
BREMEN DISTRICT

West German Mission



Bremen was the smallest district in the West German Mission in three respects: the number of branches, the number of members, and the area covered. The principal branch was in the port city of Bremen itself. Small branches were found in Wilhelmshaven (forty miles to the northwest) and in Wesermünde-Lehe (thirty-three miles to the north, two miles north of the North Sea port of Bremerhaven). A very small number of Saints lived in Oldenburg (twenty-five miles west of Bremen), but they were not sufficiently numerous to sustain a branch and were asked to travel to Bremen to participate in meetings there.¹ The district territory covered only a few hundred square miles but included areas near the North Sea and the Netherlands where no Latter-day Saints lived.

Bremen District ²	1939
Elders	8
Priests	6
Teachers	4
Deacons	19
Other Adult Males	40
Adult Females	127
Male Children	9
Female Children	8
<i>Total</i>	221

The Bremen District had too few members to provide district leadership in all Church programs when World War II began. Willy Deters was called as the district president on April 7, 1939, and served until after the war.³ Georg Schulze served as the president of the Sunday School and the genealogy specialist, and Auguste Adler was the district Relief Society president. All three were residents of Bremen.



Fig. 1. The Bremen District in the far northwest corner of Germany.

Gerald Deters (born 1934) described his father, Willy, as “a very short man, but a dynamic speaker. He had a loud voice and was well liked by the

members. I was proud to hear him speak in church.” The fact that he was hard of hearing became a benefit to him when the Wehrmacht called him for a physical examination. When he was questioned about his health, he repeatedly asked, “What did you say?” convincing the army doctors that he was not suited for military duty.⁴

The last prewar conference of the Bremen District was held on April 8–9, 1939. A report sent to the mission office in Frankfurt included this comment: “Because of the beautiful weather and the Easter holiday the conference was poorly visited, but the Saints were happy with the messages presented there.”⁵ The first report filed by President Deters after the war began in September 1939 makes it clear that the war had already caused subtle difficulties for the Church in the port cities closest to the bases of the British Royal Air Force:

Sun December 31, 1939: The fall conference of the Bremen District could not be held this year since it was impossible to secure a meeting hall. The conditions in the branches in the Bremen District are generally good. Those members who have always fulfilled their obligations to the Church still do even under these trying circumstances. We have not yet felt any of the effects of the war in Bremen. Whenever possible we hold our meetings. Because of the air-raid danger the windows are shaded and the attendance in our night meetings has dropped. Many of our members dread to go on the streets in the darkness.⁶

The next two reports sent by Willy Deters to the mission office likewise dealt with district conferences:

March 23–24, 1940: The spring conference of the Bremen District was held on this and the preceding day. The visitor was Elder Christian Heck, acting mission president.⁷ Considering the circumstances the conference was well attended, 207 being in attendance. The work in the district and the branches is going forward. Even if there are not too many present in the night meetings, all the meetings are held regularly. On Sunday mornings, even after our members have spent hours in the air-raid shelters, they are present in the Sunday School.⁸

October 24, 1940: The fall conference of the Bremen District was held. Mission counselor Anthon [sic] Huck was the visitor from the mission office. All the meetings were held during the daytime. This was necessitated by the constant air-raid danger. The conference was attended by 180 persons.⁹

The faithful Willy Deters traveled to Frankfurt in February 1941 to participate in a conference for district presidents. He reported that it was unlikely that a district conference could be held due to constant air raids that often interrupted branch meetings. All evening meetings had been moved to daytime. Two weeks later, President Deters called three new district missionaries: Wilhelm Stelzig, Herbert Baarz, and Kurt Menssen. By July 1941, conditions in the Bremen region had improved and a belated spring district conference was held with 147 persons in attendance.¹⁰

In October 1941, a district conference was held and 153 persons attended, including mission supervisor Christian Heck and his counselor Anton Huck from Frankfurt. The same mission leaders returned on May 10, 1942, for the spring conference. Saints from the outlying branches overcame substantial difficulties to travel to Bremen. A total of 144 members and twenty-three friends attended the conference.¹¹

Willy Deters’ report to mission leaders on January 1, 1943, reveals a bit of discouragement:

The fourth year of the war has started. What has the new year in store for us? The conditions in the branches are becoming increasingly more difficult. The lack of food is more and more noticeable. The constant air raids make the people nervous and irritable. There are only the real faithful Saints coming to the meetings now. However, these are in sufficient numbers to carry on the work.¹²

The spring conference in 1943 was held in Lehe, a small town just north of Bremerhaven. Christian Heck was again in attendance and this comment was included in the report submitted to Frankfurt: “In spite of all the sufferings the members showed a

fine spirit of cooperation. The spirit of the Lord was present in rich abundance.”

Willy Deters was one of the most faithful submitters of periodic reports in the West German Mission. Over time, his accounts paint a picture of a Third Reich coming down around him in flames. All three of the branches within his stewardship were located near ports critical to the German war effort and Allied bombers pounded the cities mercilessly for several years. The district president’s last three reports are increasingly bleak, but he firmly believed that the Latter-day Saints were not about to give up:

January 1, 1944: The year 1944 has come and this awful war is still going on. Life is very difficult now. The last bit of strength of the people has to be offered to the frantic war god. The life in the branches is getting increasingly more difficult. The brethren have to work day and night and don’t find the time to visit the meetings. The food rationing is more severe now. The propaganda is talking of a speedy victory but no one believes this any more. Traveling now is connected with great danger. Bombers attack trains day and night. All the meetings of the branches in the Bremen District are held regularly, so far as possible under the circumstances. The attendance has dropped drastically. But the spirit has not suffered.¹³

