

WITTE ARRIVES

A NOVEL

BY

ELIAS TOBENKIN

WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY J. HENRY

*"Was I not made the man I am
By Omnipotent time?"*

Goethe's *Prometheus*



NEW YORK
FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

Witte Arrives

Elias Tobenkin

It was "quite a respectable effort," said the Menorah Journal's reviewer about Elias Tobenkin's first novel, Witte Arrives (1916). Tobenkin "tells his story with a simplicity and a sincerity that command respect" and even "arouse admiration in the reader's mind."

Tobenkin (1882–1963), Russian-born, had come to America in 1899 and a few years later earned a master's degree at the University of Wisconsin. The journalistic career he subsequently made for himself was one of some distinction. He worked for the Milwaukee Free Press, the Chicago Tribune, the New York Herald, and Metropolitan Magazine, and also was New York Herald-Tribune foreign correspondent in Germany and Poland. In addition to this peripatetic employment, he managed to produce a number of novels.

Rosalind Ach Schwab, who called Witte Arrives to the attention of the Menorah Journal readership, recognized Tobenkin's talent, but professed dissatisfaction with what she took to be his "colorless" style: "there are no vivid images to store away in the reader's memory, no shared emotion for the reader's heart." Especially troubling to Mrs. Schwab was the fact that the protagonist of Witte Arrives found "the climax of success, the apex of Americanization, in marriage with a non-Jew"—though, as she is aware, he turned to a gentile woman only after his Jewish wife had died in childbirth. More to the point, perhaps, is Mrs. Schwab's understanding that, in his first novel, Tobenkin showed himself "hopeful for America." Witte Arrives made it clear that America had been "rather kind to the young immigrant," that for all his socialist theorizing Tobenkin had "no very definite quarrel" with American society.¹ He had not forgotten that his native Russia was a land which "sent transport after transport of prisoners, made up of the best blood and brains of the country, to the remotest Asiatic dungeons."²

1. Menorah Journal, April 1917, pp. 108–109; December 1917, p. 305.

2. Witte Arrives (New York, 1916), p. 53.

Chapter VII

A Reporter

Mr. Rand, the city editor of the *N— Express*, ran his eyes over the letter of introduction handed him by Emil Witte and put it to one side with an air of extreme weariness. Emil, watching the city editor's every move, concluded that he must be at least the tenth man who had come to ask for a job that morning, each of whom had presented just such a letter of introduction as his, and that these letters and their bearers were the bane of Rand's existence.

As a matter of fact a reporter had left the *Express* the preceding week. The vacancy had not been filled, and Rand was glad to see a man drift in and ask for a job.

Still maintaining his air of boredom, however, the city editor said: "There is no opening on the staff right now—"

The ringing of the telephone interrupted him. When Rand had hung up the receiver, he again turned to Emil Witte with a seemingly absent, but in reality searching gaze. He picked up the letter of introduction once more—it was from an influential lawyer who had taken an interest in young Witte—and read it clear through.

"You speak several languages?" Rand asked.

Emil nodded affirmatively.

"As I said," continued the editor, "there is no opening on the staff right now. However, this is a metropolitan city, and a man who speaks a number of languages ought to be useful. Come in again next Thursday. Perhaps something will turn up in the meantime."

Nothing had turned up by Thursday, but Witte was told to come in again at one o'clock the following day. He came and Rand motioned to him to sit down near one of the desks. With this Rand apparently forgot him. At five o'clock the city editor crooked his finger at Witte and the latter came up to his desk at a run.

"Go out and talk with the woman," Rand said, handing him a clipping from an evening paper.

Witte wrote the interview and laid the copy on the city editor's desk. He was again forgotten until nearly midnight. Then Rand in passing told him to go home, adding, "One o'clock tomorrow."

Emil Witte had secured his first job.

Every beginner on the *Express* was started in with the "labor run." N— was a city of a quarter of a million people. It was one of the growing manufacturing centers in the Middle West. There were about two score labor unions in the city. The news of these unions was printed every morning on the tenth or eleventh page of the *Express* under the heading "In the Labor World."

The following Monday Rand gave Witte a slip of paper with half a dozen addresses of the principal unions and briefly explained what was expected of him on the labor run.

"You will pick up the names of the other unions as you go along," Rand said. "To-day be sure to look up the iron molders. Talk to their business agent, Weber. The molders have been threatening to strike. See what you can get on it."

On the way to the headquarters of the molders, Emil studied the third of a column of labor news in the *Express*. Much of it sounded strange. The phrases, "closed shop," "open shop," "boycott," "lock-out" were new to him.

"What became of Cochrane, was he fired?" Weber asked when Witte introduced himself as the new reporter from the *Express*.

