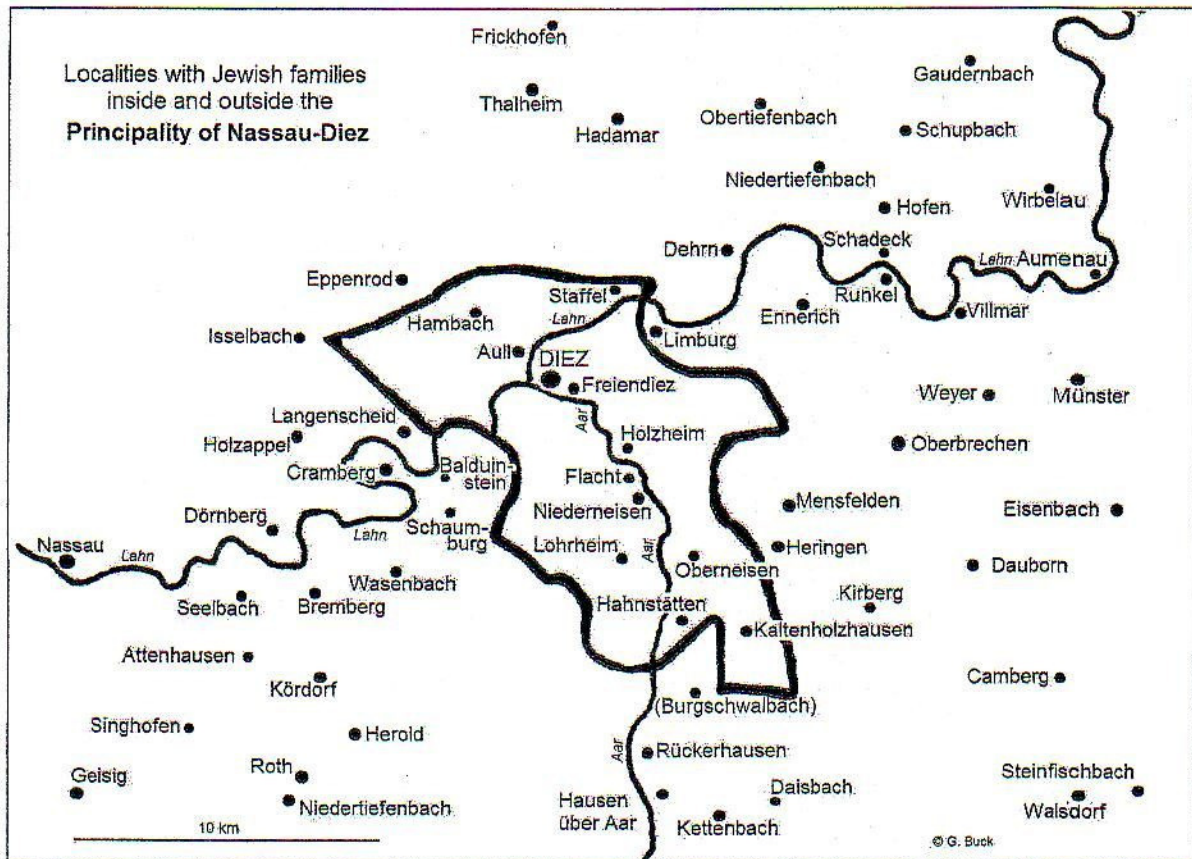


## The Jews of Flacht and Niederneisen

from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century von Abraham Frank

### The villages and their region

Flacht and Niederneisen are situated only 1 km apart in the valley of the little river Aar, which north of them flows into the river Lahn at the city of Diez. Fields characterize the valley and the higher plains in the east, and forests cover the western part. It is a rural countryside, spotted with small villages. They were inhabited by farmers and a few artisans for products of wood, iron and leather. In about an hour, one walked to the city of Diez, the only place of some commercial importance. It was the seat of the administration of the Principality of Nassau-Diez, consisting of 18 villages, and since 1806 of the greater District of Diez.



