

The Titanic: A Jewish Family's Story

By Rachel Mines

The sinking of the *Titanic* in April 1912 has become a metaphor for the 20th century's ambivalent relationship with technology. But the *Titanic* was more than a metaphor. Like other ships before and after, and notwithstanding her reputation as a floating luxury hotel, the *Titanic*'s primary purpose—tragically abbreviated—was to ferry mail and passengers between Europe and North America.

Many of the *Titanic*'s passengers were Jewish, and we know the names of the more well-to-do: industrialist Benjamin Guggenheim and Isidor Strauss, the founder of Macy's Department Store, for example. But most Jewish passengers travelled third-class, or "steerage," and of those, less is known. We know, however, that at least one was planning to settle in Montreal, and therefore he plays a small role in Canadian Jewish history. He was my mother's uncle.

David Lifschitz was the son of Moshe and Zlate Lifschitz of the Latvian port city of Libau (now Liepāja). He was born in 1887 and, after brief service in the Russian army, emigrated to Manchester around 1911. There he changed his surname to Livshin, established a watchmaking business, and married his landlady's sister, a Lithuanian Jewish girl named Cheena.

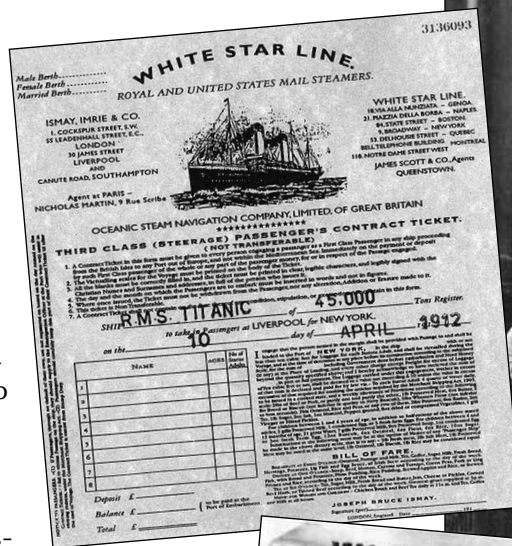
About a year later, the young couple decided to emigrate again, this time to join David's sisters Rose and Elke in Montreal. Cheena was pregnant, so David planned to emigrate first, establish a home, and send for her and the baby afterwards.

On March 21, 1912, David wrote to Elke in Montreal, advising her he would sail on Wednesday, March 27, on the ship *Grampian*. He would be travelling as Abraham Harmer, presumably because he had bought the ticket from a man of that name.

But, perhaps because the *Grampian* would be at sea over Pesach (which in 1912 fell between April 2 and 8), David changed his mind. When the *Grampian* arrived in Halifax on April 4, David was not on board. He had exchanged his ticket for a third-class ticket for the *Titanic*, number 374887, at a cost of 7 pounds 5 shillings—the worst bargain he would ever make.

With David Livshin (travelling as Abraham

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David Livshin, place/date unknown

Harmer) aboard, the *Titanic* left Southampton at noon on Wednesday, April 10,

two days after the end of Pesach. The crossing was meant to take a week.

The first few days of David Livshin's voyage were probably pleasant. Third-class quarters on the *Titanic* were basic but clean. The only real deficiency was that there were only two bathtubs for over 700 people. Other than that, there were few passenger complaints. Music and dancing took place in the third-class passenger areas almost every night. The third-class poop deck, at the stern of the ship, offered spectacular views. The food was plain but good, and there was plenty of it.

The White Star Line provided its Jewish passengers with Jewish cooks who prepared kosher food. Some of these cooks were appointed by rabbis to act as "guardians" to Jewish passengers. It's likely that these guardians would have also arranged Shabbes services. On the *Titanic*, Shabbes took place from sunset on April 13 to sunset on April 14, ending just a few hours before the ship struck the iceberg. The full Shabbes observance was probably not possible, but the more religious—David was probably one of them—would have done their best to observe tradition.

David found himself travelling with immigrants of various nationalities: English, Irish, Swedish, Finnish, German, Italian, and others. Perhaps David made some friends among the Jewish passengers, such as his cabin-mate, another Jewish man travel-

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ling alone, named Harry Corn. Like David, Harry was planning to set up a home in America and bring his family over.

