

REVIEW

Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor, and Life in the Kingdom of Poland, by Glenn Dynner, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 272 pp.

When the eponymous hero of Adam Mickiewicz's 1834 epic poem, *Pan Tadeusz*, enters his local tavern, he encounters a gathering of peasants, gentry and clergy drinking and chatting while Yankel, a wise Jewish tavernkeeper, amiably watches.¹ It is precisely this image of togetherness—of commercial coexistence between Jews and non-Jews—for which historian Glenn Dynner argues in his immensely readable new book, *Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor, and Life in the Kingdom of Poland*. Dynner's concise narrative portrays the Jewish-run tavern as a unique site of Polish-Jewish economic integration. Using this rural setting in the nineteenth-century Kingdom of Poland, Dynner captures the nuanced complexity of Jewish and non-Jewish relations, revealing the binaries of trust and mistrust, camaraderie and hostility, so deeply embedded in the social milieu. Dynner argues provocatively that, despite the tsarist regime's efforts to control its Jewish population with an onslaught of prohibitions and social engineering initiatives, a system of mutual dependency shared by Jews, nobles and peasants played a decisive role in preserving the Jewish liquor trade in the nineteenth century. In doing so, the author bravely tackles some of the basic assumptions that have long plagued the historiography of Polish-Jewish relations. Dynner ultimately challenges the consensus among postwar historians that the Jewish liquor trade had died out by the late-nineteenth century.

The success of the Jewish liquor trade has received its fair share of scholarly analysis. In *The Lords' Jews*, Israeli historian Moshe Rosman describes the alliance between Polish lords and their Jewish subjects in the eighteenth century as a “marriage of convenience” that “took on a life of its own,” transcending mere economic utility.² Rosman argues that the lord-Jew relationship was not only a potent factor in the social, economic and political dynamics of the Poland-Lithuanian commonwealth, but that it also served as one of the

¹ Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz* (1834, repr. London: Polska Fundacja Kulturalna, 1990), Book 4, 161-67, in Glenn Dynner, *Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor, and Life in the Kingdom of Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 14.

² Moshe Rosman, *The Lords' Jews: Magnate-Jewish Relations in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 210.

main determinants of the overall welfare of Polish Jews.³ Dynner goes a step further, arguing that this alliance persisted well into the nineteenth century. Despite its overt success, the partnership was met with numerous reservations from tsarist officials, landowners, clergy, and even rabbis. Those who opposed the prospering relationship wished to reduce the representation of Jews in the liquor trade in the hopes of transferring manpower to the agricultural and military sectors, both of which were considered “‘positive’ pursuits.”⁴ To stall the liquor trade, liquor concessions increased and mandated licenses were made more expensive. These policies, however, enjoyed only limited success as Jews found ways to subvert the new regulations. As Dynner writes, “Rural Jews, well practiced in circumventing Jewish law by ‘selling’ and ‘leasing’ their enterprises to Christians on Sabbaths and festivals, now simply hired Christian fronts to elude the concessions with the landowners’ full knowledge and complicity.”⁵ So instead of significantly declining in number, as official data and policy pronouncements suggest, rural Jewish tavernkeepers simply became less visible to the state.

According to Dynner, the evolution of the Jewish liquor trade into an illicit (and robust) enterprise is evidenced by contemporary descriptions in romantic Polish literature and moralizing petitions (*kvitlekh*), all of which point to clandestine tavernkeeping. Dynner challenges the positivist bias—that is, a staunch faith in official data and legislation—of postwar historians, who claim that the anti-Jewish liquor legislation came as a result of “the collapse of the noble-Jewish symbiosis.”⁶ To be sure, a small group of reform-minded nobles had been advocating for the elimination of the Jewish hold on the liquor trade since the first partition of Poland in 1772 and mercenary landowners were determined to cut out the Jewish middleman. But such landowners were in the minority. According to Rosman, the majority of landowners assisted in taking the Jewish-run tavern industry underground, proving the resilience of the lord-Jew connection.⁷

At the heart of this relationship was the nobles’ belief in and perpetuation of “the myth of Jewish sobriety.”⁸ For centuries, Polish nobles believed that Jews possessed the sobriety—not to mention the skills, industry and literacy—needed to run a profitable tavern; the Christian peasantry was considered inept and the minor gentry too difficult and demanding. It may well be true that alcoholism was a more pervasive problem among Christian peasants than their Jewish neighbours, but Dynner nevertheless calls the Jewish sobriety myth into question. Indeed, accounts of Jewish drunkenness abound. To build his case, Dynner cites several Jewish *kvitlekh* to the nineteenth-century rabbi Elijah Guttmacher, asking him to save his fellow Jews from the consequences of drinking. Moreover, Hasidim, who believed they could achieve ecstatic, mystical heights by imbibing, were popular targets of the *maskilim*, adherents of the Haskalah Jewish enlightenment movement. And yet, the stereotype of the sober Jew remained intact outside the Jewish

³ Rosman, *The Lords’ Jews*, 212.

⁴ Dynner, *Yankel’s Tavern*, 60.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 80.

⁷ Rosman, *The Lords’ Jews*, 212.

⁸ Dynner, *Yankel’s Tavern*, 17.

community. Polish reformers even cultivated their own twisted image of Jewish sobriety—concluding that shrewd Jewish tavernkeepers stayed sober in order to cheat their intoxicated Polish-Christian customers. And yet, for the nobility Jews were still the preferred choice for tavernkeeping, so long as the nobles enjoyed a monopoly on the production and distribution of alcohol. In this sense, Dynner echoes historian Adam Teller's assertion that the relationship between the Jewish minority and the Polish nobility was a fundamentally exploitative and feudal one, in which Jews were respected and protected only as long as they enhanced estate revenues by managing taverns.⁹

With *Yankel's Tavern*, Dynner offers a story of depth, nuance and complexity. For students and scholars of Polish-Jewish history, the book illuminates a dimension of the nineteenth-century Polish-Jewish relationship lost among narratives of intense hatred and mistrust. An achievement of social and cultural history, Dynner's story of cooperation is a welcome chapter in a historiography of Polish-Jewish relations that has dwelled for so long on friction and animosity.

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⁹ Adam Teller, *Kesef, koah ve-hashpa'ah* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 2006), in Dynner, *Yankel's Tavern*, 181fn17.