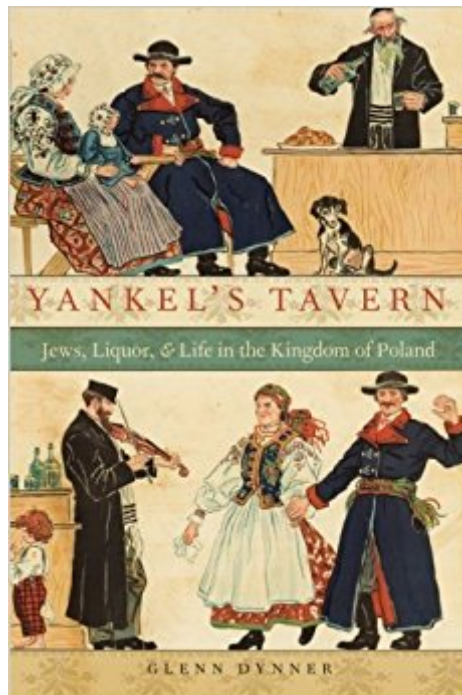




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# Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor, And Life In The Kingdom Of Poland



## Synopsis

Awarded Honorable Mention for the Jordan Schnitzer Book Award  
In nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, the Jewish-run tavern was often the center of leisure, hospitality, business, and even religious festivities. This unusual situation came about because the nobles who owned taverns throughout the formerly Polish lands believed that only Jews were sober enough to run taverns profitably, a belief so ingrained as to endure even the rise of Hasidism's robust drinking culture. As liquor became the region's boom industry, Jewish tavernkeepers became integral to both local economies and local social life, presiding over Christian celebrations and dispensing advice, medical remedies and loans. Nevertheless, reformers and government officials, blaming Jewish tavernkeepers for epidemic peasant drunkenness, sought to drive Jews out of the liquor trade. Their efforts were particularly intense and sustained in the Kingdom of Poland, a semi-autonomous province of the Russian empire that was often treated as a laboratory for social and political change. Historians have assumed that this spelled the end of the Polish Jewish liquor trade. However, newly discovered archival sources demonstrate that many nobles helped their Jewish tavernkeepers evade fees, bans and expulsions by installing Christians as fronts for their taverns. The result—a vast underground Jewish liquor trade—reflects an impressive level of local Polish-Jewish co-existence that contrasts with the more familiar story of anti-Semitism and violence. By tapping into sources that reveal the lives of everyday Jews and Christians in the Kingdom of Poland, *Yankel's Tavern* transforms our understanding of the region during the tumultuous period of Polish uprisings and Jewish mystical revival.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Yankel's Tavern is a path-breaking work that should be of interest to students of Polish, Russian, and Jewish history alike....With his careful mining of archival materials, especially case studies...Dynner has shown a more complex, even contradictory, reality."--Slavic Review

"The best English language work on the subject of Jewish tavernkeeping in nineteenth-century Poland....Dynner's short monograph is a remarkable achievement. The book is one of those rare academic accomplishments: persuasive yet concise. The frequent turn to literary references makes sense given Dynner's own elegant, almost effortless prose. There are protagonists and antagonists, evocative settings and fits of sentimentality (intended or not). Any historian of East European Jewry will find much to feast on inside Yankel's tavern."--European History Quarterly

"Glenn Dynner has written a history of Jewish tavern keepers that serves as a point of entry into a much broader challenge to a surprisingly diverse swath of conventional wisdom about Jewish life in the Polish lands of the Russian Empire. For this reason, Yankel's Tavern should be required reading for anyone interested in Jewish history, Polish history, Russian imperial history, nationalism and national identity, and the economic history of eastern Europe. Without ever adopting an aggressive or polemical tone, Dynner has launched several debates that are sure to continue for years to come....[Dynner] offers a story of nuance and complexity, one that defies any attempt to squeeze it into the simplistic dualities that have long weakened both Polish and Jewish history. This alone should place Yankel's Tavern on everyone's must-read list."--AJS Review

"[An] erudite, meticulously researched, and refreshingly original new book..." --Jewish Review of Books

"Yankel's Tavern is an interesting work that provides insight into the social, economic, political and religious realities of Jews during this time period. The book is a pleasure to read and accessible to the scholar and non-scholar alike." --Association of Jewish Library Reviews

"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."--Times Literary Supplement

"The sacred, the profane, and the 45-percent proof are at the heart of Glenn Dynner's new book, Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor, and Life in the Kingdom of Poland. Like all fine scholarly work, this...volume contains multitudes." --Tablet Magazine

