



Glenn Dynner. *Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor, and Life in the Kingdom of Poland.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 249 pp. \$74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-998851-8.



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Coexistence and Symbiosis: The Jewish Tavernkeeper in Nineteenth-Century Poland

The Jewish tavernkeeper Jankiel in *Pan Tadeusz* (1834), the epic poem by the nineteenth-century Polish bard Adam Mickiewicz, has become a symbol of the historical Jewish presence in Polish culture and society. Glenn Dynner's *Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor, and Life in the Kingdom of Poland* employs the lens of the tavernkeeper to examine overlapping economic and social interactions between Jews and Poles in everyday life in the nineteenth century. He argues that Jewish tavernkeepers, who leased the rights to run taverns from Polish landowning nobles, remained central to Jewish and Polish economic life in the nineteenth century, reflecting a continuation of the noble-Jewish symbiosis from pre-partition Poland. According to Dynner, this relationship, together with interactions with Polish peasants, allowed Jews to evade shifting policies of partitioning authorities intended to drive them out of the liquor trade. The Jewish-owned tavern therefore remained a space of interaction between Jews and Christians in overlapping economic, social, and cultural realms in the nineteenth century.

Dynner's underlying goal is to examine Polish-Jewish relations in the nineteenth century, internal developments in Jewish religious life, and the impact of state policy on economic and social realities during the partition period. He situates his study as a challenge to three historiographical narratives about nineteenth-century Polish Jewry. According to his characterization, the first two narratives emphasize tensions between Jews and Christians and focus on Jewish integration and acculturation among a minority of Jews, particularly urban elites. Dynner argues that "coexistence within boundaries," that is, interactions within the confines of distinct Jewish and Polish communities, is just as important, and perhaps more so. Tensions and integration are integral to understanding Polish-Jewish relations. The third narrative he questions is what he views as an emphasis on secularization in historiography by the end of the nineteenth century. By shifting the focus from the urban setting to the countryside, from elites to the workaday tavernkeeper, and from the last two decades of the nineteenth century to earlier decades, he finds that tradition-

alism in Jewish life—what he defines as “attunement to the rhythms of Jewish ritual law (*halakha*) and an increasingly conscious resistance to social integration and secularization”—remained strong throughout most of the nineteenth century, even as Jews sought to reconcile religious observance with their economic roles and encounters with a centralized state (p. 5).

Dynner’s extensive archival research also seeks to resolve a tension between historiography and memory regarding the fate of the Jewish tavernkeeper in nineteenth-century Poland. Tavernkeeping looms large in popular memory and family lore of the descendants of East European Jews, and in fact the Jewish-run tavern was ubiquitous in pre-partition Poland and remained so in the early decades of the partition period: Jews leased as much as 85 percent of all taverns, and the percentage of the Jewish population officially engaged in tavernkeeping was as high as 37 percent, according to Dynner’s calculations based on statistics from 1808 and 1814. Yet the consensus of earlier historians was that Jewish tavernkeeping subsequently declined rapidly as a result of the nobles’ weakening hold on the economy and concomitant breakdown of the noble-Jewish symbiosis. Israel Bartal previously challenged this consensus beyond the realm of tavernkeeping, arguing that the noble-Jewish alliance continued through the first half of the nineteenth century; Dynner, however, asserts that the breakdown of this relationship did not begin until the last two decades of the century.[1] It was the persistence of this relationship, according to Dynner, and the resulting perpetuation of Jewish involvement in tavernkeeping, that accounts for the continued presence of the figure of the Jewish tavernkeeper in both Jewish memory and Polish literature.

Dynner’s reevaluation is rooted in archival research that reaches beyond official data to understand the concrete impact of state policies on Jewish tavernkeeping. Drawing on court cases, petitions to the government, rabbinic responsa, and other archival materials as well as on memoirs, travelogues, and literature, he shows that government efforts to remove Jews from the liquor trade were ineffective, inconsistent, and often not enforced, particularly in the *shtetlekh* and the countryside. Rather than diminishing Jewish involvement in tavernkeeping, the policies drove this activity underground, facilitated by continued support from nobles and cooperation with peasants. Official statistics on which previous historians relied therefore provide an inaccurate picture of the fate of Jewish tavernkeeping in the nineteenth century, Dynner argues. In addition, pragmatism was an important

factor in what might otherwise appear to be inconsistencies in policy and its implementation: officials backed away from their decrees and reform programs when policies created social or economic upheaval or at times of political instability.

