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The Ottoman Origins of the Hasidic Kaftan

Summary: Scholar Cornelia Aust analyzes the historical connection between the Jewish kaftan and the Polish aristocracy during the 17th and 18th centuries. This article expands on her work to illuminate the significant influence of the Ottoman Empire on Polish Sarmatian and, subsequently, Jewish fashion. The research will trace the slow provenance of the Hasidic kaftan, showing first the Polish Jewry's adoption of aristocratic dress, then the Polish aristocracy's imitation of Ottoman fashion a century earlier. This paper will subsequently examine Ottoman dress from the 15th and 16th centuries to show its original forms and stability over this period. Contemporary images and 19th century lithographs of Polish and Jewish kaftans will be compared with painted portraits from Istanbul in 1618. As Aust shrewdly describes eastern European Jewish fashion as “out of time;” this article shows Jewish dress as additionally “out of place.”

Keywords: Hasidic, Jewish dress, Jewish history, kaftan, Ottoman Empire, Polish župan

OSMAŃSKIE POCZĄTKI CHASYDZKIEGO KAFTANA

Streszczenie: Badaczka Cornelia Aust, w swojej pracy, analizuje historyczne związki między żydowskim kaftanem a polską arystokracją w XVII i XVIII wieku. Niniejszy artykuł rozszerza zakres tych badań, analizując znaczący wpływ Imperium Osmańskiego na modę polską, zwłaszcza wśród szlachty sarmackiej, co miało bezpośrednie przełożenie na ubiór żydowski. Autorka śledzi proces powstawania chasydzkiego kaftana, prezentując jego dwutorowość: początkowe przejmowanie przez polskich Żydów elementów arystokratycznego stroju oraz wcześniejsze, sięgające wieku XVII, inspirowanie się przez polską szlachtę modą osmańską. Autorka artykułu przeprowadza analizę osmańskiego ubioru z XV i XVI wieku, aby wykazać jego trwałość i oryginalność. Współczesne przedstawienia i XIX-wieczne litografie polskich i żydowskich kaftanów zostaną skonfrontowane z portretami malarskimi pochodzącymi ze Stambułu z 1618 roku. Aust trafnie określa wschodnioeuropejską modę żydowską jako „poza czasem”; niniejsze badania wskazują dodatkowo na jej „poza miejscową” specyfikę.

Słowa kluczowe: Chasydzi, strój żydowski, historia Żydów, kaftan, Imperium Osmańskie, polski župan

ОТТОМАНСКИЕ КОРНИ ХАСИДСКОГО КАФТАНА

Резюме: Исследователь Корнелия Ауст анализирует историческую связь между еврейским кафтаном и польской аристократией в XVII и XVIII веках. Данная статья расширяет ее исследование, освещая значительное влияние Османской империи на польский сарматизм и, следовательно, на еврейскую моду. В ходе исследования будет прослежено постепенное формирование хасидского кафтана, начиная с заимствования польскими евреями элементов одежды аристократов, а затем и подражания польской аристократии османской моде. Далее в работе будет исследована османская одежда XV–XVI веков с целью выявить её оригинальные формы и постоянство на протяжении данного периода. Современные фотографии и литографии XIX века, изображающие польские и еврейские кафтаны, будут сопоставлены с портретами, написанными в Стамбуле в 1618 году. Ауст пронизательно характеризует восточноевропейскую еврейскую моду как «выпавшую из времени»; в данной статье еврейская одежда предстаёт ещё и как «выпавшая из пространства».

Ключевые слова: Хасиды, еврейский костюм, история евреев, кафтан, Османская империя, польский жупан

The long black kaftan has stood as one of the distinguishing signifiers of contemporary Ashkenazi *frum* Judaism (observant Judaism) and, historically, eastern European Jewry since at least the mid-18th century. Today, the garment is primarily worn by men in the Hasidic community; historically, it had a much broader reach.¹ Even before the Haskallah,² the sartorial differences between eastern and western Jewry were clear, at least to insiders. One anonymous writer in 1675 lamented in a satirical poem, among many other things, on the fashion sense of Germanic Jews as compared to the more elegant *shupits* and *shoibn* of the Polish Jews, both of which mean long, fur-lined coats. Clearly, the Polish community held a distinct aesthetic by 1675; after the Haskallah, this difference solidified into the exotic, an identity category further enabled by Western-dressing Jews eager to assimilate.³

A look into travelogues of eastward travelers in the 19th and early 20th centuries underscores the prominent visibility of the garment. Written by both Jews and non-Jews, many travelers made note of the kaftan. Those writing from outside the community often mentioned the black coats before almost anything else in the descriptions they recorded of eastern Jews, revealing their unfamiliarity with the stark, visual homogeneity of the style. Elizabeth Loenz, in her work on German Jewish social worker, Bertha Pappenheim, records general attitudes of discomfort and distaste among German Jews towards the immigrant “caftan-Jews.”⁴ The word “caftan” has a strong negative connotation in German. Karl Franzos, an Austrian Sephardi Jew in favor of ‘Germanization’ (assimilation), wrote a collection of short stories in 1877 about poor orthodox Jews in Galicia (or “the Polodian Ghetto”). In it, he writes about the “Jewish coat resembling a talar made of black cloth,”⁵ a talar being a German ceremonial robe worn by academics, judges, etc. Most harshly, in 1926, Alfred Doblin writes “...from behind, in their heavy, skirt-like caftans, they look like women. When they step across puddles, they lift their caftans like women.”⁶ These

¹ C. Aust, “From Noble Dress to Jewish Attire: Jewish Appearances in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Holy Roman Empire,” in *Dress and Cultural Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Denise Klein and Thomas Weller (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), p. 100.

