

**JULIA LINDER**

# **JEWISH HISTORY OF BONN**



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**BONN 2012**



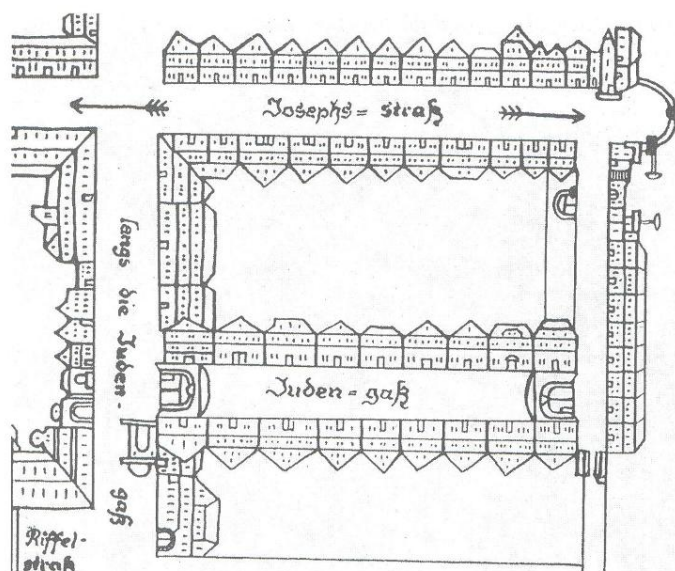
## EARLY HISTORY OF JEWS IN BONN

While for the city of Cologne Jewish communities have been reported as early as 321 CE, in the period of the Roman Empire, the first Jew to be mentioned for the city of Bonn lived about 750 years later. Mar Gedalja and his family are referred to in the tragic turn of events that occurred along the river Rhine with the prelude to the first crusade in the years 1095/1096. Fanatical hordes of furious peasants gathered in the so-called Peasants' or Paupers-crusade and began ridding the land of the "murderers of Christ", nearly causing the extinction of all Jewish communities in the region. In that trail of events the Germania Judaica mentions Mar Gedalja and his family, who tried to escape their prosecutors but were caught and massacred in Neuss.<sup>1</sup>

In the course of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, however, the Jewish community of Bonn recovered from the pogrom of the peasants' crusade and flourished to become a centre of Jewish scholarship. Ephraim Ben Jacob, born 1133 in Bonn, became well known for his compositions of prayers of penitence and psalms of praise. Furthermore the halakhic scholar Samuel Ben Natronai and the poet and scholar Joel Ben Isaac Halevi lived and worked in the city of Bonn. The city's widely accepted reputation for its expertise in Jewish lore is captured and often cited in the words of Rabbi Elieser ben Nathan, who in the 12<sup>th</sup> century gave quarrelling scholars of Mainz the advice to turn to the scholars of Bonn, "for it is from them that the teaching and the word of god arises".<sup>2</sup>

The memorial-book of Nuremberg mentions a pogrom at the Jewish people of Bonn in 1288 and notes 104 Jews to fall victim to that persecution.

For the year 1320 a special district for the Jewish community is first mentioned documentarily. The "Judengasse" / "Jew-alley" was located on today's Friedrichstrasse between Wenzelgasse and Bonngasse and contained a mikwe as well as a synagogue. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, however, the Jewish community of Bonn was once again destroyed. Rumours of ritual murder that remained still from the 12<sup>th</sup> century and new arising slander of Jews having poisoned the wells (and the



*Fig. 1: Map of the Jewish Ghetto 1773.  
Illustrated in RAUHUT-BRUNGS (2001: 53)*

Rhine) culminated in the course of the Black Death 1348/1349 in the most dreadful pogroms of the Middle Ages. The Jewish communities of Cologne and Bonn were extinguished. Even seventy years later Bonn had as few as 11 Jewish citizens. With the

banishment of Jewish citizens from the city of Cologne in 1424, however, the Jewish community of Bonn again increased to a considerable size.<sup>3</sup>