Dynner pays attention to regional differences as well as mutual influences both within and across the borders of the partitions. He finds that Jewish tavernkeeping in the Kingdom of Poland persisted longer than elsewhere in the Russian partition, while in Galicia, he argues tentatively that the persistence of Jewish tavernkeeping was even more noticeable. At the same time, he situates his study in the context of economic history in the Kingdom of Poland more broadly, supporting the argument that the old economic order of feudalism, which revolved around the Polish landowning noble and underpinned Jewish involvement in tavernkeeping, only gradually broke down. That previous socioeconomic structure lasted nearly two decades after the 1864 emancipation of the peasants, according to Dynner, and upended the economic system only with the depression of the early 1880s. Here and elsewhere in the book, Dynner makes extensive use of Polish historiography, not only recent works but also from the nineteenth century and the interwar period, both to buttress his own study and to challenge many of their conclusions about Jewish tavernkeeping. *Yankel’s Tavern* weaves this economic history together with a social history of Jewish involvement in the liquor trade, focusing in large part on interactions between Jews and Christian peasants. The tavern was a primary site for these interactions, as the Jewish tavernkeeper entertained Christian patrons with music, served them food and drink, and sometimes brought their children to a Christian milieu, while local Christian customers interacted with traveling Jews who stayed overnight. The tavern was a center of everyday life in small towns and villages, playing an important role in some Christian celebrations that took place as much in the tavern as in the church. Taking Dynner’s argument further, one can argue that the tavern was therefore a site not only of Jewish-Christian coexistence and interaction but also of cultural exchange. His analysis suggests the need for further research into the significance of the tavern in the mutual influences of Polish and Jewish folk cultures, including in music, food, rituals, and language.[2]

Yankel’s Tavern connects this study of Polish-Jewish interactions and economic history with an exploration of internal Jewish life in the realms of religious observance, family life, and gender relations. An important basis for his analysis is a trove of responsa from a nineteenth-

century rabbi, Elijah Guttmacher, in which alcohol and tavernkeeping in domestic, economic, and religious life were frequent topics of inquiry. He is among the first historians to use these materials, and they will be fruitful sources for research on other topics in Jewish religious and social history. Responsa strongly support his argument that Jewish tavernkeeping remained an essential part of social and economic life into the 1870s. However, Guttmacher's death in 1874 limits their relevance for Dynner's dating of the decline of Jewish tavernkeeping to the economic downturn of the early 1880s. Alternatively, court cases, petitions to the authorities, and other diverse archival documents make up for this limitation. These latter sources also make a further connection between economic history and internal Jewish life through the lens of gender. In a brief section, Dynner argues that attempts to evade government restrictions on Jewish tavernkeeping increased the role of women in business. Because the appearance of Jewish women was less distinctively Jewish than that of men, women became more important in the family's economic life.

Dynner's analysis of internal Jewish life initially strays from his focus on the liquor trade and tavernkeeping with an extensive exploration of alcohol in Jewish life more broadly. The stereotype of Jewish sobriety was central to nobles' continued support of Jewish involvement in tavernkeeping; Polish nobles believed that Jews were less likely to be tempted by alcohol than were other residents and therefore were more reliable as tavernkeepers. Dynner notes that alcohol was an integral part of Hasidic culture, and the Guttmacher responsa provide examples of domestic strife sometimes as a result of drunken husbands, not only among some tavernkeepers. More important for Dynner's use of the Guttmacher responsa, however, and their relationship to a central focus of *Yankel's Tavern*, is their illumination of economic and religious life as intersecting histories. Here he establishes his core challenge to a secularization narrative in historiography. Dynner's nuanced reading of these responsa shows that Guttmacher as well as some previous rabbis facilitated attempts by Jewish tavernkeepers to circumvent observance on Shabbat and holidays in order to accommodate the demands of their economic roles. They established "legal fictions" that gave rabbinic approval to various subterfuges, especially by creating a façade of turning over the tavern to Christians during Shabbat and holidays while in fact continuing to run it.

