Very worthy, etc.

My especially highly honored Sirs,

Because of shortness of time and having many other duties, I have

satisfied myself to send with the last post to my highly honored Sirs only a copy of my then most obediently rendered secret account to the States [General]. My highly honored Sirs will have learned from this how with the help of God the Most high and after many evasive tactics, a solution finally came so that a good part of the poor imprisoned Anabaptists were set loose; and what happened in this case with the so-called Anabaptist Commission; also how little it lacked that the preacher by the name of Peter Gerber, because of the unseasonable tenderness of his conscience, was not taken back into prison and held there until the full departure [of all persons].

On this occasion I may not conceal from my highly honored Sirs that this man has vexed me so much more on this third occasion that I, [page 2] expecting, so to say, something like this might occur, took the precaution to visit all the imprisoned Anabaptists for the second time. I promptly advised them that previous to and before they would be set loose, it will be arranged that they all would appear before the Anabaptist Commission and need to promise [cooperation] with mouth and hand, or yea and handshake as usual in this country and everywhere. This would be held before them to firmly comply with, also to make clear[[2]](#footnote-2) to them that this promise would aim primarily at nothing other than the goal that they report again here at the set time. During their freedom they were to live quietly and peacefully, and in particular not attempt to arrange, keep, or participate in any church meetings, etc.

I always emphasized these reminders, as best I could, to this preacher, who from the very beginning could be recognized as a very headstrong and stubborn person. Indeed, I asked him before God that he carefully consider this, [and] strive to give a good example especially for the others,

so that neither their High and Mighty Lords, nor my highly honored Sirs, nor I be made to be liars on their behalf, and that the last end not be made worse than the first. This in fact [page 3] he listened to silently and did not express himself, but finally as the outcome shows, he reflected as little as nothing, but followed his own thought and idea. Consequently, he made his own fellow believers only so much the more to stink with the local illustrious government and made me not a little ashamed because in good faith I have assured them that in this case no one would make the slightest difficulty.

Now after I came home from the Anabaptist Commission, I had all those released prisoners come to me and impressed upon them anew what they were charged with before the Commission. I asked them that before God and for the sake of their own best interest would they be willing to comply with it and to give the government no new occasion to anger, which they all promised to do. I remonstrated with the preacher concerning his misconduct and the danger arising of remaining imprisoned, and assured him that[[3]](#footnote-3) I would inform my highly honored Sirs of his actions. He could think of no answer other than to ask me for patience, etc. However, since neither the Commission nor I could any longer properly trust this man, I, in particular, not unreasonably feared that he might venture to hold meetings contrary to his given word anyway, [page 4] and begin to preach or something of the same sort, which might bring down on their heads the greatest danger to him and the others. So I request most urgently, my highly honored Sirs, that you would write him in German without delay, and suggest to him a better alternative and would send me such a letter so that I could have it handed to him safely.

Last Thursday, however, as is to be seen from the accompanying list, fifteen of the poor imprisoned Anabaptists were set free in just the manner

and with just the same formalities as the first, so that now not more than fifteen [are] still imprisoned besides Samuel Räber. I hope that the former [persons] also will be let out shortly, and in fact as soon as it is fully settled with their bail and payment of administrative expenses. The latter [Räber], however must endure, whether willing or unwilling, till the future final departure of these people.

The Commission, in the name of the Canton, on both the 14th and the 19th of this month, has especially given me to understand how the government now has a sure report that, besides the above mentioned Samuel Räber, also Daniel Grimm and a certain Aeschlimann,[[4]](#footnote-4) both preachers, have again stolen into the country and left traces here and there. They request [me] to head off greater mischief and [page 5] to be busy with it so that such matters cease, [which are] so irritable to the government and provoke further wrath. I have promised to contribute my share to this end. Also for this cause all who have been set loose have been reminded, should they meet some Anabaptist outlawed by the government, to encourage any such to leave without delay. I fear very greatly that there may be rigorous consequences if someone of the said outlawed persons should be detected and imprisoned.

Last Thursday I received my highly honored Lords’ very valued communication of the 10th of this month, and from it have learned that my communications from the 24th and 28th of the last month with the copied enclosure have safely arrived, and that my highly honored Sirs have drawn a pleasant satisfaction from all that I have negotiated up to the present. This has pleased me not a little.

Moreover, my highly honored Sirs, at your friendly request I feel obliged

again, leaving aside formality, to tell how my return journey to Schaffhausen is necessary. Also my presence there is or might be indispensable—praise to God—because of the successful delivery of my most beloved wife of her up-to-then unborn offspring[[5]](#footnote-5) and the indisposition which befell my oldest son, [page 6] as also other special and domestic matters. I have been thinking previously of not entering on [that journey] until everything here concerning the poor Anabaptists be brought to such a state that they, so to speak, may need me no more for a few months. In this interval they would see after their affairs, and in case, as I suppose, some disputes might come up concerning this, I could give representation of their side on my return in May. Then I might bring up all the troubles at one time before the Sovereign [Council] and ask in the name of the High and Mighty Lords for the removal of grievances. In this manner everything would come up at one time and turn out better than if one problem is brought up today and another tomorrow, and accordingly the government would become weary of the daily occurrence.

