



CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON THE HISTORY AND CULTURE OF POLISH JEWS

**The Jewish Tavern-Keeper  
and his Tavern  
in Nineteenth-Century Polish Literature**  
Magdalena Opalski

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in Nineteenth-Century Polish Literature**

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on the History and Culture of Polish Jews

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem



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MAGDALENA OPALSKI

**THE JEWISH TAVERN-KEEPER  
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NINETEENTH-CENTURY POLISH  
LITERATURE**



**THE ZALMAN SHAZAR CENTER  
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## PREFACE

Mrs. Magdalena Opalski's book is the fourth to appear in the monograph series of the Center for Research on the History and Culture of Polish Jews. It differs from the first three publications in that it has not previously been published in other languages or in different form. I am grateful to Mrs. Opalski for having chosen to publish her study in our series.

I would like to thank Mr. Darrel Brown for photographing the illustrations which appear in the book, and Mr. Jerzy Michałowski for translating into English the Polish quotations, and thank Mr. Reuven Eshel, who copy edited the manuscript. I would also like to thank Mr. Eli Lederhendler who helped improve the English style of the manuscript.

*Ezra Mendelsohn*  
Editor of the Series



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## INTRODUCTION

The topic of this study is the stereotype of the Jewish innkeeper as he appears in nineteenth-century Polish fiction. This is one of the most common Jewish figures in Polish literature. Moreover, the literary features of this character seem to be more clearly defined than is the case with other, less familiar, Jewish characters.

This study is based on more than 120 literary works, mainly novels and plays, produced between 1820 and 1905. To the best of my knowledge, this study is based on all the most important literary works of the nineteenth century which include the motif of the tavern. They have been selected despite their diversity of literary genre, aesthetic quality, ideological slant, and regardless of how the Jewish theme is treated in the plot. This sample, which includes a significant number of minor and now-forgotten works, is sufficiently broad to allow for some generalizations.

This study is part of a larger work dealing with Jewish stereotypes in nineteenth-century Polish fiction. Compared to the amount of research dealing with this subject in other European literatures, the little work that has been done on Polish fiction has left it virtually unexplored. Except for a handful of articles that are only marginally relevant to the subject, the literary perception of the Jewish innkeeper has not attracted any scholarly attention.

This study, which is largely descriptive in character, does not pretend to exhaust the question of the innkeeper stereotype in Polish literature. It concentrates mainly on the village taverner, who is a synthesis of features held to be characteristic of a rural Jew. The first chapter briefly discusses the character's roots in popular mythology. In Chapters Two-Four I define the main components of the stereotype and trace the adaptation of the innkeeper as a literary figure to changing historical circumstances and literary trends. The last chapter deals basically with literary

perceptions of the innkeeper as a centre of power in a rural environment.

The terms "tavern-keeper" and *arendarz* are used here as synonyms, which is a slight simplification of the terminology commonly used in the period under study. The term *arendarz* as used by nineteenth-century writers almost always refers to the Jewish lessee of a tavern. In fact, in those rare cases where an *arendarz* is a tenant of economic assets other than a tavern or a mill, this is generally followed by a special explanation on the part of the author concerning the economic nature of the lease.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, the rural Jews referred to as "middlemen", *faktors*, "merchants" and "moneylenders" often turn out to be tenants of the local tavern as well. As a literary figure, the tavern-keeper tends to "absorb" the traits of all these economic roles. In fact, he can be viewed as a synthesis of features held to be characteristic of a rural Jew earning a living by means of non-agricultural pursuits. This synthesis is enriched further by a feature that no other Jewish characters have, and which seems to account, at least partially, for the appeal of the innkeeper theme in the eyes of Polish writers: the innkeeper has a tavern.

1 Most often, however, they are described by the term *pachciarz*, the use of which continues to gain ground in nineteenth-century Polish. For the narrowing in scope of the term *arendarz* to the Jewish tenants of the tavern and, to a lesser extent, of the mill, see Z. Gloger, in: *Encyklopedia Staropolska*, 1901-1903, repr. Warszawa 1972, I, p. 68, s.v. *arenda*.

## THE TAVERN-KEEPER AND THE POPULAR MYTH

### I

The most significant characteristic of the Jewish tavern-keeper is his role as a middleman. On several different levels and in several different ways, the tavern-keeper acts as an intermediary between the outside world and local society. As a merchant, he furthers the free movement of goods. His tavern is a meeting place for different segments of the local population. As the landlord's middleman, he is pivotal to the economic livelihood of the surrounding estates. He is, furthermore, at the crossroads between town and country. In all these circumstances, the tavern represents a source of local and communal information, which is transmitted selectively by the taverner to those surrounding him.