### THE NEW JEW-DISTRICT

In the year 1716 Kurfürst Joseph Clemens erected a new Judengasse. The new district was located at the waterside of the Rhine. The alley was closed off by two wooden gates on each side – thus this new Jewish district was for the first time organized as a lockable Ghetto. In 1754, construction work for a new synagogue in the Judengasse began and was finally finished in the year 1758. It provided room for 44 men and 29 women. By 1773 the district comprised a total of 19 (permitted) houses.<sup>4</sup>

### THE ABOLITION OF THE GHETTO



**Fig. 2: Tempelstrasse/Judengasse with a view to the waterfront.**

*Illustrated in PRACHT (1997: 492)*

In the course of the French Revolution, the National Assembly for the French Jews had obtained full civil right status for the Jewish community. The French occupation of the Rhine-region in 1794 brought about the same rights for the Jewish population in Bonn. Three years after the occupation, Cisrhenanian Republicans arranged a freedom celebration in the city of Bonn. A parade went through the city, craftsmen with their tools and axes walking along. When the parade reached the Jewish district, the wooden gates were destroyed and thus the ghetto abolished. The population of Bonn, Jews and non-Jews

joining the parade as equals, moved on to the city's central marketplace where the festivities reached their height.<sup>5</sup>

In 1811, the Rhine-Moselle consistory was officially moved to Bonn, thus displaying the growing percentage of the Jewish community within the Rhine-Moselle region living in Bonn. Up to the early twenties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Jewish population grew steadily.<sup>6</sup> The thriving Jewish population in the city centre, comprising a high proportion of academia, intellectuals and successful businessmen, brought about an increasing liberal influence to the conception of Jewish religious practice, thus causing growing disparities between the liberal and progressive congregation of the centre and the rather orthodox and conservative orientation of the communities in the outskirts of Bonn. The continuing quarrels were finally settled in 1875 with the dissociation of the Jewish community into four separate congregations: Bonn (centre), Bad Godesberg, Beuel and Poppelsdorf-Endenich.<sup>7</sup>



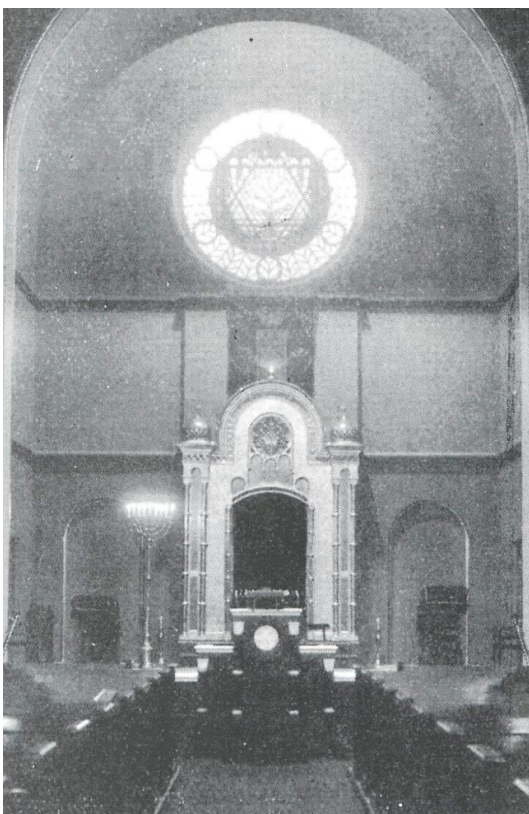
## BONN-CITY

Facing a considerable increase of the Jewish population, the old synagogue in the city centre – finished in 1758 – could no longer accommodate all of the community. Furthermore, in large parts the old building was decayed and dilapidated. Humorously Max HERSCHEL in 1904 allegorized the location and condition of the former synagogue:<sup>8</sup>

*„For: Out of the depths have I cried unto thee“  
the psalmist sings - and our fathers loved the  
literal exegesis of the scripture.*

