

Librarian's Lobby

By Daniel D. Stuhlman

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The Yarmulke Part 1

One recent Friday night a friend asked me about the origin of “yarmulke” because he had just read someone’s explanation, but that explanation seemed to be more sermonic than scientific. My curiosity was immediately raised. In a February 2001 *Librarian’s Lobby* I wrote about head coverings¹. These articles on *yarmulke* are a continuation of that investigation. As in any investigation figuring out the exact question is first step. Over the following week, I exchanged ideas and articles with the friend. Every time I have investigated a Yiddish word that was not from a Hebrew or Germanic source I have uncovered an interesting story. This article is more about the search than the final answer since many of the articles state there is no definitive answer.

When dealing with religious symbols I quickly discovered that emotion and feeling sometimes completely ignores the evidence. Antonio Hernandez did a study of the issue of skull caps and the following paragraph sums up the reasons for this emotion.

“From its simple design sprung all other caps and most hat designs. It is well known the world over; almost every nation has its own skullcap tradition. It is seen proudly gracing the heads of scholars, rabbis, priests, doctors, martial arts master, and laborers. In the form of a Jewish *yarmulke* it is the only recognized piece of head gear that simultaneously announces religion, creed, politics, race, and nation. In this particular form, it has also played a role in 20th century American Constitutional matters. It is ancient, universal, respected, loved and sometimes outlawed.” Hernandez, Antonio. *My Kingdom for a Crown*²

To find an answer about the origins of anything, one must find the original source or at least an ancient source. Several questions arise and I will explore them in this series of articles.

1. The etymology and origin of the word “*yarmulke*.”
2. Head gear in general vs. skull cap in particular.
3. Covering one’s head vs. going bare headed.

The Story of the Search

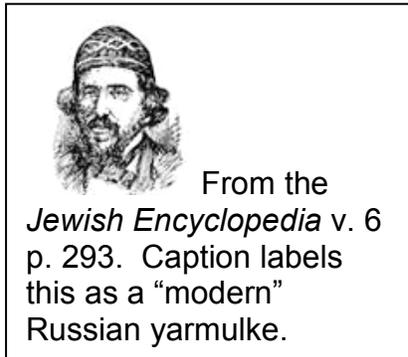
I started the search with <http://books.google.com> and <http://scholar.google.com> these two search engines facilitate the search of books and scholarly articles. They return all places where the word appears including a *yarmulke* mechanism used in carbon nanotube technology and *yarmulkes* used by Cabbage Patch dolls. This is great for sources of how *yarmulke* is used in writing it is not the way to find articles that are useful of research. Books.google has millions of digitized books and was very useful for finding words within books. Academic data bases such as JSTOR, Ebsco and ProQuest offer searches of indexed articles. Using Searchlight, which is a federated search interface, I searched eight databases in the Rutgers University Library, where I am a faculty member. The 32nd hit was for the article by W. Gunther Plaut in

¹ Stuhlman, Daniel D. “A Question of Proper Headgear” <http://home.earthlink.net/~ddstuhlman/crc39.htm>.

² Hernandez, Antonio. *My kingdom for a crown* : an around the world history of the skullcap and its modern socio-political significance. [2002?] Retrieved on Aug. 17, 2008 from: <http://www.hatsuk.com/skullcaps.pdf>

volume 26 of *Hebrew Union College Annual*.³ Other hits also made reference to Plaut's article. Much of what I wrote below is based on Plaut's article. Here is also a limitation on electronic data bases. The full text was not available on line. To get the article I had to make a request for the library to photocopy the article. This is a service that Rutgers offers their faculty. The next day I got a copy of the text via e-mail. Using that article I was able to branch to other sources. A Google search led to the Antonio Henandez article, which was published on a web site and not in an academic journal.

Etymology of Yarmulke



To figure out the origin of the word, I investigated early uses of the word. In brief most of the words in Yiddish are from German or Hebrew roots. Some words are derived from Romance languages (Latin, French, and Spanish) and Slavic languages (Polish, Czech, Russian and Ukrainian). Sometimes one Yiddish word seems to have two etymological sources. Frequently the meanings of the Yiddish words are different from the sources. For more on the history of Yiddish see Max Weinreich's, "History of the Yiddish Language: the problems and their implications," in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol.