"Meticulously researched, judiciously analyzed and deeply engaging, Yankel's Tavern sets a new standard in Jewish social history. Dynner succeeds admirably in cutting through the swath of filio-pietistic myth and anti-Semitic invective that envelops the Eastern European Jewish past. His enthusiasm for reconstructing the 'tragi-comic' lives of ordinary people is positively infectious. A rich and stimulating read." --Olga Litvak, author of Haskalah: The Romantic Movement in Judaism

"Dynner shifts the focus of

nineteenth-century Polish-Jewish history from government policy, ideological movements and secularization to the lives of real people and the persistence of traditional social, economic and cultural patterns. Using the pervasive liquor trade as a prism, he illuminates both the myths and the reality of the complexities and perplexities of the Polish-Jewish symbiosis." - Moshe Rosman, author of *The Lords' Jews: Magnate-Jewish Relations in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth*"Based upon massive new archival research, Glenn Dynner presents a wide-ranging portrait of the Jewish-run tavern, a central but overlooked institution of Polish Jewry. Drawing on a remarkable range of sources - legal, administrative, rabbinic, and literary - he illuminates the social, economic, religious and political ramifications of his subject. A sobering view of an intoxicating subject, told with sensitivity, nuance, and balance." - Jerry Z. Muller, author of *Capitalism and the Jews*

Glenn Dynner is Professor of Jewish Studies at Sarah Lawrence College. He is author of *Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society*, which received the Koret Publication Prize, and editor of *Holy Dissent: Jewish and Christian Mystics in Eastern Europe*. He has been a Fellow at the Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, a member of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University, and is currently the NEH Senior Scholar at the Center for Jewish History in New York.

Excellent. A real eye opener into the place of Jews in "Shetel" Poland.

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From what I can tell, this is a very readable treatment of a fascinating subject. Much of it seems to be territory already covered in Hillel Levine's *Economic Origins of Antisemitism*, but in a less scholarly form. However, I gave up on it after a few dozen pages. My problem is not with the book itself, but the format in which it was provided. It acted like an old PDF file: Margins were fixed and the text could not reflow to fit screen size or viewer's preferences. This meant that it was (for me, at any rate) unreadable on my 5.7 inch screen smartphone, which is my usual ebook reader. Even on my 7 inch tablet I could only read it in landscape mode, which is awkward and not optimal for a number of other reasons. I cannot imagine why it was made this format choice.

The author has written a fascinating study that exhibits an obvious attempt at even-handedness. However, in common with many works on this subject, it treats Jews primarily as the servants of

nobles and rulers, and devotes insufficient attention to the decision-making freedoms of Jews. The time period of this book is the late 1700's through the mid- and late-1800's, the era of Partition and post-Partition Poland. WERE JEWS FORCED TO BE TAVERN OWNERS? Jews, of course, were not brought to Poland in chains. They came voluntarily, and under the condition that they be welcomed in the role of a merchant class. Dynner repeats the argument (or exculpation) that Jews became tavern owners under compulsion, in that they usually were denied permission to purchase land, join artisan guilds and professions, etc. (p. 10). This is a chicken-or-egg question--or perhaps it was a reciprocal feedback process. In addition, Dynner undermines his own argument when he later cites the Hasidic tzaddik Menahem Mendel of 18th-century Vitebsk. This tzaddik claimed that the forcible removal of Jewish tavernkeepers was not disastrous, as these Jews simply found new occupations. (pp. 52-53). Attempts by Poland's foreign rulers to remove Jews from tavern ownership proceeded in fits, starts, and reversals, over many decades, because liquor concessions were so lucrative (p. 57), and because officials feared the influx of multitudes of unemployed Jews. (p. 54). However, was the latter because Jews were forbidden from performing any other line of work, or was it because the economy could not speedily absorb them, especially in large numbers? The same considerations apply to those many Jews who, during episodes of the banning of Jewish tavern ownership, surreptitiously resorted to unlicensed taverns, Christian-front taverns, and home "taverns". A report involving a government official, Viceroy Jozef Zajaczek (1752-1826), asserted that Jews could find "productive" lines of work but chose instead to maintain their particularism and avoidance of "real" work. (pp. 57-59). Overlooking the "Jews are parasites" mindset exhibited by the report, one must ask how government officials could seriously make statements about Jews in non-tavernkeeping occupations if these were barred to Jews! In an ironic mirror image of the "Jews corrupt peasants" notion, many quoted rabbis condemned tavernkeeping as an occupation that defiles the Jew and makes it easy for him to circumvent or violate the Sabbath, often in creative ways, and to assimilate and even convert to Christianity. (pp. 55-70). Now, if Jews were forced to be tavernkeepers, what sense would there be in condemning Jews for engaging in it? TAVERNKEEPING: A JEWISH CHOICE Towards the end of his book, Dynner stops emphasizing the restrictions that Jews faced, and instead describes many efforts, by Polish and Jewish officials, to "wean" Jews from tavernkeeping. (pp. 153-on). For instance, in 1816, Adam Czartoryski stated that Jews should be evicted from tavernkeeping and settled on land as farmers. (p. 154). For a time, Poles commonly made fun of the thought of Jews as farmers. (p. 154). [Evidently, the Jewish snobbery (quoted below) that dismissed Poles as hopeless drunks and non-achievers was answered by a reverse snobbery among Poles that disparaged Jewish capabilities in agriculture