The one or two storied houses were mostly built along the road running through the valley. When in the 1640s the first Jews arrived, they saw a country that was completely devastated by the 30 Years War (1618 – 1648). By death and flight, Flacht had lost 40% of its population and Niederneisen 50%. In each of the villages, there remained about 17 families or about 80 persons. Although since 1672 various European wars struck this small territory for decades, it recovered with an exceptional speed. In 1704, more families lived in Flacht (33) and Niederneisen (50) than before 1618 (27 / 36).

To be more exact, at least this number of families lived here. They paid the most common impost, the *Dienstgeld*, money levied on serfs (*Leibeigene*) instead of the forced labor, to which they were as a rule subjected. There were 114 different sorts of taxes in Nassau. Only a few paid the same combination, because they had the same legal status, which was defined by tradition, descent, property, profession, family situation, sex and other factors. The Jews were part of this system of general inequality. The modern term "inhabitant", which expresses equality, was rarely used before 1800.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the increase of the population continued so that at its end Flacht contained about 50 houses for about 50 families or 250 persons and Niederneisen about 70 houses for about 70

In 1741, **Moses Aaron** and his wife **Minkle** arrived. These ancestors of both the Arfeld and Frank families are treated separately further on. All the later Jewish families of Flacht are somehow related to this couple.

The early Jewish history of Niederneisen is far more complicated and reflects the uncertainties of that early period. Between 1682 and 1754, we find 8 families in this village adjacent to Flacht. **Süßmann** lived here from 1682 to 1689/90. Then he moved to nearby Balduinstein.

**Hirsch / Hirtz** came to Niederneisen in 1689. He had lived in Hahnstätten from 1676 to 1688 and consequently left the country for a year. In July 1697, he once again packed all his belongings and secretly disappeared one night.

**Schey(er)** and his family were allowed to move in from Schaumburg, a small neighboring territory to the west to which Süßmann had gone. From 1691 to his death in 1702 or 1703, he was *Schutzjude* in Niederneisen. One of the earliest documents pertaining to a "human interest" content instead of fiscal or legal matters, records a fistfight between him and Hirtz in 1694. It is reproduced among the illustrations in this volume. Since there existed no cemetery in the Principality of Diez, he was buried beyond its borders.

In 1706, his widow **Besge** married **Mortje / Martgen / Marx**, born about 1648. He is the first known ancestor of the Frank family and is treated in that chapter.

**Bär's** parents' lived in or near Niederneisen. Without a *Schutzbrief* he paid his *Schutzgeld* from 1703 until his death in 1710 and his widow until her death in 1715/1716, when she was aged 44. She left behind a son and a daughter.

**Moses Aaron**, the next new *Schutzjude* in 1712, was lucky enough to provide continuity contrary to these frequent changes. He became the ancestor of the Arfeld family and will be treated separately. After them, only one more *Schutzjude* besides his son **Hirtz Moses** lived in Niederneisen for a short period. **Gerson Hirtz** came in 1754 and died already in 1756 in Camberg, where his father Hirtz Manche lived with a numerous family in a town heavily populated by Jews.

Between 1682 and 1756, usually two unrelated families had lived in Niederneisen at the same time. Now Jacob Marx was the only Jewish resident as were his descendants till the 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

### **Life as *Schutzjuden***

The preceding biographies have already shown that a Jew's standing did not follow a fixed pattern based upon a strict law. During the 2 ½ centuries, which are described in this book, the Jews' living-conditions often changed for the better, before the unexpected terrible end arrived. Until 1815, they profited from (and seldom suffered under) the complicated political situation in this territory, which formed a political unity with the Netherlands. The Princes of Nassau-Oranien resided in this more important part of their state. During most years until 1766, they were only boys when their fathers died, so that the government was in the hands of guardianships. For the Jews that meant that their way of life was determined more by the personal attitude of certain widows residing in Diez and their officials and by customs rather than by fixed, printed regulations.