David's comfortable trip wasn't to last.

Just before midnight on Sunday, April 14, the *Titanic* hit an iceberg. Two hours later, the ship sank with great loss of life. Of a total of 2240 crew and passengers, only about 700 made it to the lifeboats. David was one of them.

It's impossible to reconstruct fully and accurately what happened to David Livshin in the dark, confused, and painful hours between midnight and about 4:00 the next morning, when the rescue ship *Carpathia* arrived to pick up those passengers who had made it to the lifeboats.

But after reviewing the historical evidence, it seems most likely that David somehow found his way onto the lifeboat Collapsible B. This was one of the last lifeboats to be launched from the *Titanic*—at 2:15 am, just five minutes before the *Titanic* went under—and the lifeboat landed in the water upside down.

About 30 men struggled through the icy water to board the lifeboat. They spent the rest of the night, soaking wet, freezing cold, and with no certain hope of rescue, balancing on the upside-down and slowly sinking hull.

This is what Archibald Gracie, one of the survivors on Collapsible B, recalled about his ordeal:

“We were all standing up, facing forward in column, two abreast. She was packed standing from stem to stern. Finally dawn appeared and there on the port side of our upset boat we saw the steamer *Carpathia* Two of the [life]boats cast off from the others and rowed directly towards us When everyone was in the rescuing lifeboat, [a ship's officer] lifted a lifeless body into the boat beside me. I worked over the body for some time, rubbing the temples and the wrists, but when I turned the neck I know the man was dead. I recall that he wore gray woolen socks. His hair was dark. When we reached the *Carpathia* he was taken aboard and buried.”

We don't know for certain that the man Gracie describes was David Livshin, but he probably was. The names of the men who died in the other lifeboats are known, and a process of elimination puts David in Collapsible B.

David was buried at sea from the rescue ship *Carpathia*. There are several accounts of the burial, all of which agree that “Abraham Harmer” was one of the men buried.

William Logan, in his 1912 book *The Sinking of*



David Livshin and his sister Rose Lifschitz, taken before 1911 in Libau (now Liepaja), Latvia



Cheena Livshin and her son David Livshin (ben David), born 3 September, 1912 in Manchester.

the Titanic, explains, “The dead were W. H. Hoyte, first cabin; Abraham Horner, third class, and S. C. Sirbert, steward, and they were buried at sea the morning of April 15, latitude 41.14 north, longitude 51.24 west.”

By coincidence, April 14, 1912, the date the *Titanic* struck the iceberg, was the bar mitzvah of David's younger brother, my grandfather. We can only wonder what impact his brother's death had on my grandfather's life.

The April 15 edition of the *Montreal Gazette* carried headlines reporting the *Titanic*'s mid-sea collision. Hopefully—and prematurely—the paper announced that the *Titanic* had remained afloat and that most passengers had

been rescued. But the next morning brought grim news to the Montreal Lifschitzes: the *Titanic* had sunk with loss of 1200 lives. David's sister Rose travelled to New York to attend a memorial service for the victims and to identify David's few belongings.

Several months later, on September 3, 1912, David ben David Livshin was born in Manchester. His mother, Cheena, never remarried, supporting herself on a small pension from the Titanic Relief fund and her income as a wig-maker. Cheena never told David he had relatives in Montreal. He grew

up, became a radiologist, and was a respected member of Manchester's Jewish community, a Life President of his *shul*. He married and had three children, who are now adults with families of their own.

The fate—even the existence—of the Canadian and English branches of the family remained unknown to each other until a few years ago, when contact was finally reestablished through an Internet site, *Encyclopedia Titanica*. Now, almost a century after the *Titanic*'s sinking, the Lifschitz family has been reunited.

In the spring of 2008, I first spoke to my Manchester cousin, Michael Livshin, on the phone. As we finished our conversation, I told him, “It's been 96 years ... we shouldn't wait so long to talk again.” ♦

FROM YESTERDAY FOR TODAY: YIDDISH PROVERBS
Selected by Al Stein

Oyf yenems bord iz gut zikh tsu lernen shern -

Literally: It's good (convenient) to learn to shave on someone else's beard.