Witte did not know Cochrane, did not know who his predecessor was. The good-natured, bantering way in which Weber asked the question reassured him. The agent seemed to be a good sort of fellow. He was kind and genial at any rate. So Witte threw himself at the mercy of the business agent. He told him that he was just beginning his career as a reporter, that he had been on the *Express* only three days and in the city of N— only a week. He would appreciate it, therefore, if Mr. Weber, would give him all the news there was. He would be especially grateful if the business agent would give him the news as plainly as possible so that he could write it down correctly for the paper.

Weber listened to the frank statement of the embryo reporter.

"You want to write labor news correctly?" the business agent said with a wry smile. "All right, my boy, go ahead, try. The Lord help you. You will need His help if you are to get union news into the *Express* correctly. But I am afraid even the Lord cannot protect you from your city editor's blue pencil."

While Witte was pondering over Weber's words, the business agent was studying the reporter curiously. Witte was so different from his predecessor. He was simple and unsophisticated in the city ways.

"Is your father a workman?" the labor man asked.

Witte nodded, and he felt the blood come into his face. Suppose the business agent asked his father's trade. [His father was a peddler.] But Weber did not ask.

Weber supplied the reporter with the names of a number of unions whose headquarters were in the neighborhood and advised him what men were worth while seeing in each of these unions. As for the molders, there was no news that day, he said. As Witte was about to leave, Weber added as an afterthought:

"You might say that the molders are firm in their demands, and if the negotiations now pending with the employers come to no satisfactory conclusion, nothing can avert a strike."

Witte wrote down the statement word for word.

Weber watched the reporter not unkindly. To an experienced newspaper man he would not have said that much. He would have taken for granted that the reporter would have gathered the attitude of the molders' union indirectly. Witte's frank admission of his inexperience had moved him to this indulgence.

When Witte read off to the city editor the brief statement of the business agent, Rand grunted. Witte could not make out whether it meant approval or disapproval.

"Roscoe!" Rand called across the room. A reporter at the farther end laid aside the afternoon paper he was reading and strode up to the city editor's desk.

"Witte, here, got a statement from Weber of the molders," Rand said. "He says there will be a strike unless the present negotiations end favorably for the union. It is the first authentic statement we have had from Weber. Witte will give you the exact wording. Give me about two-thirds of a column on it. It is a first page story."

Addressing Witte, the city editor told him to write out the other items he had picked up during the afternoon.

"Give them about half a dozen lines each," he added, when Emil was seated at his desk.

The "Labor World" corner, occupying frequently less than a third of a column, immediately came to be the most interesting part of the paper to Witte—it was the part he had written.

Included in the labor run was the Socialist party headquarters.

When Witte introduced himself to a rotund, smiling German, who

was the secretary of the party and from whom all news concerning the Socialists of N— emanated, the latter extended his hand to him with profuse cordiality.

“So you are from the *Express*,” the secretary—Gus Miller was his name—said. “And what became of the other fellow, Cochrane? Was he fired, or did he get married?”

Miller and his colleague at the next desk laughed volubly at this joke about Cochrane. As Witte seemed to remain somewhat unappreciative of it, Miller explained that the *Express* had changed at least half a dozen labor reporters within as many months.

“Most of the fellows were no good,” Miller said. “One good reporter they had got married and went into the State to become the editor of a country newspaper.”

When Witte called the next day he found Miller in an argumentative mood. The secretary launched out on the iniquity of the present system and what fools these mortals were for not seeing it and for having to be coaxed into the Socialist fold.

The German’s eyes twinkled good-humoredly at the young reporter.

“We have been fairly successful with some of the reporters in the past,” Miller said. “Many of the newspaper men in town are Socialists. We have converted them. And now for you, my boy, we shall have to start in making a Socialist of you.”

Witte could not make out whether Miller was speaking in jest or in earnest. The secretary continued in the same vein.

“Hoffman,” he said, addressing his companion at the neighboring desk, “I commission you with the job of converting this young man. Show your skill as an agitator now.”

“It will be no easy task, I dare say,” Hoffman replied. “This young man must be fresh from the University, where they drill them carefully into the belief that private property is sacred. However, we shall try.”

Hoffman, smiling, searched the reporter’s eyes as if in confirmation of his diagnosis.

“You might spare yourself the trouble of trying to convert me,” Witte said simply. “I *am* a Socialist.”

Miller and Hoffman at once dropped their bantering tone and became alive with interest in the boy before them. The secretary began plying him with questions. What local did he belong to? Oh, he did not belong to the party. Why not? Was there no Socialist branch in his

town? He saw that Witte was not a native of N—.

So far as Witte knew there was no Socialist party branch in Spring Water. Miller fished out a card catalogue from one of the drawers in his desk and looked it through. Witte was right; there was no branch in Spring Water. He began talking excitedly to Hoffman. They were not doing things right. They should have another organizer in the State. It was a rank shame. Here was a city like Spring Water, a city of fifteen thousand people, and no Socialist branch in it. He would take the matter up at the next meeting of the state executive board. They must have another organizer in the field forthwith!