Thus, it could happen that in 1713, when the status of all the Jews paying *Schutzgeld* in the seven villages was controlled, seven *Schutzjuden* owned a *Schutzbrief* and eight had none. Two contended to have lost theirs. Some stayed on with their father's or late husband's letter, some on the basis of other permissions. Most letters had been issued as a result of the last control in 1695.

These documents permitted the *Schutzjude* to stay further on in his village. He was forbidden to deceive other subjects, to take higher interests than allowed and "to blaspheme Jesus and the Christians". He had to observe the laws of Nassau-Diez and to inform the officials, when apparently stolen goods were offered to them. Against the payment of the *Schutzgeld* and other traditional imposts, he was allowed to exercise "like all other subjects" all sorts of trade and the production of goods, except those for which a special license was demanded. In other words, he could not become an artisan. Officials and inhabitants were ordered to let him live and trade safely and to protect him against unjust violence. Behavior contrary to these rules would revoke the validity of the *Schutzbrief*.

In the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this standard text was only slightly changed, e.g. by forbidding doing business on Sundays and Christian holidays and the Jew's confirmation by a solemn vow instead of a customary oath. The reference to any laws was as vague as possible. A *Judenordnung*, a collection of all rules for the Jews in this Principality, was never mentioned.<sup>3</sup>

In 1753, a discussion regarding a possible restriction of the number of families, about Jewish trade and taxes began between the different branches of the administration. It was only in 1769 that work

their personal living-conditions. Friendly and unfriendly opinions were uttered, yet the general intention of the Prince and his officials was to care for the welfare of their state as well as for the Jews. Trading with cattle and horses was their main livelihood, selling small goods and meat a means to increase a bit their usually meager income. Poverty and self-confidence made them protest and argue so that nearly no decree ever remained unaltered. In a time, when everything was written by hand, new officials often were at a loss about the present legal status of their Jewish subjects.

In 1801, the *Leibzoll* payable within the Principality of Nassau-Oranien between the boundaries of its formerly independent territories was abolished. Until then, a Jew had to pay a daily tax, once he was outside his home territory in business or private affairs. Negotiations with the neighboring states began. 30 years earlier, a far higher tax for Gentiles leaving a territory for good had been eliminated.

A far greater change was attempted since 1801: the opening of the artisans' corporations to the Jews so that they too could learn a craft. Optimistically a Jew of Diez looked into the new century: "The sad times, when one regarded it to be a Christian's duty to hate my nation, are past thank God."<sup>7</sup>

Although in the new Duchy of Nassau the Jews were allowed to become farmers and artisans, those of Flacht and Niederneisen remained traders. The first fundamental changes were that since 1817 all boys and girls learned together in the same classroom and that at the age of 20 all young men had to serve in the army.

The 1840s brought the decisive turn away from the old *Schutzjuden* system. In 1841, the special taxation of Jews by the state ceased and equality began. In the same year, family names were adopted so that it was not clear, if a Heymann was a Jew or a Protestant (very common name in and around Hahnstätten). The unique name Aarfeld or Arfeld did not sound Jewish at all.

As of 1849, the Jews became equal citizens in the villages and cities. That did not only mean political participation, but gave them the right to the allocation of free wood (heating!). As early as 1843, when the special tax for Jews was finally abolished, all men of Niederneisen decided that H. L. Heymann, "since his family had behaved peacefully against the Christian inhabitants and because he contributed to all burdens of the village," should be an equal partner, when wood was assigned.<sup>8</sup>

### Religious institutions

The Jewish families of this and the neighboring territories lived in relative close proximity so that religious life was easily possible. About 1650, a "synagogue", or better **prayer room**, was allowed in Diez, which was replaced by a new room several years before 1713. In that year, Hahnstätten, too, got its own prayer room. It is not clear to which locality the Jews of Flacht and Niederneisen went for services at that period of time.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of the 1700s, so many persons lived in these villages that they installed their own prayer room in Niederneisen at the house of Samuel Marx (later his son-in-law Herz Löw Heimann). Here it remained, until in 1843 the state's religious reforms terminated the more than 50-year-old independent community.<sup>10</sup>