² The Jewish European Enlightenment, which began at the end of the 18th century in Western Europe.

³ Aust, “From Noble Dress to Jewish Attire.” pp. 97-98.

⁴ E. Loenz, *Let Me Continue to Speak the Truth: Bertha Pappenheim as Author and Activist*, Monographs of the Hebrew Union College 34, Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2007, p. 145.

⁵ “The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Jews Of Barnow, by Karl Emil Franzos,” accessed April 30, 2024, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34617/34617-h/34617-h.htm>.

⁶ A. Döblin, Joachim Neugroschel, and Heinz Graber, *Journey to Poland*, 1st Amer. ed, European Sources, New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1991, p. 54.

writers simultaneously helped to create an image of a traditional Jewish attire and to mark it as Other.

Just as notable are the accounts by travelogue writers who had a personal connection to the community. Unlike outsiders, whose descriptions mention the kaftan immediately, these references to kaftans appear much later in the writers' recounting and tend towards neutral or carry warmth and affection. In 1878, Mendele Mocher Sforim playfully mocks the outward appearance of the narrator and his audience: "If your Sabbath gaberдинe (Yiddish orig. *kapoteh*), let's say, is shabby, frayed, torn and not too neat, it doesn't much matter, for wasn't the garment once made of satin?"⁷ Mary Antin, in her 1912 autobiography, wrote her own story in English to a non-Jewish audience and only lightly references "men in silk frock coats" as part of a much larger, detailed description of a wedding.⁸ Yehoash, an American Jewish poet born in the Pale of Settlement, wrote in Yiddish from Palestine of the recent Jewish migrants from eastern Europe walking around him "with fur caps and gaberдинes" in 1923.⁹ Joseph Roth describes the "heavy black silk" of Yom Kippur in comparison to everyday wear in 1927.¹⁰ Jiri Langer, who moved to Belz to join the Hasidic movement, makes two mentions in his writings on the experience in 1937. He first describes "[s]mall towns in eastern Galicia" as having "had the same character for centuries," including "torn caftans" as part of that character; he later contrasts weekday wear with the "festive caftans of black silk [that] reach down to the ground."¹¹ Jacob Glatstein, writing in 1934 of his return home from the US to eastern Europe, fondly remembers a teacher of his: "frock coat...worn and shiny, of ... greenish black material...that coat and his rabbinical hat used to inspire me."¹² Interestingly, Y. L. Peretz, in his Yiddish response to the state-sponsored survey of eastern Jews he was hired to take in 1890, makes no mention whatsoever of the kaftan.¹³ Those who came from within the eastern Jewish community noticed their personhood first; those who came from without,

⁷ M. M. Seform, *The Travels and Adventures of Benjamin the Third*, trans. Moshe Spiegel, 1. Schocken, New York 1975, p. 18.

⁸ M. Antin and W. Sollors, *The Promised Land*, New York: Penguin Books, 2012, p. 57.

⁹ Yehoash, *The Feet of the Messenger*, trans. I. Goldberg, New York: Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1923, p. 175.

¹⁰ J. Roth, *The Wandering Jews*, New York: Norton, 2001, p. 41.

¹¹ J. Langer, *Nine Gates to the Chasidic Mysteries*, trans. S. Jolly, Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1993, pp. 4, 6.

¹² J. Glatstein, *The Glatstein Chronicles*, ed. Ruth R. Wisse, trans. Maier Deshell and Norbert Guterman, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010, p. 303.

¹³ I. Leib Peretz, *The I.L. Peretz Reader*, ed. Ruth R. Wisse, New York: Schocken Books : Distributed by Pantheon Books, 1990.

Jews included, were so shocked by the visually black overcoat that they felt compelled to describe it. From whichever perspective they wrote, most writers could not help but mark the outfit, so fundamental was it to the identity expression of the eastern Jewish community.

THE JEWISH KAFTAN DEFINED

The Kaftan is defined as “a long, buttoned coat-like garment.”¹⁴ The Hasidic kaftan worn today, in the early 21st century, has many iterations. The *rekel* or *kapoteh* is a long coat typically made of wool, though sometimes of polyester or silk, intended primarily for mundane use. It bears strong resemblance to the suit jacket (Fig. 1: Reb S. Leifer, middle), and an additional comparison has been drawn to the Victorian Prince Albert coat. A *bekishe* is a floor length kaftan typically black and made of silk or polyester primarily reserved for Shabbos, holidays, and festivities. Some have double-breasted buttons down the front (Fig. 1, middle); some close with hidden fasteners and host a thick double line of black velvet down the center and on the sleeves, like the Dorohoi Rebbe and Reb M. Leifer (Fig. 2 and Fig. 1 far right), with variations occurring according to the desires of specific Hasidic courts.¹⁵ Plain black *bekishes* are sometimes reserved for Friday night and Saturday morning, whereas patterned ones, known as *tish bekishes* (table *bekishe*), may be donned for mealtimes.¹⁶ Despite the utility of the buttons or hidden fasteners, the *rekel* and *bekishe* may be worn with an additional *gartel* (sash) at the waist.¹⁷

