Chapter 4

The Court Councillor of the Great Elector

According to a later petition of his Jakab Harsányi Nagy was informed in January 1667 that Frederick William was ready to take him into his service. He was still in Stettin in early March, and arrived in Berlin sometime in mid-April. The charter of his appointment, however, was not ready until the end of May. We have no information as to the reason for this six week delay. It caused serious problems for Harsányi later in the year, and meant missing the date of payments that only took place four times a year at the electoral treasury. He was thus left without money until the end of summer. The elector spent a good deal of time away from Brandenburg during his rule, but in this very period he stayed in Berlin and the nearby castles – a fact which could hardly account for the delay. On the other hand there was another guest with Swedish connections at the court of Frederick William during the spring of 1667, and he might indeed have played a role in the procrastination of Harsányi’s employment.

Bengt Skytte, Baron of Duderhoff, travelled more than most of his contemporaries. His father, Johan Skytte, the founder of the University of Dorpat, came from a family of burghers and was elevated to the nobility, and later to the aristocracy. Since Johan Skytte was the tutor of King Gustav II Adolph, it came as no surprise that the young Bengt took part in the *peregrinatio academica*, which was regarded as almost compulsory for contemporary members of the higher nobility, and visited universities abroad after his studies in Uppsala. Nor was there anything extraordinary about his accepting diplomatic missions – among other places to Moscow. But Bengt Skytte never tended to spend longer periods of time at home even after this initial phase of his career. Apart from shorter stays, when he played an important part in Swedish politics as the confidant of the ruler in the late 1640s and during the rule of Charles X Gustav (1654–1660), he was out of the country for most of his life. As we have

1 Diploma of Frederick William about the appointment of Jakab Harsányi Nagy (Cölln an der Spree, 20/[30] May 1667), GStA PK 1. HA Geheimer Rat Rep. 9. Allgemeine Verwaltung J 16 Fasz. 2. fol. 10. For dating the offer of the Great Elector and Harsányi’s arrival in Berlin, see his petition to Frederick William (Berlin, 9/[19] July 1667), ibid., Fasz. 3. fol. 2r.

already seen, he visited Transylvania and Constantinople during the 1650s, and, after he had lost his influence in Sweden in the 1660s, he received permission, after many petitions, to leave for the territory of the Holy Roman Empire, ostensibly to visit baths and receive treatment for his rheumatic pains. His stay in Berlin in 1667, however, shows that he had more ambitious aims.3

It was the autumn of 1666 when Skytte first visited the councillors of Brandenburg with his plan. It was discussed before a wider public at the court in the spring of the following year. His ambitious idea was the founding of a “university for [the study of] all the peoples and prominent sciences of the world” (Universitas Universitatum Hominum et scientiarum praecipuarum Mundi). According to Skytte’s proposal the elector of Brandenburg would be given an opportunity to establish an extraterritorial “Republic of Savants,” where scholars from every corner of the earth might gather, pursue their research freely, exchange ideas, and accumulate the results of their work. For this purpose Skytte chose the town of Tangermünde on the shores of the Elbe, in the lands of Frederick William.4 At the same time, he knew how difficult it would be to get support for his endeavour, especially since he had already presented similar plans in London and Paris.5 It was not unprecedented for a seventeenth-century German prince to found a college of higher education, but the institution envisaged by Skytte would not have been an ordinary university. After having secured the financial backing of the Universitas, its exemption from taxes and customs, and its diplomatic neutrality, Frederick William was supposed to step back and have no influence whatsoever on the further development of the establishment. Skytte thus tried to give a detailed representation of all the prestige to be expected, and his long tirade about how the chronicles of posterity would commemorate the founder of this modern version of Solomon’s Temple seemed to have an impact on Frederick William. The elector first issued a general statement of intention, and in April 1667 he signed the foundation charter of the institution already bearing the name

3 His biography was written by Arnheim, “Freiherr Benedikt Skytte.”
4 The most detailed presentation of these plans from the pen of Skytte is a memorial from early 1667: GStA PK 1. HA Geheimer Rat Rep. 9. Allgemeine Verwaltung K lit. m 11. Fasz. 1. fol. 5. His first letter mentioning the plan was written to the councillor and doctor of the elector, Nicolaus von Bonnet, under the date Zwingenberg, 18/28 September 1666, ibid., fol. 1b–2.