In its basement of Heimann's house, there was the **ritual bath**. Since it did not meet the state's ideas of a clean and warm modern bath, it was ordered in 1837 to be closed. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the women of Flacht and Niederneisen probably went for that purpose to Diez, where in 1722 the government ordered to build a bath.<sup>11</sup>

The children's **religious instruction** was the parents' private affair. They searched, hired and paid the teacher. We know of only one, who came from Hessen-Kassel and taught in Flacht in 1836. At that time, foreigners had to undergo an examination, before they were permitted to live and teach in Nassau. The parents with children paid him 45 *Gulden* per year and provided free room and meals worth 50 *Gulden*. On demand, he worked as shokhet (ritual slaughterer) and earned an additional 10 *Gulden* per year. The community attested him a very good behavior. His instruction was limited to Jewish subjects, because since 1817 all girls and boys attended the local elementary school for 8 years, until they were 14.<sup>12</sup>

After these structural changes, the synagogue contained 50 seats in a different order. However, this number was still insufficient and their ownership was disputed. When the Jews of Flacht attended the first service after the reconstruction in 1844, many seats were already occupied by the men of Diez. A real struggle between the ones who arrived early and the ones who were late after a one hour walk began and continued through the next years. A great problem was the fact that under the seat there was a box for the prayer book and the religious utensils. One can imagine the sort of trouble by which every service was disturbed.

The leading personality to tackle this and other problems was Abraham Arfeld I. (1815 – 1896) of Flacht. According to the new law of 1843, he had been appointed *Vorstehergehilfe* or assistant to the head of the Diez community. He proposed to abolish the old privileges and to allocate the seats by lot. 25 men, among them 11 of Flacht, were without permanent seats. However, during the following years a generally acknowledged solution could not be found.

At the same time, A. Arfeld tried to restore the old communal union with Niederneisen. This plan was contrary to the state's wish to have great communities with certified teachers and *Vorbeter* (cantors) as well as a well-organized administration. Arfeld's main arguments against Diez were that the way to the religious school and the synagogue was too long and wearying for the young and the old and that the synagogue was too small in size. With a certain degree of pride, he repeated that the Jews of the two villages had enough funds to build their own synagogue and to finance the personnel, including a teacher. For the years 1845 – 1864, I found nine petitions to that effect, all of which were rejected. The government supported by Rabbi Dr. Wormser wanted to control the rural Jews with the help of great, unified communities in order to adjust their religious life in accordance with the reformers' ideology.

However, the Arfeld, Frank and Heimann families did not only write letters, they actively disregarded the new authorities in religious affairs, the state and the rabbi employed by it. Once the German revolution had started in March 1848 and the first steps towards democracy and freedom had been taken, A. Arfeld and his relatives regarded that event as the beginning of free religious practices for the Jews, as he wrote in a letter. H. L. Heimann removed his Tora scroll from the Hahnstätten synagogue and brought it into the house of Nathan Arfeld's widow in Flacht, where a prayer-room was installed. In 1852, when nearly all revolutionary achievements were abolished, our Flacht Jews got official permission to continue their own local service. Without any success, Dr. Wormser derided their prayer room as *Winkelsynagoge* or hedge-synagogue, in order to get it abolished. Flacht and Niederneisen became and remained an affiliated community of Diez. In 1861, they bought a house in Flacht for 1.600 *Gulden*, installed a spacious prayer room and had a flat free for a teacher.<sup>16</sup> In 1890, another house was bought, in which they fitted two rooms – one for men and one for women – where services were conducted on the Sabbath and Holidays.