December 31, 1944: Everything is driving to a climax. The stress on body and soul is gigantic. The air raids are increasing with unbelievable fury. The cities of Bremen, Wesermünde and Wilhelmshaven are just ruins. In spite of all the trials our meetings are still being held, even if they have to be interrupted frequently by air raids. The faithful Saints meet in cottage meetings with only 8 to 10 members present. So closes the year of trials, 1944. But we still know that God lives and that the restored gospel still is the truth.¹⁴

January 1, 1945: Hell has opened its fiery portals. It is almost impossible to visit the branches. Planes attack trains constantly. No rest can be found at night. In the branches of Wesermünde and Wilhelmshaven meetings are held regularly. Sometimes, these are interrupted. It is almost impossible to hold meetings in Bremen. However, meetings are held infrequently. There are no

more members left in Bremen who still have their homes. . . . Many of the brethren are called into the armed services that are either very young, 15, or over 50 in the organization called Volkssturm, so that they might save the fatherland. Reasoning has now changed into madness.¹⁵

These last messages sent to Frankfurt by President Deters reveal his determination to keep his small flocks safe and to see that meetings were conducted. However, reports with such negative wording would have caused Willy Deters great difficulty had government officials or fanatical Nazi Party members seen them. Suggestions that conditions were anything but positive were considered defeatism and treason in those days. On March 1, 1945, Deters reported that communications with the mission office were disrupted and that he could communicate with branch leaders in Wilhelmshaven and Wesermünde-Lehe only by mail. His last sentence that day reads, “Now we have no one to turn to for help except the Lord. I have given instructions to the branches that all the tithing money should be banked.”¹⁶

Willy Deters lost his own home to the Allied bombs in 1944, but he had previously moved his family just south of the city to Verden on the Aller River. Fortunately, he survived the invasion of the British army and was able to return to Bremen in the summer of 1946. There he resumed his work as the district president by gathering his flock and rebuilding the Church in that region.

NOTES

1. See the Bremen Branch chapter for more about the few Latter-day Saints in Oldenburg.
2. Presiding Bishopric, “Financial, Statistical, and Historical Reports of Wards, Stakes, and Missions, 1884–1955,” 257, CHL CR 4 12.
3. West German Mission manuscript history, CHL QR 1939:14.
4. Gerald Deters, interview by the author, Bountiful, UT, July 2009.
5. West German Mission manuscript history, CHL QR 1939:15.
6. West German Mission manuscript history, CHL B 1381:4.
7. Heck’s official title was Missionsleiter (mission supervisor).
8. West German Mission manuscript history, CHL QR 1381:4.

9. Ibid.
10. West German Mission manuscript history, CHL B 1381:6, A 2999:6, B 1381:5.
11. West German Mission manuscript history, CHL B 1381:6.
12. Ibid., 6.
13. Ibid., 7.
14. Ibid., 7.
15. Ibid., 8. Had this kind of report reached the police at the time, Elder Deters would have almost certainly been punished for such defeatist comments.
16. Ibid., 8.

BREMEN BRANCH

One of the principal port cities of the old Hanseatic League was Bremen, where 424,351 people lived in 1939.¹ This beautiful city on the Weser River was also home to a relatively strong branch of 158 Latter-day Saints.

The meetings were held at the time in the Guttemplerloge on Vegesackerstrasse. The branch observed the traditional meeting schedule of Sunday School at 10:00 a.m. and sacrament meeting in the evening. Other meetings were held on evenings during the week.

Bremen Branch²	1939
Elders	5
Priests	3
Teachers	2
Deacons	15
Other Adult Males	29
Adult Females	93
Male Children	6
Female Children	5
<i>Total</i>	158

The branch leadership in July 1939 consisted of president Erwin Paul Gulla and his counselors, Georg Friedrich Schulze and Johann Hinrich

Wöltjen. The branch directory shows that an American missionary was the superintendent of the Sunday School but that all other leadership positions were held by members of the branch.³

On Friday, September 1, 1939, the branch history reported numerous challenges faced by the Bremen Branch on the first day of the war:

The meeting hall of the Bremen Branch was confiscated by the German army. All requests, that at least one room [be] made available to the branch, are mockingly denied. "You are only trying to blunt the intellects of the people," President Willy Deters is told. Meetings in Bremen are held again in the Guttemple Logenhaus at Vegesackerstrasse. However, it is only possible to hold one sacrament meeting on Sundays. At this time Brother Albert Adler, Brother Erwin Gulla and Brother Johann Wöltjen are called into the military service. The Bremen Branch is now under the direction of district president Willy Deters.⁴

Helene Deters (born 1904), the wife of the district president, recalled that British air raids over Bremen began almost immediately. Earlier, Hermann Goering, one of Hitler's inner circle and head of the German air force, claimed that if an enemy airplane could drop a bomb on a German city, people could call him Meyer.⁵ Generally a very happy young mother, Sister Deters had reason to be concerned about their safety during the many ensuing air raids against that important city: "There were no [air-raid] shelters at that time, and we huddled in our small cellar for what little protection it offered. Our house was so small that a little bomb could have easily destroyed the whole thing." During one of the first air raids, she and Willy sat in a shelter without their son, who they believed was safe at another location. "Willy and I sat there hand in hand expecting the worst. But we were calm and ready to go [die] if that was the Lord's will."⁶

There is little information regarding the location of the branch meeting rooms after the Saints were required to vacate their rooms on Vegesackerstrasse. However, they indeed had found rooms, as