“Are there any other Socialists in Spring Water?” Miller wanted to know. Witte could not enlighten him.

“How did you happen to become a Socialist?” the secretary asked.

“An uncle of mine,” Witte spoke slowly, “an uncle from Russia, was visiting us—he left me some books and pamphlets.”

Miller was talking excitedly once more, this time about Russia. Ah, that was a country for you! What splendid work the revolutionists were doing there. What heroic self-sacrifice! Next to Germany, Russia would soon have the strongest Socialist movement in the world. All this while in the United States the Socialist movement was lagging behind. Yes, lagging behind, in spite of the fact that every one could read here. . . . They must put another organizer in the State at once. A city like Spring Water without a Socialist branch! Such splendid material as this young man having to wait for an uncle from Russia to bring him Socialist books and pamphlets. It was a shame, a rank shame! He would take it up at the next meeting of the executive board; they must economize elsewhere. But they must put another organizer in the field—

When Witte had written out his Socialist items—there was almost double the usual number of items that afternoon—Rand said to him as he was running his pencil over a line in the copy:

“The old windbag was talkative to-day.”

Witte guessed that he meant Miller, the secretary of the Socialist party.

“It is all right though,” Rand added. “Always pick up as many of these little items as you can—Go to dinner.”

Witte laid aside the magazine and walked up to the window. It was a

sultry August afternoon and the heat in the attic room he occupied was insufferable. But the heat made him far less uncomfortable than the story he had just finished. . . .

It was a fine story, the kind he would himself like to have written. He wondered what sort of man the author was. A man who could write a story with so much feeling in it, with so much tenderness, could not be happy. Yet the successful putting of such a story on paper in itself ought to be sufficient to bring happiness to any man. He gazed at his own half column of cut and dried notices in the *Express*. What a vast expanse of life and experience lay between his half column of labor items and the story he had just read! Would he traverse that distance? And if not, what was he doing there? Was he undergoing this struggle merely for a fate like Jim Bayley's?

In the three months Emil had been on the staff of the *Express* he had learned much about newspaper life, although he never took part in the conversation of the older reporters—merely listened. The fame and glory of the business was on the wane, he heard constantly repeated. It was becoming less and less of a profession. Chances for getting up were fewer, chances for losing out increasing. One of the things that always depressed him was a visit to the office from Jim Bayley.

James Hawthorne Bayley was a man of sixty. He was married and had grandchildren. Though he made an effort to keep himself erect, his shoulders were stooped. When he walked he shuffled his feet in a way that showed he had done a great deal of walking in his life. But his face was boyish. From the editor, Mr. Hamlin, to the youngest office boy, every one on the *Express* called him "Jim." Bayley would joke with the reporters, look roguishly when one of the boys told a piquant story. He always had a knowing, indulgent smile on his lips. The reporters always remarked how well he kept up.

In his day Jim Bayley was a power. He was in turn star reporter, city editor, managing editor on the N— papers. Now he was an all-round man on the *Blade*, a struggling afternoon newspaper. He was working under a man he had brought up. Two or three times a week the city editor of the *Express* would call him on the telephone. There were certain stories no one could handle so well as Jim Bayley. The city editor would whisper a few words to him, Jim would nod knowingly, and disappear.

His stories always ran long. Occasionally Rand would remark this

to Bill Francis, the political reporter. The two would smile, but the city editor would turn in the copy just as it was written. Jim was paid space rates and he needed the extra money.

Yes, Witte thought, it was a case either of writing stories like the one in the magazine and getting fame and a competence, or else of labor news, court news, city hall news, with a wind-up like that of Jim Bayley.

He went down into the street thinking how he was going to spend the afternoon and evening. It was his day off. Rand had given him tickets to an amusement park. But he had been to the park before and was bored. An idea came to him. He would go down to see his people. . . .

The Jews of N— were huddled together in a few blocks in one part of the city. Emil had been through the district before. But those were hurried business trips. This time he walked leisurely.

The streets here were teeming with humanity. The heat had driven the people from their stuffy quarters into the open. Women were sitting in the hallways or on benches near their houses. They chatted volubly in Yiddish.

Evening was approaching, and the men and girls came straggling from the shops and factories, each met by the anxious look of a wife or mother, each questioned and talking about the weather, the heat, and how it was becoming unbearable around four o'clock, toward the close of the day. He sought out a Jewish restaurant and took his dinner there. The place was small and there were only three people about the half a dozen tables. The meal reminded Witte of home. His mother cooked just such meals.