103:5 (Aug. 15, 1959). In the *YIVO Yiddish-English dictionary*⁴, the entry is spelled, **יארמלקע** with the definition, "cap esp. (Jewish) skull cap." That is with the letter "ר resh." In English we spell the word as "yarmulke, yalmuke, yalmuka, yalmukah, and yarmulkah." Even when spelled with an "r" the sound in dropped. The Word spell checker flags the word as a misspelling if there is no "r." The German and Polish spelling is, "jarmulka." Since the "j" has the sound of the English "y."⁵ The earliest sources in English also spells the word with a 'j.'

In "traditional" circles children are that taught one wears a head covering to indicate fear or respect of God. They learn the meaning of the word, "yarmulke" comes from two Hebrew words, **ירא מלך** "Yere melakh."⁶ (Meaning awe or respect for the King.) Malkha **מלכא** is the Aramaic for ha-melakh **המלך** meaning *the king*. This folk etymology, based on the concept, occurs very late in the history of the term. In the liturgy of the High Holy Days *melakh* in the singular is frequently associated with God. Alfred J. Kolatch⁷ says that the folk etymology is from **ירא מאלקים** "yaray may'Elokim" (meaning "in awe or fear of God.") While the English sounds may be similar, the khof כ of melekh and kuf ק of Elokim are not related to the Yiddish spelling. **מלך** melekh is the Yiddish word for "king" and is spelled the same in Yiddish and Hebrew. If this were the correct etymology one would expect **יראמולכא** would be the accepted Yiddish spelling and the change in pronunciation could be an organic development. The ending "aiyin **ע**" is

³ Plaut, W Gunther. "The Origin of the Word "Yarmulke"" in *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 26 1955, p 567-570.

⁴ Weinreich, Uriel. *Modern English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary*. New York : YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1968.

⁵ For more information of the /y/ sound and the use of "j" in English spelling see my article, "Why Start Jacob and Joseph with a "J"" in *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* vol.33:4 (132), October-December 2005.

⁶ W. Gunther Plaut uses *Yere melakhim*, but it does not really make sense because it is plural. Since Plaut dismisses this explanation, it is not clear if he made a mistake or this spelling is deliberate. No where is "God" associated the plural of "*melekh*" (king). I found people who quote Plaut, but no independent source.

⁷ Kolatch, Alfred J. *The Jewish Book of Why*. Middle Village, New York : Jonathan David Publisher, 1981. p. 121.

very common in Yiddish as it is a German ending, too.⁸ In “*may’Elokim*” the *kuf* is there to replace the full spelling of the name of God. It is not part of the source expression.

W. Gunther Plaut explains that the word has sources from 1608 and the 15th century with no special connections to a Jewish hat, cap, or head covering. Plaut refers to private conversation with Shlomo Noble who concludes the word is “of Slavic origin” occurring in Polish, Russian and other languages. Max Vasmer traces *yermuluk* to a Turkish source.⁹ According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary *yarmulke* is from the Turkish *yağmurluk* meaning “rain-hat”.

In the *Jewish Encyclopedia* article, “Head-Dress” (v. 6 p. 293)¹⁰ has pictures of head gear from the 13th century to the contemporary (1906). The 38th picture is from Russia and is labeled, “Yarmulka.” This is the picture on I used in this article. It is not like a modern skull cap type head covering.

In *The Polish Jew: His Social and Economic Value* by Beatrice C. Baskerville (New York : Macmillan Co., 1906) on page 19, Bakerville describes the way Jews were dressed in Poland, “The men were dressed in the long *halat*, or skirted coat which nearly reached to the ankles and a peaked cap, or *Jarmulka*.” *A Complete Dictionary English and Polish*,¹¹ “by Alex. Chodzko, *Jarmulka*” is defined as, “leather or velvet cap worn by the Jews in Poland. *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der slavischen Sprachen*¹², by Franz Miklosich, *Jarmulka* is from the Polish *jarmulka*, *jamulka* and the German translation is: *Mützchen*^{13 14}. These sources want to accept the fact that the only possible source is Slavic via Polish. However, none of these sources are compelling enough to be the only answer.

Amice (or *almuce*) is the name for a head covering with a cape that a priest wore while walking to church alter. The earliest German forms were *almutz* and *aremutz*. The Latin *amulcia* had a diminutive form *armulcella*. In Latin the “c” is always pronounced as a hard “c” /k/ sound. The transposition of the “l” and “c” is a common linguistic transformation.

