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Interview with Glenn Dynner

Josh Tapper & Alexis Lerner

Episodes of violence and anti-Semitism pockmark the conventional history of Polish-Jewish relations, pointing to a mutual hostility that endured for centuries. But a close examination of local economic practices and social life, especially in the nineteenth-century Kingdom of Poland, reveals a striking interethnic symbiosis. Evidence of this coexistence emerges most vividly in the local liquor trade, where Jews held great prominence as distillers and tavern-keepers, both working for and selling their product primarily to non-Jews. Even as authorities repeatedly expelled Jews from the trade, they continued to work underground with the support of the Polish nobility. This economy enabled non-emancipated Jews to establish a foothold in the local culture, and at the same time, it forced them to negotiate their religious and social identities vis-à-vis their non-Jewish neighbours.

Glenn Dynner, a historian and professor of Judaic Studies at Sarah Lawrence College, captures this story of coexistence in *Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor and Life in the Kingdom of Poland* (Oxford University Press, 2013). On February 22, 2016, Dynner delivered the Waks Family Fund Lecture in Yiddish and Jewish East European History and Culture, presented by the *University of Toronto Journal of Jewish Thought* and the Anne Tanenbaum Centre for Jewish Studies. Prior to the lecture, Dynner sat down for an interview with members of the journal's previous editorial board as part of a special seminar on Polish-Jewish history for graduate students at the University of Toronto.

Let's start with how you became interested in the role of Jews in the Polish liquor trade.

It began with a suspicion, back when I was a grad student. I kept reading about this theme of the expulsion of Jews from the liquor trade [beginning in the early nineteenth century]. It was couched in terms of a wholesale, or complete, Jewish expulsion from the liquor trade, but then you would read that ten years later, the Jews were completely expelled again from the liquor

trade, and then completely expelled again ten years after that. So, it didn't really make sense to me how they could keep being re-expelled. One of the most iconic pieces of literature about the Jewish tavern-keeper, *Pan Tadeusz*, by Adam Mickiewicz, was written in 1834, after most of these expulsions were said to have occurred. You see this as you continue in Polish literature: Jews keep getting expelled from the liquor trade, and yet they keep popping up. I went back to the archives, and as I was flipping through the files, the words "Jews," "liquor," "vodka," "drunkenness," and "peasants" kept popping up on practically every page. And Jewish tavern-keepers were popping up in the archives long after they'd been expelled from the trade. There were complaints about how Jews, despite the expulsions, despite legislation, were still running taverns everywhere. This counter-narrative had been left out by historians of an earlier generation.

Taking a step back, how and why did Jews become involved in the Polish liquor trade?

I found two reasons. In discovering these archives on how Jews were continuing to sell liquor, I also found the rationale, because every time Polish noblemen—who leased these taverns and distilleries to Jews—were caught, they would explain why they were leasing their operations only to Jews. The answer they usually gave was profits—the local economy. In other words, if they didn't use Jews, then their entire local economy would be negatively impacted: the travelling Jewish merchants would have no place to stay; there would be no hospitality on the Sabbath and no place to eat kosher food. Noblemen also had this belief in Jewish sobriety—that Jews wouldn't drink up all the product. This myth of Jewish sobriety was another major reason why the nobility would only lease their taverns and distilleries to Jews.

In *Yankel's Tavern*, you essentially debunk this myth of Jewish sobriety.

I was a historian of Hasidism coming into the project. The idea that Jews don't drink is absolutely absurd to anybody who really looks at Hasidic and anti-Hasidic sources, which really give the impression of the most robust drinking culture in all of Jewish history. With Hasidism, you suddenly have this permission, theologically justified, for drinking. Drinking occurred within prescribed times and places, but how this image of sobriety was sustained during the rise of Hasidism was just a really fascinating problem to me.

You write that even after the prohibition of Jews from the liquor trade, seventy-five percent of tavern-keepers were Jews. Who were these people? What kind of Jews were they?

We're talking about around forty percent of the Jewish population that's involved in the liquor trade in some way. The number is probably higher, because around every Christian holiday you have impromptu taverns being set up in Jewish homes. It was a huge proportion of the Jewish population. What that means is you have everyone from impoverished sublessees to large-scale merchants who are presiding over entire networks of taverns and distilleries even after it's illegal. There was a huge social range. Another fascinating element is women. You have women, especially widows and divorcees, single-handedly running these taverns. This was a new source in the history of Jewish women, who are traditionally thought of as submissive and pious, not the kind of shrewd businesswoman with the grit needed to run a successful tavern. That's what I was finding. That, of course, led me to the larger issue of women as breadwinners, sometimes principal breadwinners, which turned out to be a major segment of the Jewish economy.