When paired with imagery, the travelogue descriptions from the 19th - 20th centuries prove quite accurate. Figures 3 and 4 show the Chief Rabbis of Warsaw during the mid-1800s, namely Rabbi Chaim Davidsohn, Chief Rabbi between 1840 and 1854, and Rabbi Dov Bear Meisels, who represented the community from 1856 until 1861. The “heavy black silk,” “shiny,” and “skirt-like” phrases fit the full-length image of Meisel’s kaftan quite well. His garment has double-breasted buttons like the left-most man and Rabbi S. Leifer in Figure 1, as well as large lapels. Furthermore, men’s clothing typically buttons left over right, but Hasidim traditionally button

¹⁴ Aust, “From Noble Dress to Jewish Attire.” p. 100.

¹⁵ Silverman and Silverman, *A Cultural History of Jewish Dress*, pp. 117-118.

¹⁶ E. Muchawsky-Schnapper, “A World Apart Next Door”, Exhibition, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, June 19, 2012, <https://www.imj.org.il/en/exhibitions/world-apart-next-door>.

¹⁷ Silverman and Silverman, *A Cultural History of Jewish Dress*, p. 119.

right over left¹⁸ – “like women” – which is affirmed with both Rabbi S. Leifer’s and Rabbi Meisel’s *bekishes*. Though, it is difficult to see details of Davidsohn’s garb, two thick, black stripes are visible, peeking out between his beard and his book, exactly like Rabbi M. Leifer and the Dorohoi Rebbe.



Figure 1: “Hasidic Grand Rebbes of the Nadvorna dynasty Reb Shmuel Shmelke Leifer of Chust (USA) and Reb Mordechai Yissachar Ber Leifer of Pittsburgh (Ashdod).” Public Domain.



Figure 2: The Dorohoi Rebbe. Bobover1. 2007.

THE ORIGINATION OF THE KAFTAN AS TRADITIONAL JEWISH CLOTHING

By the second half of the seventeenth century, Polish Jewry was already distinct sartorially, including from other Jewish groups (namely, those living in “Ashkenaz,” or areas of Germanic linguistic descent).¹⁹ Both royal decrees and Ashkenazi law required that Jews remain dressed apart from the Christians around them. Like their German counterparts, however, Polish Jews drew inspiration from the styles they encountered day to day and especially aspired to imitate the aristocracy.²⁰

The Jewish kaftan can be traced to roughly 130 years between two sumptuary laws recorded in the minutes of two main semi-governmental organizations which acted as legislative bodies for religious life and were allowed significant governing

¹⁸ Ibid, 119.

¹⁹ Aust, “From Noble Dress to Jewish Attire.” 96.

²⁰ Ibid, 99.

power.²¹ One of these organizations, titled the Lithuanian Council, issued decrees which included those regulating dress, records of which were lost and later reconstructed. In 1637, ever concerned with luxury, the Lithuanian Council explicitly forbid Jewish men from wearing a Polish *żupan* made of either of two fabrics: atlas or damask.²² The *żupan* was a long-sleeved garment extending at least to the calves that closed at the front of the body via a straight seam, often with a vertical line of buttons and closed with a wide sash of a different color or pattern. At this point in time, the *żupan* had already been established as a standard dress among the *szlachta* (Polish aristocracy) for at least half a century, as well as those of lower rank nobility, who wore *żupans* made of the more affordable white linen and wool.²³ There is evidence that “even some better off peasants” wore *żupans* in the 16th and 17th centuries, likely for important occasions in place of daily wear,²⁴ showing a trickle-down effect that contemporary Jews would likely have seen frequently in its many iterations. Notably, the 1637 law makes an exception for the use of atlas and damask by the highest taxpayers (specified at 4,000 ducats per year),²⁵ meaning the wealthiest Jews may have already been wearing the *żupan* and setting the future trend.



Figure 3: Rabbi Chaim Davidsohn, Chief Rabbi of Warsaw 1840-1854. 1854. S. Sterling. Public Domain.



Figure 4: Rabbi Dov Bear Meisels, Chief Rabbi of Warsaw 1856-1861. 1861. Karol Beyer. Public Domain.

²¹ S. Zeitlin, “The Council of Four Lands,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 39, no. 2 (1948): 211–212.

²² Aust, “From Noble Dress to Jewish Attire.” 98-99.

²³ I. Turnau and Izabela Szymańska, *European Occupational Dress from the Fourteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, *The Library of Polish Ethnography* 49 (Warsaw: Institute of the archaeology and ethnology, Polish Academy of sciences, 1994). 40.