The innkeeper as go-between, however, has yet another dimension, which is crucial to understanding the literary assumptions at play in depicting his character. At the deepest mythological level, the innkeeper, as the middleman, is placed between the two antagonistic spheres into which traditional society divided the world: the realm of daily existence *versus* everything beyond, that is, the realm of death. This first sphere — *orbis interior* — is, in effect, a mirror of the existing social structure. That other world — *orbis exterior* — defines itself through a series of inversions and negations in juxtaposition to the living world.

In this archaic view of the world — characteristic of a closed, isolated and traditional society — a foreign ethnic element is generally held to emanate from that other sphere. For our purposes, suffice it to say that the features of the foreigner, as an emissary emerging from that other world, are modelled on those features

which popular culture held to be characteristic of the devil. Like aliens in general, the Jewish tavern-keeper is seen to possess clearly demonic characteristics.

While both worlds — *orbis interior* and *orbis exterior* — exist side by side, they are linked in a series of clearly-defined relationships. From our point of view, it is important to note that the tavern, as a site, has an independent status all of its own. It is a place where these intermediary activities can take place, as borne out in an abundance of folkloristic, literary and onomastic (names of taverns) material.

The tavern's role as a place where contact between *orbis interior* and *orbis exterior* can occur is closely linked to vodka. In Slavic folklore, vodka is accorded the status of a medium which facilitates visual contact with the beyond. It is no coincidence that in Mickiewicz's famous ballad *Pani Twardowska* ("Mrs. Twardowska") the devil appears before the drunkard in the tavern at the bottom of his shot glass, nor that he is dressed in a German fashion. In this ballad, man and devil enter into a compact for the man's soul right in the tavern. The tavern is a place where evil forces can enter, and in which incredible events take place.

This factor is well illustrated by the popular saying *gdzie karczma, tam prawie i Łysa Góra* ("where there's a tavern, there's well nigh also a Bald Mountain").<sup>1</sup> In popular tradition, Łysa Góra (the Bald Mountain), a Polish equivalent of the Brocken mountain, is a meeting place for witches. As a potential meeting ground between *orbis interior* and *orbis exterior*, the tavern is the ideal setting for encounters with the unknown, crime, conspiracy, mystery, witchcraft, as well as for radical change in the social condition.

This status is ascribed to the tavern *per se*, and not merely by virtue of it being a Jewish tavern. In the case of the Jewish tavern,

1 *Nowa Księga przysłów i wyrażeń przysłowiowych, W oparciu o dzieło Samuela Adalberga opracował Zespół redakcyjny pod kierunkiem Juliana Krzyżanowskiego*, II, Warszawa 1970, p. 356.

the mythological character is conveyed independently by three mutually reinforcing factors—the foreign ethnic element, the tavern as a site and vodka as a drink.

## II

In the literature of the nineteenth century, and especially of its early part, the Jewish innkeeper figures prominently in the archaic mind-set outlined above. In fact, the innkeeper is more salient to it than is any other Jewish character in Polish fiction. Several attributes ascribed to the Jewish tavern-keeper seem to be deeply rooted in popular mythology.

Typically, the Jewish innkeeper suffers from some sort of handicap betraying a form of kinship with the world below. Lameness is most common. The innkeeper is also often characterized by the loss of one eye, a squint, left-handedness, and other disfigurements which have similar mythological connotations.

The Jewish tavern is frequently the place in which an underground world can be entered. Very often, there are hiding places under the tavern: a concealed cellar, secret passageways and tunnels. They are the taverner's depot for stolen or smuggled goods. In T.T. Jeż's novel (to be discussed below, Chapter Three), the tavern-keeper has a secret stable, where he keeps stolen horses and which is entered by a special door hidden in the wall. In H. Rzewuski's *Rycerz Lizdejko* ("Cavalier Lizdejko"), a huge underground tunnel, also used to smuggle stolen horses, links the Jewish tavern with the neighbouring town. Such descriptions refer to the kind of hidden underground treasures which popular imagination ascribes to the devil.

The meaning behind such subterranean hiding places extends to parts of the visible world, too: woods, bush and land that is neglected, untilled or untrampled by human feet. In this context, Jewish taverns are often isolated and close to uninhabited terrains or on the edge of thick forests and dangerous swamps. To traverse these terrains, the taverner relies on a maze-like set of pathways