and the military.]Nevertheless, the efforts began in earnest. Fears of Jewish landowning came later. (p. 155). By 1850, about 5% of Poland's Jewish population was farmers--a figure that Dynner considers impressive considering the inertia of estate-based societies. (p. 156). The author also acknowledges that Jewish as well as Polish resistance kept more Jews from departing from tavernkeeping. (p. 158).Finally, in the Conclusion to this book, author Glenn Dynner admits that Jews stuck with tavernkeeping largely because of economic self-interest, (quote) But many Jews could not evidently see why they should renounce a lucrative industry like liquor and enter less lucrative ones like agriculture and army service... (unquote). (p. 174).

### THE MYTH OF JEWISH SOBRIETY

Both Poles and Jews recognized the fact that Poles frequently had problems with alcoholism. For Poles, this was a clearly verbalized matter of consternation and shame. (pp. 32-33). [Parenthetically, this refutes the Jews-as-scapegoat thesis. Obviously, at least some influential Poles were willing to take ownership of the Poles' share of the problem instead of blaming it all on the Jews.]For Jews, on the other hand, it often became a matter of Jewish elitism. Dynner repeats the following oft-quoted Yiddish ditty, SHIKER IZ DER GOY (The gentile [GOY] is drunk) (quote) "The goy goes to the tavern/ He drinks a glass of wine/ Oh, the goy is drunk, drunk is he/ Drink he must, because a goy is he/ The Jew goes to the study house/ He looks at a book/ Oy, the Jew is sober, sober is he/ Learn he must, because a Jew is he." (unquote). (p. 45).Dynner then provides an impressive body of evidence that shows that, although they did not do so as much as Polish peasants, Jews did drink frequently (pp. 31-on). For instance, the religious-inspired drinking of the Hasids was not just an allegation of their adversaries (the Maskilim), but a fact supported by Hasidic sources themselves. (pp. 38-on). Pointedly, Jewish drinking was less overt, (quote) In fact, Polish Jews-particularly Hasidim--indulged in liquor, and sometimes excessively. Their tendency to do so under regulated religious auspices and within Jewish spaces meant that their drinking was less free and visible to outsiders. (unquote). (p. 45).

### EXPLOITATION OF PEASANTS?

The peasants' lack of education and emancipation were arguably the root causes of peasant drunkenness. (Reference 46, p. 186). In addition, the tavern was often the only place of entertainment for miles around (p. 18), and furthermore the place upon which the peasant often was dependent for such basics as feedstuffs, horse-carriage repairs, etc. (p. 18).Dynner realizes that Jewish profiteering sometimes occurred (p. 46) but provides no indications as to how widespread it was. He portrays Jewish tavernkeepers as self-policed, while tacitly admitting that they could take considerable liberties with peasants, (quote) Most Jewish tavernkeepers were also probably careful not to push things too far. Perhaps few felt bound by their lease contracts' pro forma moral stipulations, according to which they promised never to cheat customers. And perhaps few were deterred by the risk of fines and

prison sentences for serving liquor that was less than the regulation 45 percent alcohol. But each was constrained by the knowledge that there was a limit to what the peasant was willing to endure in terms of watered-down vodka, usurious loans, cooked books, and so on. (unquote). (p. 28). Unfortunately, Dynner does not develop the latter theme. What effective recourse did the peasant have--other than violence and pogroms?

### JEWISH OR POLISH TAVERN OWNERS: SO WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

If there is to be any apportionment of blame for the PROPINACJA, Dynner, in spite of his qualifications, apportions it evenly, (quote) Jewish tavernkeepers may not have been the architects of this ghastly enterprise nor even its main beneficiaries, but they were fully complicit. (unquote). (p. 26). The author cites some Poles who condemned Polish Christian tavern owners as harshly as Jewish ones. However, the reader probably realizes that, in general, Jews are more aggressive and successful salesmen than are Poles. For this reason alone, one should suspect that, other factors being equal, Jewish tavern owners are more successful in creating a clientele of alcohol-dependent Poles than are Polish tavern owners. Of course, unmentioned psychological issues also played a role. The Polish peasant may well have thought, "They (tavern owners) are all crooks, but at least he (the Polish and not Jewish tavern owner) is our crook." Apart from all this, did it make any objective difference as to whether the tavern owner was Jewish or Polish? It most certainly did. Dynner candidly remarks, (quote) Many reformers were noblemen themselves, and thus disinclined to blame their peers for placing the "weapon" of liquor in Jewish hands. But some, at least, seemed to genuinely believe that Christian lessees would be disinclined to sell drinks on credit and more likely to have social bonds with their clientele. "The fewer Jewish tavernkeepers there are," reasoned one reformer, "the less inclined peasants are to get drunk, because the Jewish tavernkeeper sees only the sale of vodka, not his buddy, mate, and best friend with whom he spends time." (unquote). (pp. 24-25). Finally, the reader must go beyond the content of this book and appreciate the fact that there is such a thing as a culture of alcohol consumption. This culture can spread. This explains why alcoholism was significant in geographic areas in which there were no Jewish tavern owners as well as in areas in which there were Jewish tavern owners. Finally, a culture of alcohol consumption can persist for many generations. This can explain why alcoholism is significant among Poles even today, even though some generations have passed since the demise of the Jewish-owned tavern in Poland.

