

# Joseph Wittlin

Giant of Polish Letters

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“EACH of us,” Joseph Wittlin said in an interview with the French critic Champigneulle, “has some Ithaca to reach.”

To a man such as Wittlin, accustomed to view life as an odyssey, full of blind buffetings yet purposeful withal, the senseless and awful events that have taken place since he left Warsaw late in August, 1939, for what he supposed was to be a retreat near Paris, do not seem remarkable. Long before they occurred, Wittlin had learned, partly from the shock of his first war, in which as a Pole from Galicia he served in the Austrian army, partly from years of studying Homer and the Bible, and from contemplation of the life of St. Francis of Assisi, to remain unshaken by the jar of earthly happenings. As a result, the horror of his second war, which brings him now an exile to America, has left Wittlin with no perceptible scar. From great literature and from long practice of the contemplative life, Wittlin had learned before the present horror took shape the secret of personal quarantine.

All there is to know about the shy, gentle, almost monkish man whose “Saga of the Patient Footsoldier” has been named by the Polish PEN Club as its candidate for the Nobel Prize, may be learned from the Saga itself, the first volume of which has already been published in an English edition (1939) under the title “Salt of the Earth,” and is soon to appear, perhaps with another title, in an American edition.

Wittlin has often been called the Polish Andreev, and it is of Andreev one is reminded at once by the title of the *Saga*: one thinks instinctively of Andreev’s “Confessions of a Little Man during Great Days” and reflects that it is justifiable to link the Pole with the Russian, since Wittlin’s work, if not the “Confessions of a Little Man,” is unquestionably that “Little Man’s” odyssey. Wittlin’s hero, Peter, moreover, is certainly the very archetype of those masses of marching men in Andreev’s *Red Laugh* who “did not know where they were going,” nor “what the sun was for,” who, in fact, “did not know anything.”

Again, they call Wittlin the Polish Barbusse, and in a sense he is, for his Peter is the very flesh and blood and heart and soul of what Barbusse’s *poilu*-hero would be if he were a Polish-Ukrainian Austrian like Peter. For Peter is a single individual who stands for all the individuals who, drawn from the “emptied towns and ruined villages” constitute the “material of war” crowded by Barbusse into *Le Feu*.

SOME call Wittlin the Polish Remarque, and again with a certain amount of justification. Wittlin’s saga, like Remarque’s familiar “All Quiet on the Western Front,” is conceived in pity and elaborated with fine-edged irony, and we can be certain that when Peter passes from the scene, if he does at the end of the saga as it is projected in Wittlin’s mind, the report issued by his superior officer—perhaps by the exquisite Bachmatiuk himself—will read as the one did at the end of Remarque’s tale, “Nichts Neues im Westen.”

But Wittlin differs from his Russian and French and German contemporaries despite the common denominator of background, which is the First World War, and of hero, which is the ordinary individual. Andreev surveyed the common scene and found the poor creatures who marched blindly down the sunbaked roads all mad. Barbusse saw the same men in the filthy trenches of France as instruments, some consciously but the majority without knowing it, of a purpose. Remarque saw the mass of those who fought for Germany as men lost beyond possibility of reclamation. Wittlin saw them as simply—Peter, the Hucul railroad guard from the mountain hamlet of Topory-Czernielica whose single ambition in life was to wear the cap which was the sign and symbol of Imperial service.

Who is Peter? He is the Unknown Soldier, the one universally apotheosized in the *inter bella* years and remembered with cenotaphs and everlasting fires. Visiting diplomats placed expensive wreaths on his tomb and passers-by tipped their hats in his memory.

But what sort of being was this Unknown Soldier? Nobody can say. Nobody knows. He was as unknown humanly as if he had never existed within a human frame or drawn a human breath. The thought of this, of the blank, empty, utter Unknownness of the man struck Wittlin as appalling, and he conceived the idea of revealing him. He set about the task in 1925.