These findings have two implications, according to Dynner. The first is that rather than abandoning religious observance, many Jews fell back on tradition dur-

ing times of uncertainty that accompanied changes in economic life and encounters with a centralized state. Their economic activity, concealed behind a façade of observance at times when Jewish law prescribes refrainment from work, could be seen as straying from religious strictures. Yet Dynner argues that their desire for rabbinic approval shows their continued faith in traditional ways of life and their desire to maintain observance, even when doing so required a circumvention of some aspects of Jewish law. The Jewish encounter with modernity therefore led to the development of traditionalism in religious life and identifications, resisting secularization while making concessions to new economic and political realities.

Just as significant for Dynner's focus on the liquor trade is the role of Christians in facilitating subterfuges in Jewish religious life and subsequent cooperation between Jews and Christians in getting around government restrictions. Cooperation with Christians that allowed Jews to maintain religious observance set a pattern for peasants' assistance in circumventing state law regarding Jewish tavernkeeping, such as the practice of fictitious sales of taverns to Christians. That is, "legal fictions" in the religious realm that allowed Jewish tavernkeepers to follow Jewish law through technicalities while maintaining their businesses gave way to legal fictions in the economic realm. This cooperation with Polish peasants and nobles, supported by seals of approval granted by rabbis such as Guttmacher, made these legal fictions possible. "Instead of the Jewish solidarity and cunning depicted in much Polish Romantic literature," argues Dynner, co-existence and symbiosis characterized relations between Jewish tavernkeepers and Christians (p. 79).

Dynner's chapters on the Polish uprisings of 1830 and 1863, and on efforts of tsarist officials to reform Jewish economic life and education, shift the focus once more away from the liquor trade. This places the book's central issues in the background but his analysis illuminates the complicated, triangular relationship among Jews, Poles, and tsarist authorities in the partition era. He cautions against making generalizations about Jewish attitudes in the struggle between Polish society and the state. The presence of the Jewish tavernkeeper as both traitor and ally in Polish literature underscores the diversity of Jewish attitudes toward the Polish uprisings. However, he concludes that a kind of passive support of Poles against the tsarist authorities, rooted in the historic noble-Jewish symbiosis in the economic realm, was the most common reaction of Jews, who typically expressed sympathy with Polish resistance without endangering themselves.

Dynner's book is significant not only for East European Jewish history, but also for how historians incorporate memory studies into their work. He does not accept the tension between historical analysis and popular memory of the past as one that cannot be resolved, or the idea that all history is narrative. Nor does he accept the argument that it is popular memory, rather than the work of historians, that inaccurately represents historical developments. Rather, for Dynner, popular memory, whether rooted in family lore and memoirs or in literary portrayals of the past, is a starting point for reassessing narratives in official documents and revisiting a historiographical consensus when it contradicts how historical developments are remembered. He finds that history from the ground up in fact supports popular memory of continued Jewish involvement in tavernkeeping, while coexistence as a typical relationship between Jews and Christians challenges both memory and historiography that emphasize tensions between them. For Dynner, therefore, memory is not only a subject of study in and of itself, as the field of memory studies often approaches the topic, and is significant not only for analyzing oral histories and other sources for the history of events and developments within living memory. It is also another

kind of source for historical analysis, one that sometimes supports, sometimes challenges, and sometimes complements more traditional sources of an historian. Certainly archival documents create narratives that are themselves a form of memory, establishing a picture of the past that is limited by what was not preserved. Court cases and appeals to government authorities, both of which are important sources for Dynner, sometimes skew representations of the past toward the atypical rather than the norm. Responsa pose a similar problem. Yet it is the questions provoked by the contradictions between memory and history that bring to light the gap between everyday life and politics based on official policy in the realm of tavernkeeping and beyond.

Notes

[1]. Israel Bartal, *The Jews of Eastern Europe, 1772-1881* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

[2]. For a study of Polish-Jewish interactions in everyday life from the perspective of memory, see Alina CaÅa, *The Image of the Jew in Polish Folk Culture* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 1995).

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