²⁴ Aust, “From Noble Dress to Jewish Attire.” 100.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

In 1761, the Lithuanian Council again referenced the kaftan. This time, they explicitly permitted its use, both during the week and on Shabbat, as well as in Jewish and secular places such as the market, which often required Jews to alter their dress so as not to be seen flashing an appearance of wealth and attracting unwanted anger. During the previous century, the wearing of unspecified “non-Jewish” clothing was explicitly forbidden; in a marked departure, Polish Jews were now permitted to purchase such clothes second-hand, even ones with gold or silver embroidery or made of silk.²⁶ In short, within 130 years or so, the kaftan was accepted as the sartorial norm amongst Polish Jews.²⁷



Figure 5: Juif Polonois (Polish Jew), 1765, Etching, in: Jean Baptiste Le Prince: *Habillments de diverses nations*, © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

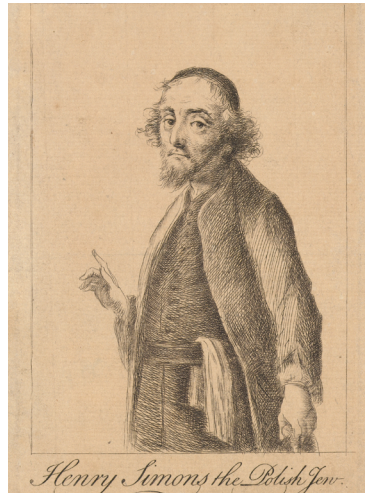


Figure 6: Henry Simons the Polish Jew. Thomas Worlidge. 1753. Public Domain.

Visual depictions offer further insight into this standard of dress. In Jean Baptiste’s *Polish Jew* etching from 1765 (Fig. 5), the man depicted wears a noticeably different outfit than those of his descendants in the 19th and twentieth centuries. The kaftan does not bear any lapels and reaches the neck. The garment closes diagonally and reveals a line of tiny buttons, along with a cloth *gartel* wrapped

²⁶ Ibid, 99-100.

²⁷ Aust, et. al. spend considerable time documenting other records of the association between Jews and kaftans and the distinctiveness of the kaftan to the Jewish community by the mid-1700s. For further detail on this subject, consult her article.

multiple times around the waist, which bears a striped pattern and a color that appears different than the rest of the garment. A large fur hat sits atop his head, which bears strong resemblance to both a turban and the modern day Hasidic *shtreimel*. He also wears an over-the-shoulder cloak, which did not survive to modern day. *Henry Simons the Polish Jew*, the cover of an antisemitic pamphlet against him in 1753, is described by The Met as “characteristic of a conservative Jew from eastern Europe.”²⁸ He wears a kaftan with buttons down the center which stop at a sash around his waist, framed by an outer jacket, neither of which have lapels.

A look into 19th century detailed drawings of historical costume allows for a close cross-cultural analysis across time.²⁹ *Polish Jew* and characters 1 and 5 in *Pologne* (Fig. 7) offer visual connection between the 18th and 19th centuries. Character 1, a “Jew on his way to synagogue,” appears strikingly similar to that of *Polish Jew*. He, too, wears a kaftan, cinched at the waist with a thick sash wrapped multiple times, as well as a shoulder cloak. His hat differs from that of *Polish Jew*, in that it has a triangular shape and less fur. Additionally, he leaves the kaftan open at the center to reveal a decorated shirt underneath, unlike Le Prince’s etching character, who leaves the garment closed. Character 5 depicts a bright blue kaftan and a thick green sash at the waist, as well as an early *shtreimel*, a similar width to its current iteration but flat on top. The kaftan boasts thick black stripes running around the neck and down to the waist, which bear a close resemblance to those of Reb Leifer (Fig. 1) and the Dorohoi Rebbe (Fig. 2), both from modern day. Importantly, both Characters 1 and 5 also mirror Polish Sarmatian fashions in the 17th century.

²⁸ T. Worlidge, *Henry Simons the Polish Jew*, 1753, Etching; first state of two, Plate: 6 9/16 × 4 5/16 in. (16.7 × 10.9 cm) Sheet: 7 1/16 × 4 3/4 in. (18 × 12 cm), 1753, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/898497>.

²⁹ Other scholars have used contemporary drawings and paintings to make the connection between both Polish Jewry and the Sarmatians as well as the Polish Sarmatians and the Ottomans. (For the former, see Jagodzinska and Hamiger, “Overcoming the Signs of the ‘Other’: Visual Aspects of the Acculturation of Jews in the Kingdom of Poland in the Nineteenth Century;” and Aust, “From Noble Dress to Jewish Attire;” for the latter, see Charlotte Jirousek and Sara Catterall, *Ottoman Dress & Design in the West: A Visual History of Cultural Exchange* (Bloomington, Indiana, USA: Indiana University Press, 2019); and Beata Biedrońska-Słota and Maria Molenda, “The Emergence of a Polish National Dress and Its Perception,” in *Dress and Cultural Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Denise Klein and Thomas Weller (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 113–136.) Given the limited number of such images, especially those depicting Polish Jews, this paper uses 19th century depictions for their variety and specificity drawn as part of Western Europe’s fascination with historical costume. Researchers such as Auguste Racinet spent a lifetime time researching costumes of other cultures and from previous centuries and had artists draw from live models wearing relevant costumes, many of which were made in the relevant century and later became part of museum archives. Due to the corresponding racism of Racinet and others, only their images relating to European culture are analyzed here. For more on Racinet and the context of 19th century study of historical costumes, see A. Racinet, *The Costume History: From Ancient Times to the 19th Century: All Plates in Colour*, ed. Françoise Tétart-Vittu, trans. Chris Miller, Bibliotheca Universalis (Cologne [Germany]: Taschen, 2015).