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It took the community fifteen years of effort until they could finally purchase new building ground and start construction of a new synagogue. The property was located at the very end of the former Judengasse, right at the waterside – the decorative front of the new building facing the Rhine. The ground plan of the synagogue was shaped symmetrical comprising 555 m<sup>2</sup>. On January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1879, the new synagogue was finally inaugurated.<sup>9</sup>



**Fig. 3: Picture of the inside of the renovated synagogue in Bonn Tempelstrasse in 1928.**

*Illustrated in PRACHT (1997: 494)*

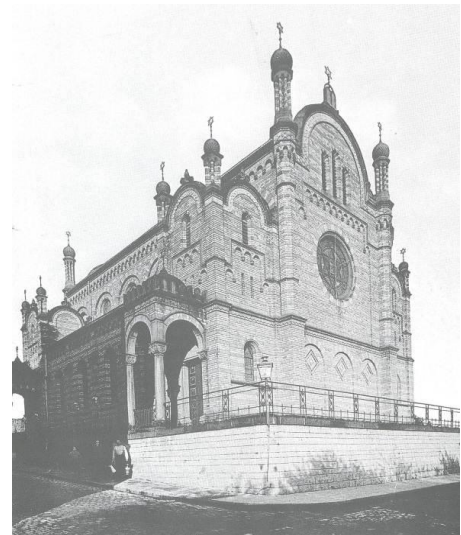
*There – where fifty years ago  
the former ghetto, our Jew-  
Alley [...] was cut off the  
Rhine promenade, – where a  
narrow alleyway, hardly wider  
than one metre accommodated  
the houses [...] – there now  
for the past twenty-five years  
arises our glorious new  
temple. The waves of the  
Rhine salute it and tell it of the  
great and of the hard times,  
which our fathers endured  
along its shore. They tell of the  
bloom of Bonn's  
congregation, and they tell of  
the dark confusions of the  
Middle Ages [...] and then the  
waves tell of that one day in  
1798, when for the last time  
they passed by the Ghetto ...*

Max HERSCHEL  
January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1904

*The play of colours starting from the most delicate yellow, changing over to orange and into a rich red and purple, graces the synagogue with a warm and opulent tint. The dark red is especially striking, from which the preserved golden Torah ark gleamingly sets itself apart. Over the black velvet curtain, decorated with elaborate embroidery, a carved star is glowing.<sup>10</sup>*

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The parish hall of the city congregation, formerly located right next to the old synagogue, was taken down in 1900 and rebuilt in 1909/1910. In 1928/1929, the new synagogue was extensively renovated – ten years later, in the morning of November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1938, the synagogue as well as the parish hall were set on fire and burnt to the ground.<sup>11</sup>



*Fig. 4: Synagogue in Bonn Tempelstrasse, around 1900. Illustrated in PRACHT (1997: 493)*



*Fig. 5: Synagogue of Beuel. Illustrated in PRACHT (1997: 503)*

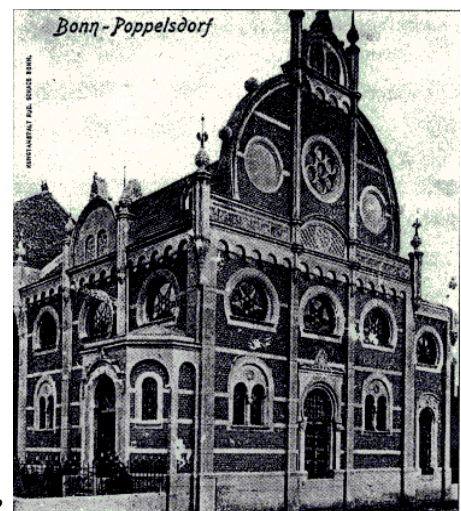
### **BONN-BEUEL/VILICH**

Following the separation of the Jewish community in 1875, each of the subdistricts was eager to provide for its congregation the necessary religious infrastructure, first of all with an own or a new synagogue. While for Bonn-Beuel a 34 m<sup>2</sup> wide prayer room is referred to in the year of 1808, the first synagogue in Bonn-Beuel/Vilich was built between 1824 and 1847. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, a new, bigger synagogue was built and inaugurated by Rabbi Dr. Elias Kalischer in August 1903. Just as the synagogue of the city-centre congregation, the synagogue was renovated in 1928 and burnt to the ground during the November pogrom 1938. The yellow bricks the synagogue was built of were later used for the erection of a memorial.<sup>12</sup>