Further, it is easy to suppose that in the first two months there might be little to do, but in the last two a great deal. Accordingly, I believe that I can absent myself better now than toward the time of the complete removal of these poor people. Then I may also see a little to my own matters and accordingly proceed in the affairs of the Anabaptists with a much more positive attitude.

Should my highly honored Sirs, however, want to accomplish something from here [in Bern] on behalf of their [page 7] fellow believers during my absence, then please address the request to me at Schaffhausen. Be assured that such will be advanced through my channel far more surely, certainly,

and quickly than through any other, particularly since during my absence, I will have to correspond with the Anabaptist Commission as well as the Anabaptists. Among those being imprisoned there is not a single one with whom my highly honored Sirs could carry on an orderly correspondence. Among those scattered around indeed there are some, but such are unknown to me, except for Daniel Rychen[[6]](#footnote-6) from Frutigen. But his home is so far distant from the others that they could gather in the four months[[7]](#footnote-7) of freedom scarcely one time if they do not want to arouse any suspicion or jealously on the part of their government.

As to the circular letter to all the Anabaptists in this land, which is to be prepared by my highly honored Sirs, allow me to approve it completely, and do not worry that it will not be allowed as contrary to the local illustrious government.[[8]](#footnote-8) Since my highly honored Sirs do me the honor and wish to consult with me in this case, I believe in my humble opinion that it would be best and surest if the distribution and giving out of such circular letters to the Anabaptists might occur through no other than my channel [page 8] and indeed not earlier than in the coming May for sure, so that my highly honored Sirs might send the original draft of such a letter certainly in German in April. I could thus share it in confidence with some of the local gentlemen in high office, change those things which need to be changed, bring it then into print, and afterward allow a good number to be distributed in the whole land. This is how the distribution in print could occur and the costs of the transportation that would be required if copies needed to be made at your place[[9]](#footnote-9) be spared.

The letter itself would also be better adapted to the specific nature of

the local dialect of this land and consequently also more intelligible to these poor people. And since the Sovereign Council here has resolved to publish and distribute [their] proclamation of freedom to every Anabaptist man or woman, my highly honored Sirs’ circular letter of admonition would not only fit well with that, but would probably, if [publicly] printed and distributed and not [page 9] secretly and stealthily, be of a special satisfaction to the local illustrious government. This, highly honored Sirs, would be my humble opinion with regard to both my trip to Schaffhausen and the distribution of the proposed circular letter; please reflect on this and in reply let me know your sentiments.

Meanwhile I remain, besides a mutual commitment to the Most High’s powerful, gracious protection and the best commendation of myself and mine into your most devoted prayer, also with heartiest greeting,

My highly honored Sirs’

Most devoted servant,

J. Ludwig Runckel.

1. 138 This document is translated into Dutch in Vorsterman’s Relaes (A 1392) on pp. 142-144. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Construing “verdeuten” as miswritten for “deuten” or “verdeutlichen.” The Dutch translation in Vorsterman’s Relaes, p. 142, line 20, gives “beduÿt.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “dat ik van sÿn gedrag aan UW EE soude kennis geven…” Vorsterman’s Relaes, p. 142, lines 40-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Michael Aeschlimann, as in Documents 16a and 37. Michael Aeschlimann was from Blasen in the parish of Grosshöchstetten, and born in 1641 (Kirchenbuch Grosshöchstetten 2, 199) and married to Margret Blaser (ibid., 2, 381, cf. also 3, 159). He was suspected of being an Anabaptist already in 1673 (Kirchgemeindearchiv Grosshöchstetten, Chorgerichtsmanual 4.1, 72). In the 1690s his property was confiscated; he was imprisoned and banished several times. In 1710 he was an elder. He was not part of the large exodus in 1711, but again imprisoned in 1718 “eternally” (Staatsarchiv des Kantons Bern, A II 664, 158ff). Information from Hanspeter Jecker. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Johann Rudolf Runckel, born February 12, 1711; the oldest son was Beat Ludwig Runckel born July 17, 1707. Stadtarchiv Schaffhausen, Geburtsregistern, C II 06.01/03 and C II 06.01/04. Thanks to Hanspeter Jecker for this information. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Daniel Rychen, Amish preacher from Switzerland, whose family originated in Frutigen in the Bernese Oberland. He arrived in the Netherlands in 1711, settled first at Deventer, and later became a leader of the Oude Zwitsers (Old Swiss) in Groningen and Sappemeer. ME IV, 324; Piet Visser, “Some Unnoticed Hooks and Eyes: The Swiss Anabaptists in the Netherlands,” in The Amish: Origin and Characteristics 1693-1993, ed. by L. Hege and C. Wiebe, (Ingersheim, 1996), pp. 102, 111; Müller, pp. 309, 321, 323, and 325; Abels, V, pp. 2517 ff. Cf. Jecker, “Der Grosse Berner Täufer-Exodus von 1711,” pp. 138-143. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The period from March till June. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Dutch translation in Vorsterman on p. 144 says, “Anders gevalt mÿn uwEE voorneemen on Circulaire Brieven aan de al/ hier wonende doopers te vervardigen seer wel, en twijfel niet deeseh/ loff: overigheÿt sal daer ook niet teegen hebben….” It appears that Runckel is warning the Committee in the Netherlands that they might say something slightly amiss and he wants to fix the letter before it is circulated. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Dutch translation in Vorsterman’s Relaes gives “Costÿ.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)