Figure 7: Pologne. Félix Durin. 1876-1888. Lithograph depicting the style of dress of different ethnic groups and professions in Poland in the 19th century: (1) Jew on his way to synagogue; (2) peasant from Lublin; (3) driver; (4) & (5) Jewish woman and child; (6) poultry merchant; (7) & (8) woodcutters. The New York Public Library. New York Public Library Digital Collections.

THE AESTHETICS OF THE POLISH SARMATIAN MOVEMENT

Polish Sarmatianism was an ideological movement among the Polish aristocracy from the mid-15th century to the end of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the close of the 18th century. At its core lay the idea that the *szlachta*, unlike other residents of the Commonwealth, were descended from ancient Iranian Sarmatians, who occupied contemporary Polish lands between the 3rd century BCE and the 4th century CE. Central to this era of Polish-Lithuanian history is the pseudo-democratic political system in which all members of the *szlachta* held the same voting rights and membership of Parliament, regardless of personal wealth, and under which the latter elected their kings.³⁰

The Polish Sarmatians were known for their fashion. Dressed in bright colors and patterned fabrics, they wore headdresses atypical of other European styles, often with fur-lined overcoats atop tunics and pants – an almost one-to-one comparison with clothing of the Ottoman elite whose clothing will be highlighted in the subsequent section. Their identification with ancient Iranians made the adoption of Ottoman dress a matter of cultural identity.³¹ A Sarmatian dress consisted specifically of a *żupan* (a kaftan),

³⁰ J. Filonik, "The Polish Nobility's 'Golden Freedom': On the Ancient Roots of a Political Idea," *The European Legacy* 20, no. 7, 2015, p. 731.

³¹ B. Biedrońska-Słota and Maria Molenda, "The Emergence of a Polish National Dress and Its Perception," in *Dress and Cultural Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Denise Klein and Thomas Weller, De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019, pp. 116-117.

the *kontusz* (a wide, colorful sash, often of silk, worn visibly), a *delia* (a cloak worn over the *żupan*), and a *szabla* (a curved saber worn around the waist).³²

Edad moderna -- polacos del siglo XVI (Trans.: *Modern Era – Poles of the 16th Century*, Fig. 8) and *Poland 18th & 19th centuries* (Fig. 9) illustrate some of the variety early modern Poles used within this fashion structure. In *Edad moderna*, characters 6 and 14 wear visible buttons to the waist framed by a *szabla*; character 9 hosts a fur-lined *delia* with broad lapels and a central line of buttons down the center. In *Poland 18th & 19th centuries*, characters 4 and 6 from the left both bear *szablas* as well as the very visible *kontusz* sash; both also wear *delias* with slit sleeves, which character 6 has tied up behind his neck.

In addition to showing a typical Sarmatian dress, some characters show striking comparisons with later images of traditional Jewish dress highlighted in the previous sections. Character 7 in *Edad moderna* wears a white thigh-length overshirt enclosed with a *kontusz* underneath a *delia*, without lapels, colored solid blue with a fur lining visible only as two thick, parallel lines running down the central opening of the garment. The fur lining here bears a strong similarity to the black velvet linings on the *bekishes* in Figures 1 – 3, and the shape of the *delia* flows out at the waist in a similar fashion to the Rabbi Meisel's kaftan. In *Poland 18th & 19th Centuries*, Character 4's outer, umber-hued *delia* has long lapels extending from the mid-shoulder almost to the waist, framing a white *żupan* underneath with a central line of buttons, as does Character 9 in *Edad moderna* (who sports even broader lapels). Taken in context with Character 14 from the same image, who wears a *żupan* buttoned to the waist met with a belt hosting his *szabla*, a broad connection might be made with the aesthetics of a central line of buttons, a sash, and an overcoat that form the outfit of *Henry Simons the Polish Jew ca. 1753* (Fig. 6). Finally, Character 2 wears the *kontusz* and a small, white, visible collar at the neck; in the same color as the *kontusz*, a thick line of fabric (details unclear) runs from neck to waist, and draping over his shoulders is a cloak (*delia*). The whole of the outfit, including both the central linear feature and the drape of the *delia*, resembles that of *Polish Jew* and Character 1, "Jew on his way to synagogue," in *Pologne*. As an additional note, because the influence of the Western suit cannot be dismissed, although the historical origins of the lapel are outside the scope of this paper, these images show the lapel was already present in the 16th century. Given its frequent use among

³² Kępa, "The Kontusz Sash;" Jirousek and Catterall, *Ottoman Dress & Design in the West*.

the Sarmatians, the Polish *szlachta* must be considered a possible influence on the lapel's incorporation into the Jewish kaftan as compared to the Western suit. Further research into this aspect of the kaftan may offer deeper insights into the interconnectedness of early modern global fashions.



Figure 8: "Edad moderna -- polacos del siglo XVI." Friedrich Hottenroth. 1894. Lithograph. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. New York Public Library Digital Collections.



Figure 9: "Poland 18th & 19th Centuries". Thade. 1876-1888. Lithograph. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. New York Public Library Digital Collections.