### **BONN-POPPELSDORF & BONN-ENDENICH**

A prayer room for this part of the city is first mentioned in 1830. In 1902, a synagogue was completed for this part of the city as well.

*Measured along the prevalent architectural preferences of the time, the new synagogue was a plain, yet extraordinary, building.<sup>13</sup>*



*Fig. 6: Synagogue of Bonn-Poppelsdorf. Illustrated in GENERAL-ANZEIGER BONN May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2002*

In 1927, the congregation of Poppelsdorf celebrated the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its synagogue – newspaper reports of that event illustrate a still tight inclusion of the Jewish congregation in the community of the city district.<sup>14</sup> In 1938, this synagogue as well as all the others on the city grounds were burnt down. Today, a memorial stone and a two metre high menorah commemorate the former site of the synagogue.

The city-district was in possession of its own Jewish cemetery. While reports of demolitions of the graveyard are mentioned as early as 1896, the cemetery still accommodates ninety gravestones, as well as recovered Torah-rolls which are buried under a small mound on the premises.<sup>15</sup>

### **BONN-BAD GODESBERG**

The prayer room in Bad Godesberg is first mentioned in 1812, being located in a private household. A new synagogue was inaugurated in 1850 and also destroyed in November 1938. A memorial tablet was installed in 1985. Bad Godesberg also featured its own graveyard, containing 33 gravestones today, which were extensively renovated in the 1980s.<sup>16</sup>

### **CEMETERY IN SCHWARZ-RHEINDORF**

The oldest vestige of the Jewish history of Bonn is the cemetery in Schwarz-Rheindorf, located on the right side of the river, outside of today's district Schwarz-Rheindorf. SIMONS takes into consideration locating the origin of the Jewish community of Bonn in that part of the area, thus originally deriving from the right side of the river Rhine – Vilich/Beuel. Not until the middle ages, he suggests, the Jewish community of Bonn

was established on the left side by settling over to the new emerging centre of the city.<sup>17</sup>

*„Our cemetery was located downstream in Vilich, on the right side of the stream. [...] The bodies were put into a Schalde (a bigger Nachem), and encompassed by the funeral cortege it was escorted to the cemetery, oftentimes with high-water and ice-drift. Such a cortege gave an exceedingly melancholy, but highly poetical sight.“*

Max HERSCHEL, 1904  
„Bonner Zeitung“ September  
8<sup>th</sup>, 1928, cited in PRACHT  
(1997: 474)

The oldest gravestone in the cemetery dates back to the year 1623. It belongs to Shabtai Bar David, a Jewish citizen of Bonn during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) who lived in the old Jew-Alley. The ground property was officially purchased by the Jewish community in 1818. The cemetery's location on the right side of the Rhine did cause rather troublesome circumstances: as there was no bridge by that time, the funeral procession had to cross the river, escorting the deceased in a small yawl to the other side. In 1872, a new graveyard on the left side was built.<sup>18</sup>



## JEWISH CEMETERY – RÖMERSTRASSE

The first funeral on the cemetery Römerstrasse took place on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1873. Since then it was used as the main burial place for the city's congregation. The cemetery in Schwarz-Rheindorf was endowed with a memorial stone in November 1968, in remembrance of the fellow Jewish citizens who have been murdered. The cemetery Römerstrasse has a war memorial for the fallen Jews of Bonn of World War I. To the left-hand side of the war memorial now stands the memorial for the murdered Jewish people of the Shoah.<sup>19</sup>

## SHOAH

In September 1935, the *Nürnberger Gesetze* ("laws of Nuremberg") had been enacted. Photographs of the streets of Bonn from the 1930s put across to which extent the city centre was impacted by the Nazi-ideology. "The Jew is the enemy", "The Jews are our fatality" being written on banners hanging throughout the city.<sup>20</sup> In 1937, 674 "pure" Jews are still listed for the city of Bonn, displaying a decline of one third of the Jewish population between 1933 and 1937. Over one fourth of those remaining Jewish citizens was at the time more than sixty years old.

