158. May 8, 1711. A letter from the church council at Hamburg in which the complaint that the settlers could become serfs was refuted, but granting the opinion that those living on the boundaries of Prussia could easily come to misfortune. For this reason a location near Berlin is recommended. They express doubts about settlement in Holland on the land with peat removed or on the dry heath of the Veluwe.

[folio 1 recto]

Doctor Hermannus Schijn, Hamburg, May 8, 1711

Jacob Vorsterman, and

Cornelis Beets

Very beloved friends,

Having received your letter of April 21 regarding our Swiss fellow believers in good order and having understood it, we perceive that in the time ahead the main issue will be where to settle those people. The dug-up peat lands and the dry heath in the Veluwe[[1]](#footnote-1) will not be fertile enough, at least not in the first years, to allow those people an existence. Those having had some means would become poorer, and others, largely without means, remain the expense of the Society. We also observe that the brothers have written that they have received news from Danzig, Elbing, and Königsberg to the effect that the most depopulated small town, Marienwerder, and the surrounding lands, together with the Prussian Werder situated twelve miles above Königsberg by the river and by the land called Tils, are good soil and a good district. But there were the following objections: first, that the neighbors of those lands are a source of concern, holding each other at bay through [folio 1 verso] equality of military power.[[2]](#footnote-2) But important above all was the fear of being made serfs by the aristocrats.

To this we must respond to the friends that it is true that the land in Prussia is situated on the border with neighbors, but that His Majesty will not readily enter a war, and the chance of being attacked by others is believed not to be great in the present circumstances. Nevertheless, it is true at all times that the one who lives on the border lives under the darkest cloud in the case of the least commotion. Therefore it is reasonable to consider whether those people wouldn’t be better settled in the area of

Berlin or more in the center of the territory of the said Majesty. For, as has been pointed out to us, there are still many places where quite a lot of people could be settled, where the lands could be approved for free use during the many years it would take to make them suitable with great effort. To discover some other option, it will be necessary very soon to send men who have some knowledge for the purpose of searching out which option would be the best choice.

[folio 2 recto]

Regarding serfdom, His Majesty has declared in writing to the Envoy at great length that there is no fear of that at all; rather, the said Majesty wants to try to abolish it altogether in his territory, of which we have sent you a copy. We perceive the friends’ concern that they might be brought to it by the aristocrats on whose land they might end up on the basis of the rights they [the aristocrats] may claim to have. But very likely there will be enough other estates besides the possessions of the aristocrats, and supposing there were not enough others, such an aristocrat is not a sovereign who can make free men into serfs, least of all if there are concrete contracts to the contrary which destroy all claims there might be on whatever excuse. However, once again, as long as no detailed research is done by deputies, nothing further can be said on a well-founded basis other than that one must trust the King’s word and assurance and look into whether a possibility is in existence.

We remain, after friendly greetings,

Your well-disposed friends and brothers in Christ,

Brothers Gerrit Roosen,

Jan de Lanoij,

Jan Beets.

1. 158 Range of hills in Gelderland in eastern Netherlands. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Dutch proverb in the document says literally, “The one sword keeps the other in its sheath.” That is, because both parties are evenly armed, battle is avoided. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)