How pious were these tavern-keepers, whose job required them to interface regularly with non-Jews? Can we make any generalizations about their religious behaviour?

The piety issue is very interesting, because to have a profitable tavern you need to keep it running on the Sabbath and on Jewish religious holidays. You also need to keep it running on Sabbaths and holidays if you want to stay alive; a nobleman or bishop who wants his drink is not going to be turned away because it's Saturday. This presents a real dilemma for pious tavern-keepers. Now, are they pious? Our definition of piety is probably different from theirs. We think in terms of religious consciousness, conviction, spirituality. I doubt those were prevailing motivating factors for these tavern-keepers. Many of them believed that if they didn't find a *halakhic* way to keep their taverns running while violating the Sabbath it could have dire cosmic consequences, and certainly consequences for their own salvation. In the pre-modern Jewish situation of religious compulsion, piety meant something a little different.

One of the most interesting things about Jewish ritual law is the attempt to circumvent its economically debilitating aspects, such as closing shop on the Sabbath. Sure enough, in Congress Poland the rabbis found a way around it. They would write up contracts between Jews and non-Jews that allocated one-seventh of an enterprise's profits to the non-Jew, which allowed Jews to keep their taverns open on the Sabbath. The partnerships were largely fictitious. But they came in handy when the state outlawed Jewish tavern-keeping. The same non-Jew who partnered in the tavern could become the "owner" once it was no longer legal for Jews to do so. That seems to be how the whole system worked—and how even though Jews seem to keep getting expelled from the liquor trade, they never ever go away.

How might this Jewish economy have contributed to secularization? Can you point to any correlation between these tavern-keeping Jews, who interfaced regularly with non-Jews, and assimilation?

I think it had the opposite effect. Seeing members of the rival culture and religion at their drunken worst does not do much for acculturation. It leads to contempt. That's why Jews, especially Hasidic Jews, were very careful to drink in their own spaces, outside of the public eye. They knew just how bad it looked. [Jewish poet Hayim Nahman] Bialik has a great poem about his father running a tavern; drunks are running around vomiting and he's clinging to his father while the pure words of Torah are issuing from his father's mouth. There's a kind of disgust throughout a lot of this literature—if anything, exposure to drinking is a barrier to acculturation.

The cities might be a little different in the sense that there was a more cosmopolitan tavern-keeper. There you start to see petitions to authorities for special rights and privileges that downplay Jewish association. And in remote villages, where there was one Jewish family surrounded by non-Jews and the children grew up with the peasants' children, there are a lot of cases of intermarriage and conversion.

Polish-Jewish relations are playing out on a local level, but Russian imperial authorities are making the laws that govern this relationship. Can you speak about the colonial actor and the role it plays in this economy?

Something that fascinates me is that the language and terminology of postcolonialism doesn't seem to have reached the historiography of Eastern Europe. There seems to be a resistance to using the term colonialism, and I don't know why. But I would use it. I think there's a soft colonialism. It's not what you see in India, for example, but you do have, beginning with the Union

of Lublin in 1569, a colonization of Ukraine, historic Lithuania and historic Belarus by the Polish-Lithuanian nobility. They used Jews to abet that colonization by having Jews lease the enterprises on their estates and populate their towns. It was a precarious situation, and it all blew up during the Chmielnicki Uprising in 1648, but most of the time that kind of arrangement held—until, of course, the late nineteenth century, when nationalism gathered enough force.

Under Napoleon, the Duchy of Warsaw was semi-autonomous. But then Napoleon met his demise and the Czar took over, renaming the Duchy of Warsaw the Congress Kingdom of Poland. What I see, especially beginning in the 1830s, is Polish autonomy curtailed to the point where legislation toward Jews is like that applied across the empire. And so, Jews were answerable to the czar. If the Czarist-dominated government discovered that Jews were running taverns, they could swoop down, interrogate everybody, expel the Jews and reprimand the nobleman. But absolutism is a bit of a misnomer. The Polish nobility was usually left to run affairs on their own estates. So even after an expulsion, life soon returned to normal. The nobleman wanted Jews running his taverns. It was a complex situation, but I think we should look at it as a kind of layered form of rule. Jews learned to navigate this environment and play parties against each other when they could.