In 1939, the list mentions 512 Jews, 453 of those being of "mosaic faith" and 152 being "half-breeds of first grade". In 1940/41, only 353 are still listed. The Jewish population thus declined between 1933 and 1939 from 0,8% to 0,4%.<sup>21</sup>

In the morning of November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1938, all synagogues of Bonn were set on fire, the remaining Jewish stores were destroyed and all possessions and merchandise confiscated.

Midyear 1941 the remaining Jewish population was detained in the convent "Zur Ewigen Anbetung" in Bonn-Endenich.

Deportations out of the Bonn area started in the middle of 1942. The first out of four transports left the convent June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1942, carrying 44 people. The second left Bonn June 15<sup>th</sup> with 87 people on board; July 19<sup>th</sup> 157 people were deported and the last transport left July 27<sup>th</sup>, carrying the last 83 people out of the convent in Bonn-Endenich.

*Prof. Felix Hausdorff received his order of committal in the beginning of 1942. Three days before his enforced relocation he committed suicide together with his wife and his sister-in-law, explaining in his suicide note, that*

***"Auch Endenich ist noch vielleicht das Ende nich"***

*Even Endenich\* might not be the end yet*

*\* which literally translates to "End not"*

VAN REY (1994: 234-237)  
Hausdorff's suicide-note is printed in "Bonn in der NS-Zeit"



Only eight of the 481 people that were detained in the convent survived the Shoah. One of them being Alfred Philippson, who, having returned to the University of Bonn later, expressed in a speech:

*Ich fühle mich am Ende meines Lebens und bei der furchtbaren Zerstörung und Zerrüttung der Vaterstadt und der Universität enger mit diesen verbunden als je zuvor. I feel myself at the end of my life and, witnessing the terrible destruction and disruption of my hometown and its University, to be closer affiliated with both of them than ever before.*<sup>22</sup>

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### **THE UNIVERSITY OF BONN IN THE NAZI ERA**

The University of Bonn – being located in a city that for a long time was famous for its Jewish scholarship – shared this great legacy of Jewish intellectuals and academia. For centuries remarkable students and professors of Jewish origin have contributed in preserving and extending its scientific status.

#### **People that have a.o. studied<sup>23</sup>**

Heinrich Heine, Moses Heß, Karl Marx, Samson Raphael Hirsch, Abraham Geiger.

#### **& taught at the University of Bonn<sup>24</sup>**

philologist Jacob Bernays, mathematician Rudolph Lipschitz, medical scientist Nathan Zuntz, biologist Moritz Nußbaum, chemist & Nobel Prize laureate Otto Wallach, specialist in German studies Felix Solmsen, physicist Heinrich Hertz, archaeologist Georg Karo, geographer Alfred Philippson, historian Wilhelm Levison, mathematician Felix Hausdorff, jurists Eberhard Bruck and Max Grünhut.

Prof. Paul KAHLE depicts in his essay “Bonn University in pre-Nazi and Nazi times (1923-1939) – experiences of a German Professor” the Nazification of the University of Bonn. In “step one” he lists the redundancies of Jewish professors between 1933 and 1939 – amongst others he mentions Prof. Hausdorff, Prof. Toeplitz, Prof. Grünhut and Prof. Bruck. The famous Alfred Philippson and Wilhelm Levison were already emeritus professors before the redundancies were enforced.

