

# Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor, and Life in the Kingdom of Poland

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**Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor, and Life in the Kingdom of Poland**, by Glenn Dynner, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, 249 pp., US\$74.00 (cloth), ISBN-13 978-0190204143, US\$24.95 (paperback), ISBN-10 0190204141

Yankel's (Jankiel's) Tavern (one of them) is, of course, the one paradoxical real center of "all things Polish" in Adam Mickiewicz's fictional "national" epic *Pan Tadeusz* of 1834. It is the place where members of the feuding Horeszko and Soplica petty noble clans come to eat and drink together and, occasionally, patch some things up. Its proprietor, a central character in the plot, "though a [thoroughly traditional Lithuanian] Jew ... had a fairly good Polish pronunciation, and was particularly fond of national songs." We do not know what other things he may have been smuggling back to Soplicowo (guns?) from his semi-mysterious trips to the West on the eve of the Napoleonic campaign in Russia, but one was what would become (and still is) the Polish national anthem ("Poland has not yet perished ..."): the report was "that he was the first to bring from abroad and make popular in that time and place the song which is to-day famous all over the world, and which was first played all over the world, and by the trumpets of the Polish legions." Through Mickiewicz's Jankiel, one of the stereotypical images of Polish culture and literature of the nineteenth century became the Jewish tavern-keeper, and this one "also had the reputation of being a patriotic Pole."

Not all of the representations were so benign, of course, and by the time we reach Stanisław Wyspiański's *The Wedding* (1901) the troubled triangle of drunken and indebted Polish peasant, the Jewish tavern lessee, and his usually noble (here clerical) employer can be presented in a few lines of the poet's quite imitable semi-doggerel: "PRIEST: 'No wonder they're so bellicose; / whose vodka is it that they drink? / Jew, peasant, vodka – ancient link!' (Act 1, Scene 28). Here the priest neatly sketches the economic devil's circle: vodka is the commodity, and the economic players are the peasant purchaser/drinker, the "sober" Jewish lessee and purveyor, and the noble/clerical tavern owner – who is above it all (so long as the money comes in).<sup>1</sup>

Given these broadly internalized images, it may come as a surprise to some that Glenn Dynner's excellent, lively, and meticulously researched new book – based on unused or underused archival resources, both in Poland and at the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO) in New York – is actually a work of *revisionism*. Given state-promulgated bans on the practice of Jewish tavern-keeping in the course of the nineteenth century, "East European Jewish historians of the postwar period had unanimously pronounced the Jewish liquor trade dead" by the end of the century (ix). In his "Introduction" (1–13), Dynner argues that the traditional question of why Jews failed to become socially integrated into Russian or Polish societies – a classical *question mal posée* – hides important truths. Coming at the material from a different angle, "we would find social interaction between Jews and non-Jews with heavily prescribed roles. In normal circumstances, nineteenth-century peasants encountered Jews as petty merchants, tavern-keepers, and creditors; nobles encountered Jews as their factors, lessees, and moneylenders; and Christian townspeople encountered Jews mainly as competitors but also as renters of their apartments and storefronts. Few sought either their social company or their physical destruction; most merely accepted Jews as a fact of life" (5–6). We find the conclusion already in the "Introduction": "Nobles ensured that Jewish men and women remained central to the liquor trade as lessees of liquor monopolies, excise taxes, and distilleries throughout most of the nineteenth century, in villages, towns, and cities, both legally and illegally ... The impression is that Jewish tavernkeepers did not really decline in number at all. They just became less visible to the state" (10).

While Dynner is able to do some quantifying, the real attraction lies in his generous and judicious use of anecdotal evidence in making his main points. The approach has the added advantage of making the book pure fun to read; and, in my opinion, perhaps even for this period,

given the nature of our sources, an anecdote sometimes tells as much or more than a set of numbers.

The six chapters deal with: myths and counter myths (Chapter 1, 14–46); the attempts to remove Jews from the liquor trade in rural Congress Poland (Chapter 2, 47–81); urban Jewish liquor trade in the Kongresówka (Chapter 3, 42–102); Jewish tavern-keepers during the November (1830) and January (1863) Uprisings (Chapter 4, 103–30); Jewish tavern-keeping after the emancipation of the peasants (Chapter 5, 130–52); mostly failed attempts to turn the taverns over to the (presumably now sober and numerate) Christian peasants and to turn the emancipated Jews into “farmers, soldiers, and students” (Chapter 6, 153–74). A “Conclusion” is to be found on pages 175–8. Excellent notes and an index add to the usefulness of the book.

Among the myths Dynner delights in submitting to examination are those of Jewish sobriety, general gentile guzzling, and “a sober Jewish conspiracy behind the region’s rampant drunkenness” (16). Although some of the most colorful material concerning drunken Jews comes from attempts “to stigmatize the Hasidic movement by means of a derogatory motif formerly reserved for Gentiles” (38–9), Dynner finds a wealth of evidence for Jewish drinking, Jewish alcoholism, use of drink in Jewish ritual, and Jewish–Christian “fraternization” (for lack of a better word) behind a glass. Early modernists are about as shocked as Claude Rains to discover that Jews and Christians had been cooperating and collaborating for some time in evading both Jewish and Christian law. Dynner writes of the “well-entrenched practice of using Christian fronts to evade economically debilitating Sabbath and festival restrictions. Jewish tavern-keepers had already been employing Christians to evade their own laws for centuries.” (And, as far as I can tell, the relationship was mutual: Christians had been using Jewish shops as convenience stores when their own were closed since the early modern period.)

Not surprisingly, Jewish tavern-keepers turned soldiers, smugglers, and spies could be found on both sides of the Russian–Polish struggles of the uprisings: sometimes the same person on both sides, and sometimes offering reasonably convincing evidence for belief (on non-belief) in the one or the other cause. All this against a broader background of peasant Christian and Jewish indifference to the causes, since, until the late nineteenth century, neither side had much to offer either their Christian serfs or “their Jews.”

Evidence of Christian–Jewish connivance at lower levels against state rule adds to our picture of the history (to paraphrase Jacob Goldberg) of a Polish–Lithuanian Jewry that cannot be understood without the Poles, and of a Poland–Lithuania that cannot be understood without “its” Jews. What I found a fascinating farce, tragi-comedy – I’m not sure what to call it, and it may simply be a matter of the fact that I work primarily in older materials – was the top-down attempt to “reform” Jewish tavern-keepers (and Christian peasants at the same time) by having them switch roles to a certain extent, and putting the peasant in charge of the economy of the tavern, and sending the Jew to the “farm,” the army, the Polish school. Dynner puts it nicely: “We may well imagine a sequel to Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz* in which Yankel’s sons join an agricultural colony, serve in the army, or enroll in a state-sponsored school, only to return eventually to their father’s occupation” (174). Even toward the end of the century, the change was only then coming.

One would dearly love to know how much boundaries like that of the Congress Kingdom made a difference in the economic and social behavioral patterns Dynner presents so colorfully. In other words, would Polish–Jewish relations in Galicia, Lithuania, Prussia have presented strikingly different pictures from those found in the Kongresówka? Whatever the answer to that question might be, this book is a pleasure to read. I learned a lot. Read it.

## Note

1. For the quotes, see Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz*, trans. George Rapall Noyes (London: J.M. Dent, 1943), 96–7; Stanislaw Wyspiański, *The Wedding*, 52 (Act 1, Scene 28). On the metamorphoses of the image in the history of nineteenth-century Polish literature, see Magdalena Opalski, *The Jewish Tavern-Keeper and His Tavern in Nineteenth-Century Polish Literature* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 1986), especially Chapters 3 and 4.

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