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The Hats of Borough Park

Some months ago I became interested in the hats worn by the (male) Hasidim of Brooklyn. I had heard it said that each of the Hasidic "courts" -- Lubavitch, Satmar, Ger, Bobov, Belz, and many others -- wear distinctive hats and that, therefore, it is possible to tell to which court an individual adheres by the style of hat he wears. Since such identification may be of interest to non-Hasidic Jews, and others, I thought that I would put together a photographic documentation of Hasidic hat styles, ordered by court group.

Talking to some Hasidim in Brooklyn, it quickly became clear that the question of Hasidic hats was more complex than I had anticipated:

- 1) Not everybody who wears Hasidic garb and a Hasidic hat is closely or exclusively affiliated with one of the courts. It emerged from more than one of my conversations that there are various nuances in the degree to which a person may feel himself associated with one or more of the courts. As a result, the boundaries of hat styles, no more than allegiance to the various courts, don't necessarily exhibit clear-cut boundaries.
- 2) Weekday hat styles differ from those worn on shabbes, other holidays, and special simchas (celebrations) such as weddings. Most of the Hasidic groups favor the [shtreimel](#) (a wide fur hat) for the latter occasions. The Gerer Hasidim wear the spodek (a higher fur hat) instead. The Lubavitch Hasidim wear neither (see below).
- 3) Men associated with the Lubavitch movement do not wear any of the specifically Hasidic hats. Instead they wear black hats like those worn by non-Hasidic Orthodox Jews, a style sometimes termed "Yeshivish." The hat in [Picture Mem](#) appears to be this kind. I have been told that it was the last of the Lubavitcher Rebbes, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, who abolished the wearing of the

Hasidic hat among his followers. The Lubavitch Hasidim will turn down the rim in the front of their hats; it is said that the Rebbe wore his with a particularly noticable downturn. Here is the story that I heard: when asked why he had abandoned the Hasidic hat, the Rebbe said that wearing Hasidic hats would impress many people in Mea Shearim (the Orthodox neighborhood of Jerusalem) and Borough Park, but these good people are already pious Jews. What needs to be done, the Rebbe is reported to have said, is to reach a Jew like the kibbutznik, someone whose piety may leave a little something to be desired. Wear the hat of the world, he continued, eliminate the barriers between you and the secular masses, and you will bring back the wayward Jew to the fold of the Toire (Torah).

With these limitations in mind, it emerged that Hasidic (weekday) hats can be classified by two cross-cutting criteria: a) "smooth" vs. "beaver," and b) "high" vs. "flat".

The "smooth" hat has a finish that is similar to the smooth finish of secular felt hats. (The Yeshivish hats of the Lubavitch are also smooth). Picture [Beys](#) shows this finish. The "beaver" finish is furry and, I understand, comes from rabbit fur. Pictures [Pey](#) and [Yud](#) show this finish.

The "flat" hats are shorter than the "high" hats. Both [Pey](#) and [Yud](#) (see above) are flat.

As I understand the story of who wears which style, it goes essentially as follows. Hasidim who trace their origins to Hungary, mostly the Satmar, are more-or-less the only ones who wear flat hats. All the rest, it would seem, wear the higher style. From the point of view of finish, almost all the Hasidim wear the beaver finish. Aside from the Lubavitch, the major exception is the Gerer group, who wear only smooth. The Satmar can wear a smooth hat on weekdays and a beaver hat, or the shtreimel, on shabbes.

The story I have heard about the smooth hats of the Gerer Hasidim is that about 150 years ago a ruler of Poland forbade Hasidim to wear special clothes. Whereupon the Gerer rebbe said that the only

thing special about Hasidic clothing is the "beaver" hat so he told his Hasidim to wear only smooth ever after. And perhaps the Gerer peculiarity of wearing spodeks instead of streimels on shabbes has a similar origin.

While taking the pictures that follow a number of Hasidim objected to having their faces appear in them. I made the promise to have no face appear, and this is the reason that the hats appear without faces.

There is a certain mystery around the trade in Hasidic hats. Traditionally, it seems that many if not most Hasidim on both sides of the Atlantic depended on the Bohemian firm of Hückel in the old Austro-Hungarian empire to supply their hats. When that empire expired at the end of World War II, two successor firms, one in Poland and the other in Czechoslovakia, produced hats for Hasidim.

The Polish firm is called [Polkap](#). In a recent message to me, it insisted that it produces Hasidic hats, but would not go into details how it exports them, if at all, to America.

The Czech firm is now called [Tonak](#). It appears to use the Hückel trade name to this day.

Whether and how these European hats are imported to the Hasidic community in America is a closely-held secret. One merchant would only tell me that he obtains his wares "indirectly" from Czechoslovakia.

Some years ago a well-known New York Hasidic hat merchant died on a business trip in Czechoslovakia. This event seems to have deepened the mystery of the Hasidic hat trade.

