

Third Class TITANIC Survivor Stories:

Anna Sophia Turja

On Board

She was 18 years old when she boarded the Titanic in Southampton, England, as a steerage (third class) passenger on her way to America. To her the ship was a floating city. The main deck, with all its shops and attractions, was indeed bigger than the main street in her home town. The atmosphere in third class was quite lively: a lot of talking, singing, and fellowship. She had two roommates on board who were also young Finnish women. One was married, travelling with two small children; the other travelling with her brother. But in steerage, the men were kept in the front part of the ship, the women in the rear. Late that Sunday night, she felt a shudder and a shake. Shortly thereafter, her roommate's brother knocked on the door and told them that "something was wrong," that they should wear warm clothing and put on their life jackets. Their little group started heading for the upper decks. A crew member tried to keep them down – ordered them back – but they refused to obey, and he didn't argue with them. She clearly remembers, however, that the doors were closed and chained shut behind them to prevent others from coming up. The others of the group continued up to a higher deck, "where it will be safer," they said, but out of pure curiosity and chance she remained on what turned out to be the boat deck. She thought it was too cold to go up further, and she was intrigued by the activity and by the music being played by the band, though she didn't know the names of the tunes. She remembers the band coming out of a room they had been playing in and the doors being locked after everyone had gotten out. She also remembers seeing the lights of another ship from the deck.

In the Lifeboat

Her lifeboat was fully loaded when it was launched; it was not one of the ones that got caught up in the cables. They immediately rowed away from the ship, fearing that they would get sucked down with it when it went under. The sailors were so well trained, she was sure that they would have capsized had it not been for the expertise of the oarsmen. She heard loud explosions as the lights went out. Her lifeboat was so full that as she held her hand on the edge of the boat her fingers got wet up to the knuckles. For the first five or ten minutes in the water they had to beat people off who were trying to get into the boat. They were in the lifeboats for eight hours. Though the night was a "brilliant, bright night," they had to burn any scraps of paper they could find -- money or anything else that wouldn't cause a flash fire -- so that the boats could see each other and stay together. Her most haunting memory was that of the screams and cries of dying people in the water. Every time she would get to this part of the story she would start crying. "They were in the water, and we couldn't help them."

Margaret Devaney O'Neill

Fled her small village in County Sligo in 1912 to escape famine, poverty, and the English, just as thousands of others had done, to seek out a new life in the New World. She carried with her a suitcase, some odds and ends, and the clothes she had on at the time. She was below decks in third class [steerage] peeling potatoes on April 14 1912 when she decided that she needed some fresh air. With coat in hand she headed up the many flights of stairs to the main deck. As she was nearing the top of the final flight she felt a tiny bump that interrupted the constant motion she had grown accustomed to over the last four days. It was, of course, the collision with the iceberg that would cause the TITANIC to sink. Unfortunately, 2230 passengers and crew tried to fit into 20 lifeboats. My grandmother was literally thrown into a boat when she was trying to go back to steerage to find her three traveling companions who boarded with her. She didn't know they were already doomed: Sealed behind bulkheads that were closed to try to prevent the ship from sinking.

On the lifeboat with about 50 other terrified souls it appeared that she would at least survive the sinking, but the officer in charge could not detach the lifeboat from the quickly sinking Titanic. The story goes that Margaret gave him the little knife that she had been using earlier to peel potatoes and with it he was able to cut the boat loose.

After her lifeboat was picked up by the Carpathia the officer returned the knife to my grandmother and gave her the ensign, which is the plaque that is attached to the side of each lifeboat bearing the White Star Line symbol. He gave her the ensign to thank her for the knife, but he also knew that people would begin tearing apart the lifeboats as souvenirs and he wanted to make sure that she had something to tell her grandchildren about.