### THE NOVEMBER 1830 AND JANUARY 1863 INSURRECTIONS

Author Glenn Dynner provides an impressive amount of detail on Jewish support for the Polish insurrections against tsarist Russian rule. At the same time, he is candid about the fact that most Jews adhered to the Talmudic dictum of DINA DE'MALKHUTA DINA [an allusion, for example, to Baba Kamah 113a]--the law of the current kingdom is law. (p. 103). This, of course,

meant that Jews generally switched their loyalties in order to support whoever ruled over Poland, or whoever they thought was stronger. Dynner also attempts to evaluate Jewish conduct against Poland. He cites archival 1830 Uprising figures from the Polish revolutionary regime. When summarized, they show that 83 out of 288 accused spies were Jews. (p. 111). Even though most accused spies were Poles, 83/288 comes out to 28.9%, which, if valid, means that Jews were three times more common among spies than among the general population. [Of course, it is possible that a disproportionate number of Jews was falsely accused of espionage, inflating the quoted Jewish figure. On the other hand, it is possible that Jews, owing to their superior communication skills honed by centuries of experience in commerce, and ability to disguise espionage as commercial interaction, were disproportionately more successful in talking their way out of valid blame for espionage, and/or concealing their espionage in general, thus rendering the quoted Jewish figure an undercount.] Now consider the 1863 Uprising. Dynner states that the evidence for Jewish espionage is more abundant than that for 1830, and gives many examples of the same. (pp. 122-on).

**JEWISH ETHNIC SOLIDARITY, JEWISH COLLUSION, ENDEK BOYCOTTS**

As the Polish national movement grew in strength by the late 19th century, proto-Endek and Endek thinkers increasingly contended that Jews work together to drive nascent Polish entrepreneurs out of business, and that only boycotts (and, later, formal discriminatory policies) can "level the playing field" (using modern parlance) by creating significant business opportunities for Poles, and thus emancipating the Poles from Jewish economic dominance. Although Dynner objects to unqualified notions of Jewish solidarity and Jewish collusion, and cites examples of Jews driving other Jews out of business (p. 147), he tacitly acknowledges that Endek thinking, which he does not mention, did have some basis in fact. He comments, (quote) Contrary to Werner Sombart's claim that Jews were the first to be committed to the "spirit of capitalism" and the principles of free trade, monopolistic practices and ethnic protectionism were as yet unquestioned in Polish Jewish society. Age-old communal ordinances forbade Jews to compete with and outbid fellow Jews (with limited success, as we shall see)[Have seen], while other ordinances attempted to protect the Jewish community from external competition "lest money fall into non-Jewish hands"...The same ethnic protectionism increasingly prevailed in the liquor trade...the increase in non-Jewish competitiveness was perceived as an act of aggression against the Jewish community, suggesting an economic aspect to the emerging traditionalism. (unquote). (pp. 146-147).

The work has no peer. For now it is a bit dull in many spots. There is some redundancy and it might have been better to focus on like forms of local or regional attempts to work about otherwise

enforced regulations or laws in different periods and then summarize the history, referring back to a cited instance. There is a pattern there that is seen once and again and one feels that the Eighteenth and then the Nineteenth Century one lands yet again in a similar rut along the road. Still, with that reservation, the author makes a point that Jews provide reliable middlemen for the local lords and that with heads turned away from them, the Jews earned some substantial monies and status as providers of libation as well as lodging. To the extent that this has been previously ignored, the work is worthwhile. It is not terribly lengthy, but I suspect that it could have been cut by a quarter, or nearly so, with tight editing.

Excellent book. Clearly illusts the role THAT jEWISH TAVERN LEASE HOLDS PLAAYED INT pOLAND.

Wonderful book!

Finally a book that focuses on the more typical experience of Polish-Jewish coexistence, even if it wasn't always pleasant. Really well-written and informative.

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