Can you share some examples, then, of how Jews operated in this space, sometimes dealing with czarist authorities and sometimes with the Polish intermediary?

One example would be the liquor trade. Let's say you were a tavern-keeper and you were upset with a nobleman for pushing you out of your lease for a reason you didn't think was fair. You could turn to the czarist authorities and expose that nobleman for allowing Jews to run taverns in other villages. But it was a very complicated configuration, especially with two fairly suc-

cessful Polish uprisings against the Czar. If you're a Jewish inhabitant of these lands, who do you side with? Do you side with the Poles, who might succeed and create an independent Poland? You know them. You've become somewhat acculturated having lived there. You have relations with the Polish nobles, and so maybe you're rooting for them. Or is that completely foolish? Do you side with the imperial regime, because declaring war on the czarist empire might not be the wisest idea? Who to side with presented a real dilemma for Jews. Sometimes they can be forgiven for hoping the whole thing would just pass with minimal damage to their life and livelihood.

How did developments in the Russian Empire affect the Polish-Jewish relationship? And when do interethnic tensions start to outweigh the economic linkages between Jews and non-Jews?

Take the town of Jedwabne. The Jedwabne incident is pretty well known now: there was a pogrom during the first phase of the German occupation in 1941. There's a debate over what the role of the Nazis was in this affair, but by and large it seems to have been a Polish affair, where Polish Catholics turned on their Jewish neighbors, 300 of whom were pushed into a barn that was then set on fire. If you looked at Jedwabne 100 years earlier you'd find economic coexistence. You'd find Jewish tavern-keepers, Jews leasing other enterprises, Jewish merchants coming through with goods from other cities and even overseas; you'd find real reliance on Jews, and relative security and prosperity. How do you get from 1841 to 1941? How does that transition occur?

What I've come to see is not a happy answer, and it seems to be peasant emancipation. Peasant emancipation is something we all want. We don't want anybody to be a serf, a virtual slave, but at the same time there were all kinds of unintended consequences of emancipation. The weakening of nobility through land redistribution is one thing. The nobles were the main pro-

tectors of Jews. Another factor is that after a generation, young peasants who didn't grow up under serfdom didn't see why they shouldn't be able to run a tavern or engage in trade on their own. Suddenly, the peasantry, which is a majority of the population, was set on a collision course with the Jews, who had formed a surrogate middle class. Jews' special relationship with the nobility was undermined through emancipation. That was the point when you started to get anti-Jewish economic boycotts, pogroms in southern Ukraine, and the rise of political anti-Semitism, with the endorsement of parts of the Catholic Church. I think the beginning of the breakdown has everything to do with emancipation.

Moving away from your book, can you talk about the role of Jewish Studies in the academy, as you see it? Are its objectives different from other fields that focus on minority groups?

The role of Jewish Studies should be the same as Irish Studies and Polish Studies, and so on. I think the professionalization of the field demands a certain neutrality, a willingness to avoid the temptation to condemn, certainly to ascribe collective guilt. I think we need to strive for empathy, not just for our own people, but for all peoples. It's difficult, especially when an entire civilization has been annihilated. It's difficult when you have a memory of anti-Jewish violence. But I think we have to do it. However, I would argue, maybe provocatively, that it doesn't have to be at the expense of heritage, spirituality, and other reasons that undergraduates who are of the Jewish tradition will take Jewish Studies courses. I think it's a great way to garner interest in your field if you're speaking to people's personal inclinations, as long as you don't let it hamper that striving for objectivity, neutrality, and empathy.

In *Yankel's Tavern* you write about the tensions between history and Jewish memory. How do you negotiate this terrain as a scholar and teacher, inside and out of the classroom?

I was surprised to learn that I had more in common with the genealogists than I did with my colleagues in the field of history, who were so devoted to the archives that they read them at face value! These historians were basically telling people their memories were all false—that if your grandfather claims he ran a tavern in the old country that's impossible. I actually argue for more openness to Jewish memory as long as you can verify it and use it to illuminate the sources you have at your disposal.

I prefer contemporaneous sources, usually archival sources. I prefer them because they're less prone to the game of telephone that tends to distort memories. However, I think we need more openness to memory, not less. So that's my departure, I suppose, from the conventional way of doing history. But as far as worrying about what people are going to say, you just have to do your own work, do what you want to do, and not give a damn about what everyone else is saying.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.