OTTOMAN IMPERIAL DRESS

Unlike the varied clothing of Europe, which was highly influenced by various aspects of Ottoman style during this period, Ottoman clothing remained relatively stable during the 15th and 16th centuries – the height of the empire. It was so stable that it remains difficult to date clothing from this period. This stability also demonstrates the lack of influence European fashions had on that of the Ottomans,³³ underscoring the power differential between the singular, imperial nation state and the peripheral continent of Europe.

Historic Turkish fashion consists of a base form of the *şalvar*, or relaxed pants with a dropped crotch, a *gömlek* (shirt), a sash, and a variety of layered garments on top, from *yelek* (vests) to *kaftan*, *entari*, *uç etek*, and *dolman* (coats with a front closure), to *cepken* and *salta* (jackets), etc., as well as a head covering. As the goal of this paper is only to show cross-cultural similarity, the Ottoman upper body or full-length clothing analyzed here will primarily be referred to as a kaftan or overcoat. These forms were similar to those of other cultures originating from Central Asia, like the Mongols, Iranians, and Pashtun, to name only a few. The unconstrained, layered clothing has practical roots in two major influences on the ancient nomadic lifestyle: horseback riding and fluctuating temperatures. Multiple layers allow the wearer to add or remove clothing to keep warm or stay cool; a loose fit allowed for a wide range of motion required by a life on the move.³⁴

³³ Jirousek, 86-88.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

From these base forms developed an elegant, ornate style of dress which impacted much of early modern European fashion, including its later forms that continue through modern day, like the suit.³⁵ The Ottomans had an “insatiable” desire for fabric and generally seemed to delight in textiles, from upholstery to drapery to clothing.³⁶ An anonymously authored portrait album from Istanbul dated 1618 contains carefully drawn depictions of 59 individuals, each with different clothing. From this album, three images have been selected for their specific similarities to clothing discussed in this paper.

Sultan Seleim (Figure 10) wears what is likely a *dolman* (described as “a style of *entari* without buttons, worn in the Ottoman Palace”).³⁷ At his waist is a large sash of a different pattern than the *dolman*; draped around his shoulders, sleeves hanging freely, is a fur-lined overcoat. Peeking out of the jacket is an object shaped like the hilt of a saber. Excepting the saber, *Habit of a Polish Jew* resembles it in entirety. Character 2’s *zupan* (excluding the central design on the chest), as well as the *delia*, sash, and possible *szabla* in *Poland 18th & 19th Centuries* each resemble Suleiman’s *dolman*, sash, the draping of the outer jacket, and the possible saber.

The *Portrait of a Kapici Basi* demonstrates the general intersection of form used by the Ottomans and later adopted by the Polish: a full-length kaftan with frontal closure; a sash at the waist; and a fur-lined overcoat with trailing sleeves. The overcoat here consists of a singular base color without buttons. Its primary feature is the highlighted border, made visible by the fur lining (in this case, striped), whose strong similarity can be seen in the later iterations of Character 7 in *Edad moderna* (nearly identical), in Character 5 in *Pologne*, and the *tish bekishes* of Rabbis Davidsohn, Ber Leifer, and the Dorohoi Rebbe.

The portrait *A Jew in Constantinople* also models a strong precedence for those who lived after him (an image selected only for the representative dress depicted – any religious cultural overlap is outside the scope of this analysis). His kaftan hosts a central line of buttons down to the waist, where it meets a sash of a different color (white) than the base fabric (orange), over which he wears an open vested kaftan. This garment configuration compares well with Characters 2 and 4 in *Poland 18th & 19th Centuries*, as well as the “Jew on his way to synagogue” in *Pologne* for their central line

³⁵ *Ibid*, 133-134.

³⁶ Baker, *Islamic Textiles*, 97.

³⁷ Koç, Fatma & Koca, Emine. (2012). The Clothing Culture of the Turks, and the Entari (Part 2: The Entari). *Folk Life*. 50. 141, 147. Koç and Koca, “The Clothing Culture of the Turks, and the Entari (Part 2: The Entari)”.

from the neck to the waist, sashes, and overcoats, and, most exactly, *Henry Simons the Polish Jew* for his line of buttons, sash, and open overcoat.

Many other comparisons can be drawn between these three portraits and many characters present in the images depicting traditional Polish Sarmatian dress, especially along general aesthetic lines. The purpose of the comparisons made here has been to show the rather direct through-line coming from 16th and 17th century Ottoman dress to 16th - 18th century Polish Sarmatian fashions to the subsequent emergence of traditional eastern European Jewish fashion in the 18th century and beyond.