I cannot with any certainty say that any of these pictures are associated with a given court. If any of my readers feel that one or more of these pictures give enough clues to make such association, I would very much like to hear from them. Please contact me by clicking here:

[Send an e-mail to Werner Cohn](mailto:wernercohn@www.wernercohn.com)

For the ethnographic background, I have consulted, among others, the excellent books by Mintz and Gutwirth:

Jerome R. Mintz, Hasidic People, Harvard U. Press, 1992

Jacques Gutwirth, Vie Juive Traditionnelle, Minuit, 1970 (an ethnography of the Belz Hasidim of Antwerp)

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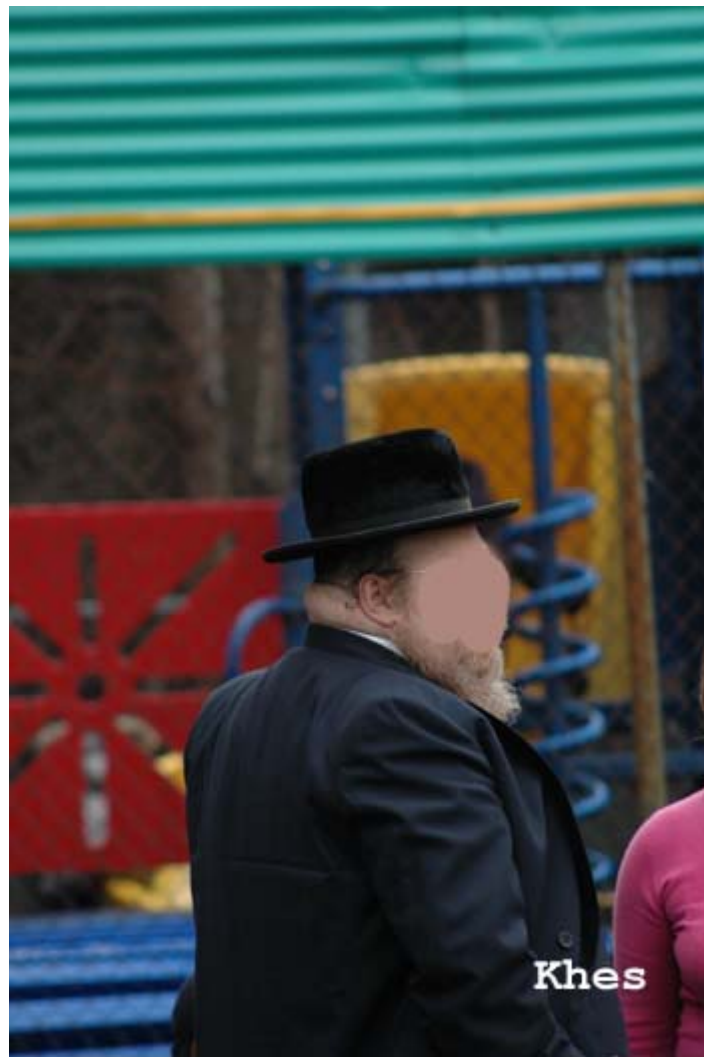