Both before this time and after, Wittlin had lived a good deal in the company of acknowledged heroes. He entered their company in an Austrian war hospital when he began reading the “Odyssey” to pass away the idle hours of convalescence. The poem became so absorbing to him that soon he was translating it into Polish verse. This was a gigantic undertaking and it took Wittlin a long time to accomplish, so that for months and even years he lived in close association with the Great Men of a great world war.

Wittlin knew, however, from his own participation in the twentieth century counterpart of the Greco-Trojan duel, that it is not the Ulysseses who make a war but the nameless, long-suffering soldiers who travel on foot. The idea of these men as heroes fused in Wittlin’s mind with the idea of revealing the Unknown Soldier, and so the “Saga of the Patient Footsoldier,” whose very name Niewiadomski means “Son of an Unknown Father,” was born.

THE quality which more than any other distinguishes Wittlin from contemporaries to whom he has been compared is his Biblicalness. His style is essentially that of the great stories in the Bible: clear, simple, and detached, worthy of significant deeds. His treatment of individuals is Biblical: each becomes a symbol and each is as completely evoked in his symbolic role as a Job or a Daniel. His manner of communicating mass emotion has a Biblical quality too. Wittlin realizes the emotion simply and poignantly through the gestures and sounds of striking and symbolic figures, as in the unforgettable scene of mass despair on the platform of the station of

Topory-Czernielica the morning when the troop-train bearing Peter and the other Huculs and all the assorted mountain types to the war begins to pull out. Wittlin’s sense of the mystical unity of all life is Biblical too and nowhere more majestically brought into play than in the early scenes of the story where Peter is still in his native village above the mist-hung gorges of the Prut and the Czeremosz.

The Biblical quality of Wittlin’s saga, as well also as that of his earlier war poems (*Hymns*), is by no means exclusively of the Old Testament, though the Old Testament is unquestionably Wittlin’s first and greatest model. His attitude toward all humankind, not only toward Peter, whom he loves and who is, in fact, himself, but toward the Austrian officer Bachmatiuk at the other end of the social scale, is Christian and New Testamental: he has regard for both the least and the greatest of men and he sees both deluded in equal measure by the very quality in themselves that makes them nobler than the beasts, the capacity men have for selfless devotion to another human being or to an ideal. Wittlin enfolds simple Peter and elegant Bachmatiuk alike in a common mantle of Pity for their blind loyalty to a shaky old man called the Emperor in far-off Vienna who was in no way worthy of their devotion and only used it to destroy them.

In bulk the sum of Wittlin’s writings is not great, for two reasons. For one thing he is an ascetic and requires long periods of silence for contemplative reflection. For another, he is a painstaking craftsman and an almost excessively scrupulous checker of facts. He says he stands in positive terror of giving an impression that does not accord with historic truth. The result is that it took him ten years to write “Salt of the Earth” alone, and this part of the “Saga” is a record of only a very small part of the odyssey of Peter. Masses of material shedding light on the war had to be gone over: old newspapers, old photographs, archives in every part of the Empire had to be examined lest the letters which Wittlin imagined arriving to tell him he had perpetrated an untruth should actually arrive!

It is to be hoped Wittlin will find in New York the island of silence he never found in Warsaw, where he told me he had to stuff his ears with cotton to keep out the drone of airplanes training overhead. Here, it is to be hoped, he will complete the “Saga of the Patient Footsoldier” and also, after a period of gestation, write something superior to anything that has so far been done—though Remarque has tried it in “Flotsam” and Feuchtwanger before him in *Paris Gazette*—with the theme of the “*Völkerwanderung*” of the twentieth century. No one is better qualified to do it than Wittlin, for he knows Europe thoroughly, from the melancholy expanse of the Podolian steppe, which is native country to him, to the cloister of Assisi and the *cafés* of Paris. He loves Europe and still believes in what he calls “Europe-ism”: perhaps he will be able to show Americans, who for the moment are sceptical about it, the goodness and beauty which are still at the heart of this embattled concept.

