

REVIEW BY LARRY WOLFF

Glenn Dynner

YANKEL'S TAVERN

Jews, liquor, and life in the kingdom of Poland

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The Polish phenomenon of *propinacja* – the landowner’s estate monopoly on the production and sale of alcohol – has long been an important subject in the historiography of the early modern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In a feudal agricultural economy the landowners often leased this monopoly right to Jews, who then occupied the particular economic niche that involved transforming grain into spirits and selling it in taverns to local peasants. Nobles and Jews thus jointly participated in disposing of grain surpluses by facilitating what we would now call substance abuse. Hillel Levine discussed this early modern arrangement in *Economic Origins of Antisemitism* (1991), and Glenn Dynner has now followed the subject into the nineteenth century. The “Yankel” of his title refers to the most famous Jew in Polish literature, Jankiel the tavern-keeper in *Pan Tadeusz* (1834), the Polish national epic by Adam Mickiewicz. Jankiel, Mickiewicz wrote, “loved the fatherland like a true Pole”, and could conjure the thrilling and tragic spirit of its history by playing on his fiddle.

Dynner chooses Yankel as his titular tavern-keeper partly in order to point out that when Mickiewicz created this figure in the 1830s he ought to have been an anachronism: by that time, the noble- and-Jewish alcoholic enterprise had already become the object of

serious social criticism and reform legislation. Yet Jews remained both real and proverbial tavern-keepers throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, “being evicted or taxed out of existence once, twice, and three times over; yet there they are again”. Dynner has carried out impressive archival research to show how the formerly feudal phenomenon of *propinacja* persisted in the Russian-ruled Congress Kingdom of Poland as something semi-legal and half-modern, with Jews adapting strategically and evasively to the interventions of the state, and ultimately affirming their own economic rights as subjects of the tsar. In a classic anthropological study of economic modernization, *From Field to Factory* (1978), about building a bicycle factory in West Bengal in the 1960s, Morton Klass discovered that, regardless of hiring policy, the employees would quickly reorganize themselves into departments subtly sorted according to caste, thus preserving traditional social structure within a modern economic context. The Jews of Russian Poland seemed to find themselves in taverns by a similar principle of social inevitability.

Polish nobles traditionally favoured Jews for liquor leases because of what Dynner characterizes as “the myth of Jewish sobriety”. It was also a Jewish tenet of distinctive identity: “Oy, shiker iz der goy. . . Nichtern iz der yid” (Drunk is the goy... sober is the Jew) was a song that could still be heard late into the twentieth century among the Yiddish-speaking diaspora. Dynner, who is also the author of a major book on nineteenth-century Hasidism, *Men of Silk* (2006), points out that the Hasids themselves had an affinity for alcohol. His research further permits him to observe the anxiety of rabbis over the mingling of Christians and Jews in taverns, the risk of both alcoholic and sexual

misconduct, and even the particular problem of Jews raising pigs to serve ham alongside vodka in the tavern. In some cases, Dynner notes, tavern-keepers led “doubly illegal” lives, in violation of state law and religious norms. In fact, some of the most serious resistance to Jewish taverns was eventually undertaken by Christian temperance movements, with anti-alcoholism also conditioning new varieties of anti-Semitism.

Dynner’s rich archival discoveries lead him into multifarious aspects of Jewish life in the Congress Kingdom. He offers a thoughtful survey of Jewish perspectives on the Polish insurrections of 1830–31 and 1863, observing that, counter to conventional supposition, it was not only modern and enlightened Polish Jews who sometimes supported the national cause, for, unexpectedly, there were Hasidic enthusiasts who drew links between Polish and Jewish messianic striving. A certain *tzaddik* supposedly “used to pray that the government and kingdom of Poland would be raised up and restored”, since “the bringing of the Messiah by our *tzaddikim* depended on this”. These issues connect to tavern-keeping inasmuch as those who supported the Polish cause sometimes lost their licences after the Russian defeat of the uprisings, while those who assisted the Russians often appealed for licences as their reward. Dynner analyses the differences in rural and urban regulation of Jewish taverns, from the outright rural prohibitions of the 1840s to the more indirect Jewish residential restrictions imposed in cities like Warsaw from the 1820s. He has also discovered a fascinating collection (preserved in the YIVO archives in New York) of appeals to a miracle-working non-Hasidic rabbi, Elijah Guttmacher, the *tzaddik* of Grätz, who received, among other petitions, frequent appeals from tavern-keepers in legal and business straits. In a shifting economic landscape, there were Jews who still looked for miracles in the nineteenth century.

In addition to Mickiewicz’s epic poem, Dynner makes superb use of the work of other Polish, Jewish and Russian authors – including Bolesław Prus, S. Y. Abramovitsh and Isaac Babel – to explore the interplay of cultural perspectives on Jewish tavern-keepers, who survived as semi-mythological figures in several cultural frameworks of literary and historical memory, whether sentimentally or anti-Semiticly construed. Thanks to Glenn Dynner’s book, we can now see them with mythological accretions painstakingly removed, as enterprising hosts on the social and economic threshold of European modernity.