According to Plaut, it appears plausible to assume that *almucia* was an often used term in medieval Germany (hence its adoption into everyday language, taking later the form of *Mütze*). This same process then gave rise to calling a small cap worn by Jews with this term. When the Jews took their medieval German to Eastern lands they probably also took the word *armucella*. It is entirely possible that the ultimate adoption of the word in its present popular form was hastened by a “re-inoculation” from Slavic sources.

Plaut is saying that the term *yarmulke* is from medieval German and may have been the source for its also use in Eastern lands and then from there re-introduced back to German lands.

We have a word that came into German from the Latin and a similar word was taken by the Jews to Turkey where it was adapted into Slavic languages. *Mützchen* is a diminutive form that took on the meaning of a “small cap.” *Yarmulka* entered Yiddish with both Slavic and Germanic

⁸ Three examples are *meshuge* , מְשׁוּגֶה (crazy), *narte* נארטע (ski), and *blate* בלאטע (mud, dirt).

⁹ Vasmer, Max, 1886-1962. *Russisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Heidelberg, Germany: C. Winter, 1953-

¹⁰ Reprinted in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1972)

¹¹ New York : Macmillan Co., 1906.

¹² W. Braumüller, 1886.

¹³ The “chen” is a diminutive ending added to German nouns meaning “small” or “similar.”

¹⁴ The German word, *Mütze* is thought to derive from the Latin *amulcia* or related forms *aumucia* or *armutia* according to the Grimm Brothers. *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, von Jacob Grimm, Wilhelm Grimm, Moriz Heyne, Rudolf Hildebrand, Matthias Lexer, Friedrich Ludwig Karl Weigand. Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1885. p. 2839.

sources that can both be traced to Latin. According to Plaut, none of this derivation story connects the word to a Jewish hat. We do have a word that has its origins in medieval clerical head covering that went both to German and Polish. The Yiddish word, *yarmulke*, referring to a Jewish head covering is a term that can only be traced to the later part of the 19th century. So far the skull cap version of the heading covering compared to the high sided section of a cylinder (or pill box) type head covering I can only trace to about the 1940's. If anyone has older evidence I would appreciate seeing pictures.

In a private conversation one member of my *shul* speculated based on his experience that the smaller size in recent times allowed kids to wear *kippot* all the time without feeling too self-conscious about them - and not just wearing them in *shul* as our parents did. Even regular Jews in Europe did not wear a *yarmulke* outside. They wore caps or hats if they wanted their heads covered. The picture below supports that opinion.



This is a family picture taken in April 1946. My father under the red arrow is wearing a skull cap type head covering while his older brother under the green arrow is wearing a high sided covering. Half of the men have high sided head coverings and the other skull caps. Everyone older than my father has a high sided head covering.

There is another word for Jewish head covering. In a private conversation with someone who grew up in Frankfurt, he told me that he used the German, *Kuppchen*, to mean a skull cap. The German word, *Kappe* means cap. In Yiddish *Koppel*¹⁵ is also used for a Jewish head covering,¹⁶ *Kappe* comes from the Latin *cappa*. I suspect that *cappa* and the Hebrew *kippah* כִּפָּה are cognates, but I can find no proof or source.¹⁷

The next **Librarian's Lobby (#101)** will deal with general questions of Jewish head gear.

Daniel D. Stuhlman is president of **Stuhlman Management Consultants**, Chicago, IL, a firm helping organizations turn data and information into knowledge. Visit the web site at Stuhlman.biz to learn more about knowledge management and what our firm can do for you. Previous issues of **Librarian's Lobby** can be found at: <http://home.earthlink.net/~DDStuhlman/liblob.htm>. E-mail him : ddstuhlman@earthlink.net. This is column number 100.

¹⁵ *Koppel* is also used as both a family and a given name. The most famous person with this name is Ted Koppel, a journalist who works for ABC News. His parents emigrated from Germany to escape the Nazis.

¹⁶ See *Children of the Ghetto: A Study of a Peculiar People* By Israel Zangwill. New York: Macmillan Co., 1899. On page 58 "It came from old Hyams, who had been sitting quietly with brow corrugated under his black velvet koppel." *Koppel* also appears in page 213. Zangwell does not use "*yarmulke*" or "*kippah*" in this book.

¹⁷ Thanks for Jordan Pollack for ideas and guidance that gave rise to this article.