Contrary to many other cities and villages, religious instruction in Diez was in a bad state, before Dr. Wormser arrived in 1843, and remained a constant problem due to the personal weaknesses of all the men involved. To appoint him rabbi of a quarter of the Duchy as well as simple religious teacher of the new greater community of Diez was an impracticable combination. He did not have enough time for his pupils in Diez and none for those in the villages. All attempts to employ an assistant teacher failed, or clearer, were a catastrophe. This deplorable educational situation continued after Wormser had left in 1852. In 1863, after 20 years, the 15<sup>th</sup> teacher began his work (and in two years, none had taught). Most teachers resigned, because working conditions were negative in every respect (salary, the behavior children, parents and other interfering adults).

This situation in Diez only strengthened the parents in Flacht in their opposition against changes and reforms. In all their letters concerning the synagogue in Diez they demanded instruction in Flacht, either by their own teacher or by the one of Diez. During the Revolution of 1848, three Franks and three Arfelds signed a petition of 16 families demanding their own free choice of a teacher, according to the new law concerning the fundamental rights of all Germans, regardless of their faith.

In 1856, the parents reached their aim that the teacher of Diez came regularly to Flacht to instruct the approximately ten children. The subjects were Bible, religion, Hebrew, singing, history and geography. Good results were only achieved, after the turbulent two years were over. When the pupils were 13 years of age, both boys and girls went to *Konfirmation*, the new Protestant term for the old and different bar-mitzva ceremony. Very quickly, this change was accepted. Fanni Heymann (born

1832) was the first girl to take part in such a ceremony, which was however discontinued during the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 1860s, religious strife and strife subsided. The partial separation of Flacht and Niederneisen was accepted. The new synagogues in Flacht (1861) and Diez (1863) offered enough seats. A new generation, grown up under different conditions, turned adult in a world that was changing in many aspects, mostly for the better between 1871 and the outbreak of World War I, as well as during the Weimar Republic, until the members of the last generation shared the terrible fate of German and European Jews during the Holocaust.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Wiesbaden (= W) 190 R10187,10201, 10202, 14682; 172/2895, 2896. Staats- und Adreßhandbuch des Herzogtums Nassau.

<sup>2</sup> For all biographies: W 171 D 162 b, J 13, Z 3763. W 190 R (Rechnungen and their Beilagen) 10185 – 10205, 1 0206 – 10274, 10343 – 10437, 10899 – 10965. W 172/ 2895, 2896 (Gemeinderechnungen).

<sup>3</sup> Schutzbriefe: W 171 J 13, Z 3763.

<sup>4</sup> W 172/719, 1482.

<sup>5</sup> Annotation 1. – W 171 D 162, J 13; 172/1482.

<sup>6</sup> W 190/14201 (Gemeinderechnung Flacht), 1442 (Gemeinderechnung Niederneisen); 221/42, 980.

<sup>7</sup> W 172/719, 1482.

<sup>8</sup> W 221/42.

<sup>9</sup> Synagogue: W 171 B 125 (1713), D 162b (1711/1716), Z 3763 (1713); 190 R 10392 (1716, 1718); 356 XIV,17 (1702).

<sup>10</sup> W 211/11488, 11490.

<sup>11</sup> W 211/7975 (1837), 171 D 162c (1722).

<sup>12</sup> W 211/980, 1259.

<sup>13</sup> W 190 R 10392 (1718); 221/951, 958.

<sup>14</sup> W 221/958 (1867, 1873).

<sup>15</sup> A. Morlang / K.-P. Hartmann, Boykottiert – Emigriert – Deportiert – Liquidiert. Diez 1999. pp. 4, 59 – 62.

<sup>16</sup> W 211/11486, 11490; 221/45, 951.

<sup>17</sup> W 211/7979, 11486, 11487, 11488, 11490; 221/45, 951, 958, 1183, 1259.



Gedenkfeier in Flacht am  
19. Nov. 2011  
3. von links: Utr. Rübsam aus Nd. Neisen