Figure 10: Sultan Selim



Figure 11: Portrait of a Kapici Basi



Figure 12: A Jew in Constantinople

Series: A brief relation of the Turckes, their kings, Emperors, or Grandsigneurs, their conquests, religion, customs, habits, etc. 1618. Paintings mounted on album folio. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

A WRINKLE IN THE TIMELINE

Scholars have covered the multi-year phenomenon of the 1850 sumptuary law under the Congress Kingdom of Poland.³⁸ The event is also remembered within the Hasidic community and re-

³⁸ For in-depth coverage of this law, the nature of its enforcement, and Jewish resistance to it, see: Jagodzińska, Agnieszka. *Overcoming the Signs of the 'Other': Visual Aspects of the Acculturation of Jews in the Kingdom of Poland in the Nineteenth Century* and Glenn Dynner, "The Garment of Torah: Clothing Decrees and the Warsaw Career of the First Gerer Rebbe," in *Warsaw. The Jewish Metropolis*, ed. Glenn Dynner and François Guesnet (BRILL, 2015), pp. 91–127.

told as part of the movement's history.³⁹ Such a law, if followed and enforced, obstructs the connection of Jewish traditional clothing to the Ottoman Empire beyond 1850, and thus bears addressing.

In coordination with the Russian czar, the Congress Kingdom of Poland announced in late 1845 that all Jews wearing traditional clothing had until 1850 had to cease dressing in such a manner. Instead Jews, had to choose to dress either in what was called "German" fashion or "Russian," the latter referring to typical contemporary fashions of Russian merchants.⁴⁰ At this point in time, the Haskallah had opened up many opportunities for Jewish people, including access to full citizenship of Poland, and the community was irreversibly split between those wishing to blend in and those wishing to remain as they were before (or, what had begun to be called "traditional"). This bifurcation was reinforced heavily by the sartorial choices of each group, which acted as a visible marker of membership. For some, after centuries of a requisite differentiated outward appearance, full citizenship created a desire to blend in. Progressive Jews, calling themselves "Poles of Mosaic faith," voluntarily opted to wear local styles that corresponded strongly to the German fashion, and had, in fact, been doing so for some time.⁴¹ Traditional Jews continued to wear their usual kaftan, which was neither German nor Russian. The law imposed a tiered fine system according to profession between 1845 and 1850, after which time compliance would become required by everyone. Styles were not allowed to be mixed; meaning, if one chose to dress in the German fashion, one could not also wear a Russian headband. Kippot, *peos* (sidelocks), and satin, among other things, were not allowed at all.⁴² After much resistance by the traditional Jewish community and repeated fining and public searches by the police, the Chief Rabbi of Warsaw finally chose the Russian option on behalf of the majority on the eve of 1850. Given its similarity to religious Jews' traditional clothing, it still appeared distinctive in comparison to local non-Jews and secular Jews. By this time, such distinction was an important aspect of Jewish culture.⁴³

Russian merchants were not commonly seen in Warsaw during the 1840s, and, to enforce the law, police were issued several images to demonstrate the style accurately. Notably, these images

³⁹ Rabbi A. Frischman, "Inyan, 01-10-2024 - Jewish and Israel News," *Hamodia*, January 10, 2024, pp. 12–19.

⁴⁰ Jagodzinska and Hamiger, "Overcoming the Signs of the 'Other': Visual Aspects of the Acculturation of Jews in the Kingdom of Poland in the Nineteenth Century," p. 74.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 72, 77.

⁴² *Ibid*, 74, 77, 78.

⁴³ Dynner, "The Garment of Torah," pp. 118–119.

were not issued to the Jewish community. Figures 13 and 14 show a single figure on the left wearing a black overcoat with a lapel and double-breasted buttons. The coat extends only to the mid-calf, not full length, and lacks the flair and large lapels of Rabbi Meisels. The other two figures clearly show that Russians were also influenced by the Ottomans, with a buttonless diagonal closure of the outer coat, different colored sash at the waist, and, for the second figure, loose, drop-crotched pants. The figure on the right wears a full-length kaftan that bears slight resemblance to that of Rabbi Meisels, though it does not have a fitted waist or the stiff, double-breasted torso on his garment. Though it does indicate a connection to the Ottomans, if the religious community were to have adopted this iteration of Russian dress, it would have meant a reversion in the timeline back towards Ottoman clothing. At this time, however, the black kaftans seemed to be on a different path towards either double-breasted buttoned closure or a buttonless fur- or velvet-lined seam, both of which close along a straight line down the front. If they did indeed adopt the style of the figure on the far left, which is possible, it would have also meant giving up their *shtreimels* (fur hats) and adjusting the shape of the coat.

Enforcement of the czarist decree proved quite difficult. While the middle- and upper-class urban Jews largely did obey, the poor majority simply did not have the means for the enormous expense of changing their wardrobe. The most they may have managed were very small alterations such as shortening their coats slightly, though data on this is scant. An official report from 1860 complains that “inhabitants of the Mosaic faith” largely had not altered their clothing, and while under the eyes of police simply wore something passable. Enforcement was even more difficult in the more remote *shtetls* (villages) and small towns, where oversight was harder and resistance was stronger, especially among Hasids, who often refused adjustment outright.⁴⁴

The two images of the Chief Rabbis of Warsaw during the time the law went into effect serve as evidence against the law’s interruption of the sartorial link between modern day Hasids and the Ottomans. Rabbi Chaim Davidsohn, Chief Rabbi until 1854, has, in his 1854 portrait, both a *tish bekishe* with a buttonless front closure framed by fur or velvet and a *shtreimel*. The image of Rabbi Dov Bear Meisels, Chief Rabbi from 1856-1861, reveals the strongest evidence against the influence from the sumptuary law, with his silk kaftan, form-fitted at the chest and skirt-like flare at the

