

The Titanic 1912



The Lebanese of the Titanic

Centennial (1912-2012)

Sunday 15th of April 1912 is the centennial of the sinking of the Titanic and the disappearance of 1,514 passengers. Among those who perished were Lebanese who left their homeland in search for a better life.

It was reported that there were 154 Lebanese passengers on the Titanic and only 29 survived. Anecdotes tell of a very eerie story about the reaction of the Lebanese on board the ship. When fate struck the liner, passengers from Lebanese villages danced the dabke to the rhythm of a piper. Their reaction to the sinking of the ship might seem uncanny; however one needs to know that culturally dancing is part of funeral rites that are still practiced in Lebanon especially during the funeral of people who die young or perish in a disaster. The Lebanese of the Titanic performed this ritual and danced for their own funeral, lamenting their fate and that of their family members.

These Lebanese villagers hailed from Hardine, Kfar Michki, Tibnine, El Shweir, Zgharta, and Serhel were of different ages and included children.

Several books were written about the Titanic, about those who perished on that ill fated day and those who survived. Among the survivors were Anna Thomas (Touma) and her son Georges. A book has recently been written by Joseph Thomas, one of Anna's grandchildren. The book is entitled 'Grandma Survived the Titanic'. Anna with tears in her eyes reported to her grandson that "there were a dozen families from her tiny village that accompanied them on this trip to America and who drowned on the Titanic, since they were locked in steerage." When the ship hit the iceberg, Anna was asked to pray by two Lebanese males who reported the fact to her; her response was "I will do so but I feel better find out what I have to pray about."

stories

Shaaninee Abi Saab, wife of George Joseph Whabee, the better known of the Arabs who traveled on the Titanic was born in Thoum, Lebanon on Palm Sunday, 1874. She was the youngest of seven children, the daughter of Thomas George Abi-Saab and Katoole Deeb Abi-Saab. She married George Joseph Wahbee and came to America in 1906, hoping to make enough money to return to Lebanon and buy land for her family. But, when her husband died in 1908, she remained in Youngstown, Ohio, where she raised her children, Joseph, Thomas, Albert, Rose and Mary. Around 1910, her son Thomas became seriously ill. Doctors told her to send him back to Lebanon where the fresh mountain air was expected to help nurse him back to good health. She later learned that her son's illness had worsened, and, fearing his death, she returned to Lebanon, arriving 10 days after he had died. She had left her daughters, Rose and Mary, in the care of the Christ Mission Society.

It was in April 1912 that Shawnee traveled to Cherbourg, France, where she purchased her ticket (#2688) aboard the Titanic. It cost her 4 pounds 4 shillings. She boarded with the three cousins, named above. A survivor, she witnessed the sinking of the ship, and saw her male cousins remain onboard. Members of the crew, using guns, fired into the air to prevent some of the men from rushing to the few lifeboats. She sat with other passengers in the life boat, dressed only in a nightgown and life-jacket, shivering in the cold. Several passengers in the boat died from the cold during the six-hour wait.

Part of her story was told to the Sharon Herald issue of April 1937, 14 commemorating the sinking twenty-five years later: "Banoura and I were placed into the next-to-last lifeboat to be lowered from the ship. A scared young man leaped over the side of the liner and landed in the bottom of the lifeboat. Women shielded him with their night gowns so the sailors wouldn't see him. "They would have shot him," she recalled. "After having pulled about half a mile, the sailors stopped rowing. We watched the lights of the big boat with our hearts in our mouths. Then we saw it sink." Shawnee was cared for by the Hebrew Sheltering Society when she arrived in New York. She later boarded a train for Youngstown after being paid \$150 by the Titanic company for her lost belongings. Witnesses and relatives reported that when she left for Lebanon to see her dying son, her hair was jet black. A year after the Titanic tragedy, her hair was completely white.

Source: Ray Hanania, Arabs on Titanic: We Share the Pain but Not the Glory, Mediaoasis, Originally published on April 1998, 8, updated Dec. 19, 2009.