The proprietress of the restaurant came up to where he sat and talked to him. She was a middle-aged, motherly-looking woman, who had come to N— recently from New York. She had never before seen Emil Witte at her place, and she wondered whether he was a recent arrival from New York.

She had taken Emil for a tailor, first, because all the Jewish young men who came to eat at her place were tailors, and secondly, because Emil's shoulders were stooped exactly like the shoulders of a machine operator.

Her questions, frank and penetrating, did not offend Emil. On the contrary, he liked to be talked to by the motherly-looking woman.

Nobody had talked to him so kindly and with such whole-souled simplicity since he had been in N—, since he had left home.

When he emerged into the street again night lay over the N— ghetto. The girls and boys had on their best clothes, and in pairs, or in couples, were going down-town, or to parks. The older people remained sitting in their hallways or on chairs and benches near their homes, drinking in the slight breeze.

He came upon a small bookstore. In the window were the works of Yiddish authors whose names his father frequently mentioned. He bought several of the small, paper-covered volumes and started for his room.

His explorations of the N— ghetto left him with a heavy heart. They revived memories of his own coming to the new world and of the four years of separation from his father, those tender years passed in loneliness and unutterable longing for his sire, a longing only partly quenched with the letter the postman handed them once a week.

He began reading one of the Yiddish books he had bought. The little volume dealt with the very things he had been thinking of, the pathos of parting and the joy of the reunion in the new world of an immigrant family. It was midnight when he laid aside the book after reading it from cover to cover. Just before he fell asleep an idea came to him. Why not write up the N— ghetto? He would try it in the morning. He set his alarm clock at seven.

He wrote the story the following morning, and the morning after and the third morning. Then he found that he had begun telling his story at its weakest point and rewrote it anew. Stealthily he laid down the manuscript on the city editor's desk, after receiving his assignments for the day, and made a rush for the elevator. He did not wish to meet Rand's gaze, nor see what disposition the city editor would make of his uncalled-for contribution.

When Witte returned to the office at five o'clock and sat down to write his labor items, Rand called him. The city editor introduced him to the Sunday editor. Rand had turned over Witte's story to the latter.

The Sunday editor—Witte did not get his name and was too timid to ask—explained what he wished. Could not Witte elaborate the story in one or two places—he pointed out the places—and return it in the morning?

Nothing further was said about the story till midnight Saturday. At

that hour the city editor tore off a page from the Sunday supplement and handing it to Witte said:

“Here is your story.”

Across the seven columns of the page was the headline, “An Evening in the N— Ghetto.” The story and illustrations covered the entire page. Some of the more striking sentences in the story were boxed near the top of the page. Above the body of the story in big letters came the legend—“By Emil Witte—”

Monday noon Witte found on his desk a letter from Lena Rosen. There were congratulations on the success he had made in journalism and much praise of his story. . . . Then there came some gossipy news about Spring Water’s young set—the Jewish set. As he read the letter Emil became conscious of how far he had drifted from this set, which consisted of boys and girls of his own age, his former schoolfellows, in the years he had been at the University.

The letter wound up with a plaintive note. Life in Spring Water was dull. Lena would be happy if she too could go to a city and strike out for herself. But her parents would not hear of it.

“They are keeping me here ‘like a goose in a cage,’” Lena wrote, Englishing a Yiddish phrase of her mother’s.

Before Emil’s eyes rose the face of Lena, so reminiscent of the fat Mrs. Rosen and yet so wonderfully different. For Lena was slender and stately and had refined manners and an aristocratic bearing.

He thought of the girl all afternoon. In his mind he talked to her. Oh, how he talked! He never knew he could be so eloquent. He talked of his future. It was to be a big future. No, not money. He would do things—big things. He would write. He would write about the poor and disinherited, the people he was meeting on his rounds as a labor reporter, the misunderstood, submerged people of the slums. . . . And in his mind’s eye he saw Lena agreeing with him—understanding him—ready to follow him to the ends of the earth—

There were the usual number of clippings on his desk, obituaries from the evening papers, to rewrite. He wrote the items rapidly one after the other. He felt equal to tasks ten times as great. He welcomed work.

A soreness against the city editor arose in his heart. What was he keeping him on this drab stuff for, instead of giving him real work to do, instead of giving him assignments that would offer an opportunity

to show his skill as a writer? But the soreness soon gave way to the pleasant recollection of Lena's letter. What a fine judge of writing she was! How enthusiastic she was about his story, how she understood him—

“Witte,” Rand bellowed across the room, “this is a metropolitan city. You left out the street number in the Winkelmann obit. What is it?”

Emil fumbled among his papers, found the clipping and read off the number, under the city editor's blazing look. He felt as if he had received a ducking in ice water. The picture of Lena and all the bold and pleasant thoughts with which it had been associated that afternoon faded from his brain. He was gloomy the rest of the evening. . . .