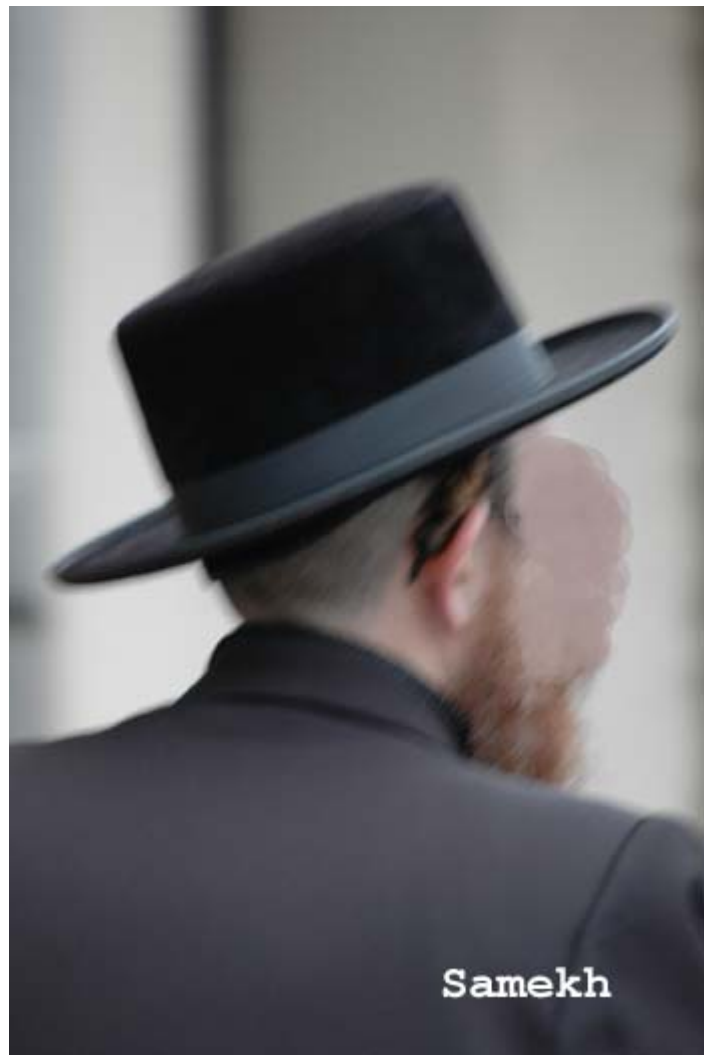


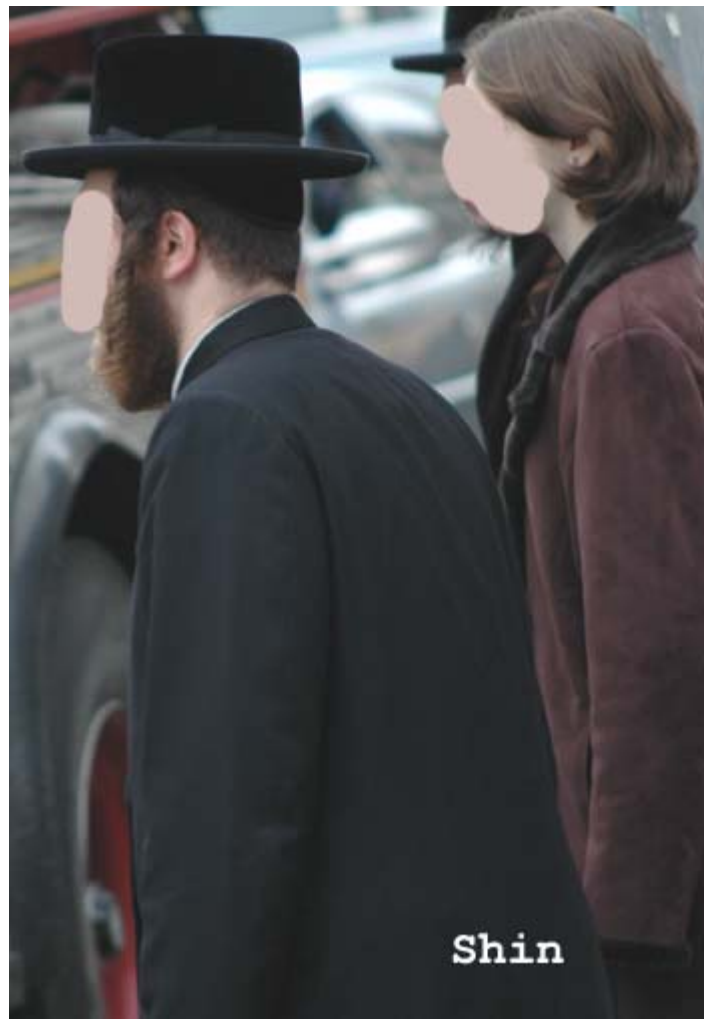






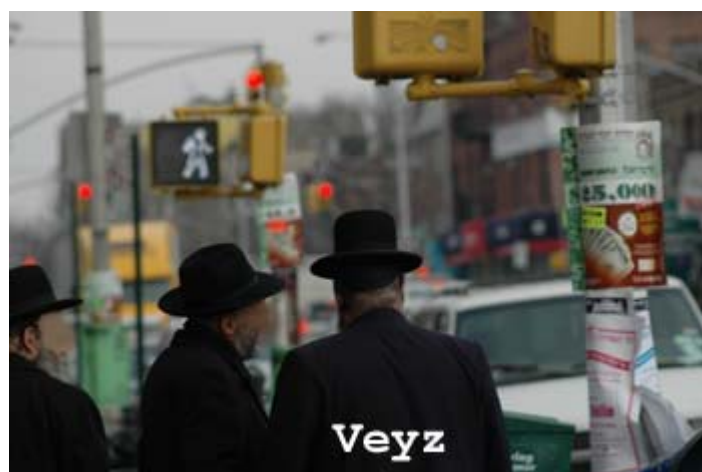


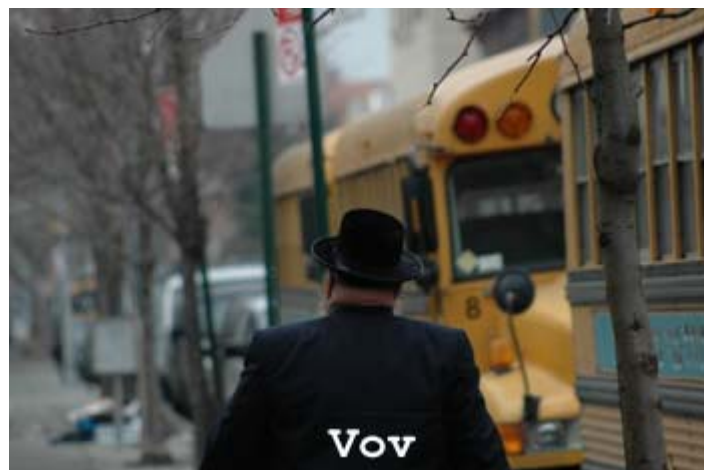














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