KAHLE notes that also people not being of Jewish origin, like himself, were struck by the reorganizing measures. He then refers to the theologian Prof. Karl Barth, who KAHLE remembers as being a harsh critic of the regime and “not easy to get rid of”.<sup>25</sup>

Prof. Paul KAHLE himself was one of the highest noted professors for his field of study in his time. He had studied theology and oriental studies in the cities of Marburg, Halle

and Berlin and achieved his professors-degree at the University of Halle in 1909.<sup>26</sup> In 1923 he got appointed ordinarius in Bonn.<sup>27</sup>

In the end of 1938 KAHLE and his family were defamed as “traitors to the German people” for helping out a Jewish neighbour after the November pogrom – followed by his discharge from the University in January 1939. In 1940 the University of Halle deprived KAHLE of his title.<sup>28</sup>

The University of Aberdeen and the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York conferred an honorary doctorate to Prof. KAHLE and in 1955 he was awarded the order of merit of the Federal Republic of Germany.<sup>29</sup>

A rather famous case to gain notoriety was the one of Thomas Mann – honorary doctorate of the University since 1919. In the late 1930s the University of Bonn, by that time being rather progressed in its Nazification, officially deprived Thomas Mann of his honorary doctorate in 1937, “which aroused Mann to a famous and moving reply in which he epitomized the situation of the German writer in exile.”<sup>30</sup> In 1946 his honorary doctorate was restored.

All in all more than thirty university students got suspended – more than fifty people got deprived of their doctors’ degree – and about forty doctoral candidates did not get granted their title, after passing their doctoral examinations.<sup>31</sup>

## JEWISH CONGREGATION OF BONN AFTER THE SHOAH



Siegfried Leopold – survivor of Theresienstadt – dedicated himself to the rehabilitation of the Jewish community after his return. It was in his private apartment that the few survivors and returnees held their first services.<sup>32</sup>

In 1950, the city of Bonn provided the Jewish community with landed property for the new construction of a synagogue in the renamed Tempelstrasse (Templestreet). On May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1959, the newly built synagogue, designed by Helmut Goldschmidt, was inaugurated.

*Fig. 7: Eastern wall of the former synagogue.*

*Photo by Julia Linder*



*Fig. 8: The new synagogue of Bonn, Tempelstrasse. Photo by Julia Linder*

A wooden plate out of the provisional prayer room from 1947 was preserved, which since 1959 now adorns the new synagogue of Bonn:

*Aus Nacht und Grauen wiedererstanden ist dieses Gotteshaus und  
denen Ehren, die da sterben mussten für Ihr Jude sein.  
Out of night and horror this house of God revived – and honour to those  
that had to die for being a Jew.*

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The property on which the original synagogue was built in 1879 remained in ownership of the city. For several years it was used as a large-scale parking ground. Later on, the brilliantly located building ground was purchased by a famous hotel chain, which now benefits greatly of the waterside view that used to feature the Jewish synagogue.

On the waterfront side of the hotel one can still see a small piece of the eastern wall of the destroyed synagogue. In 1988, a memorial was erected at the riverside Erzberger Ufer, constructed out of the bricks the synagogue was built with, designed by Itamar Geyer.<sup>33</sup>



*Fig. 9: Memorial at Erzberger Ufer. Photo by Julia Linder*

The Jewish congregation today covers the area of Bonn as well as the Rhine-Sieg-district. The synagogue integrates a parish hall, two kitchens (one for milk and one for meat dishes) and a youth room, which is used for the weekly religious education classes. The synagogue's library of Jewish literature today contains also a large collection of Russian literature. Through its women, senior, and youth groups the congregation organizes various activities for its community.

Up to the 1990s the community remained rather small – with about 200 people. In the 1990s many immigrants from the eastern part of Europe expanded the congregation up to approximately 900 members today.