⁴⁴ Jagodzinska and Hamiger, “Overcoming the Signs of the ‘Other’: Visual Aspects of the Acculturation of Jews in the Kingdom of Poland in the Nineteenth Century,” pp. 79-80.

bottom, lapels reaching the shoulders, as well as a *shtreimel*. The picture is dated 1861. His presence as the very public Chief Rabbi of Warsaw, well after the implementation of the law, indicates that adherence to the clothing change was likely low. It is possible that the rendering of Rabbi Davidsohn was done in his Shabbos clothing, for which exceptions were made in 1853,⁴⁵ and the picture of Rabbi Meisels was of his preferred clothing within the safety of his own home as compared to what he may have worn instead on the street. Even so, such dress indicates strong ties to the Ottoman-influenced clothing solidified as traditional less than a century earlier.



Figures 13 and 14: Examples of Russian Merchant Dress presented to Warsaw police, 1847. (Images have been slightly adjusted to better view small details.) The Central Archives of Historical Records in Poland (AGAD). Public domain. AGAD, KRSW, 6644

Furthermore, even if the community did indeed adopt the changes required by the 1850 decree, Russians were also influenced by Ottoman styles. Records show that the royal court presented expensive cloth gifts to many courtiers and foreign ambassadors, in the royal Ottoman fashion. Russian clergy also made extensive use of Ottoman textiles, from robes to upholstery.⁴⁶ Though the merchant clothing in the image may have led to an alternate chronological evolution of Hasidic dress, the connection to Ottomans would remain, if not through the Polish than the Russians.

CONCLUSION

The simplistic dichotomy of German-Russian, or rather, West-East/Civilized-Uncivilized, was part of a broader contemporary shift in European thinking in the 18th and 19th centuries which ac-

⁴⁵ Dynner, "The Garment of Torah," pp. 119.

⁴⁶ Atasoy, Denny, et al. *Ipek, the Crescent and the Rose: Imperial Ottoman Silks and Velvets*, pp. 180.

complicated German's shift in clothing ("German" broadly defined). This change in milieu simultaneously associated the Occident with the present and the Orient with the past and helped Europe to define its new, increasingly imperial identity within an already globalized world. It also created a complex dynamic in which eastern European Jews, who continued to wear kaftans *en masse* well into the 19th century, came to be defined as Oriental as well as 'of the past.' Scholar Kathrin Wittler highlights two separate descriptions of an Ottoman envoy to Berlin in 1763-1764 to demonstrate the breadth of such thinking. The first comes from Prussian chamberlain Ernst von Lehndorff: "The Turkish music is appalling. One would think their whole demeanour and their appearance were Jewish." Entirely separately, King Frederick the Great penned a letter to Prince Henry, summarized by Wittler: "The Ottomans, whom he believed to be egoistic and greedy, reminded him of Jews and Slavonian soldiers who had fought against Prussia in the Seven Years' War."⁴⁷ That two people in very different circumstances should record similar impressions indicates a larger cultural phenomenon in which eastern European Jews and the Ottomans suddenly appeared one and the same.

The insistent presence of eastern Jewry gave western Europeans something to define themselves against, and therefore paved the way for even assimilating Jews, like those recorded by Elizabeth Loenz, to eventually write pejorative descriptions of "caftan-Jews." The word kaftan itself can be etymologically traced to the East and its use further cemented the contemporary connection between the Ottomans and eastern European Jews.⁴⁸ Thus at the time of the plethora of travelogue descriptions of eastern Jews and their kaftans, describing them as such, either with horror or fondness, connected to a deeper social current allowing for the transfer of global imperial power. The sight of the sea of black robes, often mired in 'uncivilized' poverty, provided not only an aesthetic shock but a stark reminder of Europe's own, poorer past. The urge to describe it, especially as outside oneself, proved not only compelling, but useful.

Ironically, many European fashions in the 18th century were inspired by Ottoman royal dress, including the three-piece suit, which derived from the Ottoman layering of a shirt, vest, outer coat, and *şalvar* pants, which became breeches. English King Charles II first wore the now widespread garment in its new, monochromatic form

⁴⁷ K. Wittler, "Orientalist Body Politics. Intermedia Encounters between German and Polish Jews around 1800," *Central Europe* 17, no. 1, 2019, pp. 35-36.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

in 1666.⁴⁹ Therefore, the demarcated gap between contemporary Europe and the Ottomans upon closer analysis can be understood as largely semantic, with the black kaftan serving as both symbol and scapegoat. The garment may be “out of time,” and, perhaps further, “out of place,” however, such descriptions are as much creations of the 19th century as they are conceptually true. This paradox highlights the complexity of the broader Jewish position in early modern Europe, and further reveals a strong connection between the kaftan and the suit. The kaftan is not derived from the modern suit, as it might appear with Rabbi S. Leifer’s contemporary outfit in Figure 1; rather, both can be connected back to the Ottoman Empire at the height of its global influence. By examining these attitudes towards dress, we gain insight into the intricate mechanisms by which European identity was forged, often at the expense of marginalized groups, and how fashion became a powerful tool in the articulation of cultural and political ideologies.

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⁴⁹ Jirousek and Catterall, *Ottoman Dress & Design in the West*, pp. 133-135.

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