WOLYNIEC notes that while these facts are positive for the size of the community, on the other hand the confrontation of differing Jewish traditions does also cause friction within the congregation. He further states that the character of Judaism in Bonn has changed considerably: "In its social structure the Jewish congregation of Bonn was of liberal nature and used to be strongly connected to the city of Bonn and its character. The present however, is affected by language and integration problems. The Jewish congregation takes great effort in integrating the Jewish immigrants. By offering German language courses on the one hand and a collection of Russian literature on the other hand the congregation aims at reaching a compromise between integration and preserving the familiar."<sup>34</sup>



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- <sup>1</sup> LINN (1983: 57-58), VAN REY (1994: 228), PRACHT (1997: 467).
- <sup>2</sup> PRACHT (1997: 467), LINN (1983: 62).
- <sup>3</sup> LINN (1983: 61-64).
- <sup>4</sup> PRACHT (1997: 467-469), RAUHUT-BRUNGS (2001: 61-66).
- <sup>5</sup> LINN (1983: 81), RAUHUT-BRUNGS (2001: 53-60), KASPER-HOLTKOTTE (1997: 9).
- <sup>6</sup> KASPER-HOLTKOTTE (1997: 113-115).
- <sup>7</sup> PRACHT (1997: 468).
- <sup>8</sup> HERSHEL (1904: 5).
- <sup>9</sup> PRACHT (1997: 471-475).
- <sup>10</sup> „Bonner Zeitung“ September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1928, cited in PRACHT (1997: 474).
- <sup>11</sup> PRACHT (1997: 476-477).
- <sup>12</sup> PRACHT (1997: 480-481).
- <sup>13</sup> Extract from the newspaper BONNER GENERALANZEIGER May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2002. Online available at: [http://ikk-osc-nr.de/poppelsdorf\\_aktuell\\_Synagoge.htm](http://ikk-osc-nr.de/poppelsdorf_aktuell_Synagoge.htm) (May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012).
- <sup>14</sup> PRACHT (1997: 482-485).
- <sup>15</sup> PRACHT (1997: 482-485).
- <sup>16</sup> PRACHT (1997: 486-487).
- <sup>17</sup> SIMON (1959: 7-8).
- <sup>18</sup> RAUHUT-BRUNGS (2001: 88-104).
- <sup>19</sup> RAUHUT-BRUNGS (2001: 11-33).
- <sup>20</sup> MEHMEL, ASTRID (2009: 5-6).
- <sup>21</sup> VAN REY (1994: 231-237).
- <sup>22</sup> VAN REY (1994: 234-237).
- <sup>23</sup> RAUHUT-BRUNGS (2001: 67-70).
- <sup>24</sup> VAN REY (1994: 230).
- <sup>25</sup> KAHLE (2003: 100-120).
- <sup>26</sup> Information from the standing exhibition of the GEDENKSTÄTTE FÜR BONNER OPFER DES NATIONALSOZIALISMUS – AN DER SYNAGOGE E.V.
- <sup>27</sup> HÖPFNER (1993/94: 476).
- <sup>28</sup> Information from the standing exhibition of the GEDENKSTÄTTE FÜR BONNER OPFER DES NATIONALSOZIALISMUS – AN DER SYNAGOGE E.V., HÖPFNER (1993/94: 476).
- <sup>29</sup> Information from the standing exhibition of the GEDENKSTÄTTE FÜR BONNER OPFER DES NATIONALSOZIALISMUS – AN DER SYNAGOGE E.V.
- <sup>30</sup> THE NOBEL FOUNDATION, Nobelprize.org. (1969): The Nobel Prize in Literature 1929. Thomas Mann. [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1929/mann-autobio.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1929/mann-autobio.html) (May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012).
- <sup>31</sup> Information from the standing exhibition of the GEDENKSTÄTTE FÜR BONNER OPFER DES NATIONALSOZIALISMUS – AN DER SYNAGOGE E.V.
- <sup>32</sup> RAUHUT-BRUNGS (2001: 32, 77).
- <sup>33</sup> PRACHT (1997: 475).
- <sup>34</sup> WOLYNIEC (2003: 16-19); RAUHUT-BRUNGS (2001: 77-79).

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