

Alien Passengers: Syrians Aboard the *Titanic*

Leila Salloum Elias



A century ago, just before midnight on April 14, 1912, the “unsinkable” RMS *Titanic*, on its maiden voyage from Southampton to New York, collided with an iceberg. Its sinking in the chilly Atlantic was a disaster that then and now captured the global imagination and became the stuff of countless stories of loss, heroism, and survival. But one story has not been fully told. Below deck, in steerage class, about one hundred and thirty Syrian passengers, immigrating to America, struggled to understand what was happening to the ship, as instructions were issued in a language few understood. Only about thirty survived, and among those only four men.

Today we know the names and origins of the vast majority of the over 2,200 passengers, and crew, as well as their reasons for taking the voyage. However there remain unanswered questions about

Survivor *Katrīn(ah) Rizq Buṭrus Yūsuf* with husband Peter and survivor, son Michael (*Shaḫīq*) sitting, 1907. Source: *Louis R. Joseph*.

these Arabic-speaking passengers whose families' farewells were the last words they heard from their native soil. Lost beneath the waters of the Atlantic, their names and lives disappeared with them.

For those whose bodies were recovered, little had been known save for a name or a presumed age or perhaps a description of their clothing. As for the survivors, their stories unfold to reveal the reasons for their departure, the effect of the disaster on them and finally what eventually transpired in their lives.

Leaving Home

Those Arabic-speaking passengers who boarded the *Titanic* in 1912 left during the peak of Syrian immigration to the U.S., from 1880 to 1920. Between 1910 and 1914 alone, it is said that one quarter of the population of what today is Lebanon emigrated from their homeland, many of them to *Amrīka*. Acute food shortages, a stagnant economy, political and religious tensions, the outbreak of epidemics and the rumblings of World War I set the movement for departure.¹ One eighty-six-year-old resident of *Kafar Mishkī*, a village that saw ten of its own perish in the sinking of the *Titanic*, recalled that emigration served as a possible solution to poverty and hunger.² *Tuḥūm*, hometown of five Syrian passengers aboard the ship, blamed its decrease in population on emigration. So many of the residents had departed for the United States (Ohio in particular), Cuba, Argentina, and Uruguay that by 1998, the number of families remaining in the village were fewer than those who had emigrated. So it was that during this period, emigration became what one writer refers to as a contagious disease, another, a fever.³

Even though the English language was strange to many and a different culture faced the immigrant in America, and in spite of the lack of professional industrial skills, the spirit of migration and ambition was strong. Although the reality of hardship and fatigue lay ahead of them, as one learns from the letters of one *Titanic* survivor's father to his hometown of *Shwayr*,⁴ the venture to the new world beckoned. Beyond the waters of the Atlantic, a life less laden with poverty and offering more opportunity drew them.

Stories of the successes of their fellow countrymen encouraged the belief that fortune and opportunity in the *Mahjar*⁵ awaited. America was idealized by returning immigrants. *Hardīn*'s⁶ group of *Titanic* passengers were inspired, like those before them who had left their northern Syrian town in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to join their fellow countrymen in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. According to letters sent back home by earlier successful settlers in 1911, the small Pennsylvania city already boasted a Maronite Church built by the new immigrant community where the newly arrived *Hardīn*ites would be comfortable with their fellow-villagers in their new foreign surroundings. Likewise, *Kafar Mishkī*ans could avoid the anxiety of leaving their lifelong surroundings knowing that Canada's capital, Ottawa, was home to many of their own.

Many times the first family member to emigrate would be the youngest of working age. It was more practical: the younger the age the more years of work, the higher the endurance of long working hours, and the greater the adaptability to new surroundings.

Women emigrated, as well, occasionally on their own to work, or to join husbands and fathers who had arrived earlier, as in the case of some of the Arabic-speaking female passengers on the *Titanic*. For those women who left ahead of their families, the care of their children was entrusted to the father, grandparents and other relatives. These women generally would take to peddling and the money they saved could eventually pay passage for other family members to emigrate. *Titanic* survivors *Zād Naşr Allāh* and *Shānīnah Abī Saʿb* were the first of their families to emigrate, while survivors *Jamīlah* and *Ilyās Yārid*, were on their way to join their mother *Nūr*, who had emigrated some years earlier with two other children.⁷ Family circumstances dictated who would leave first.

The immigration story was no different in the spring of 1912 when a group of men, women, newlyweds, children and infants gathered their luggage, said their good-byes, and embarked on their journey to New York. Some were joining spouses or parents, others returning to work and family; yet all shared one common bond – they were leaving their homeland.

All Aboard the *Titanic*

From families of the Arabic-speaking passengers and from survivors we learn that those who waited in Marseilles heard of a great ship of the sea, the “palace on the water,” the world’s largest liner: the unsinkable *Titanic*. In particular, they heard of a safe vessel that would provide secure passage across the Atlantic. Excitement was universal for the maiden voyage of this great ship; Arabic newspapers in 1912 referred to it as “the Giant of the Sea;” a “wonder of all wonders.” *Al-Dalīl* described it as a lofty tower making its way along the surface of the water.⁸

Save for one couple, the Syrians boarded as steerage passengers: this lowest fare for many amounted to their accumulated life’s savings. The majority took the route from Beirut to Marseilles and then onto Cherbourg. Four young Syrian men, whose stories appear to have disappeared with the loss of their lives, boarded at Southampton as steerage passengers. The newlywed *Naşr Allāhs*, also boarded at Southampton but in second class. Egyptian valet and dragoman *Ḥamad Ḥassab* travelled with his employer, thus garnering a berth in first class.

The Syrian passengers were mainly assigned to cabins together in the *Titanic*’s bow. This way communication in a common language would ease the journey for them. Relatives, fellow villagers and townsmen travelled together.⁹ Some knew each other, others did not. For entertainment, some brought their musical instruments, the *dūrbakkah*¹⁰ and the *cūd*,¹¹ to pass the time away by dancing and singing. They were celebrating a new beginning. The baggage they carried held not only their worldly possessions, but also what they felt they would need in the new environment. One story



Survivor Adal Habib Nasr Allah (Shamaley) 1916.
Source: author's collection.



Adal Nasrallah was only 14 years old when she survived the *Titanic's* sinking. Her husband Niquila died on board.

Source: <http://www.arabamericannews.com>

is told¹² of a Syrian woman who carried with her homemade *rawbah*¹³ to prepare her homemade *laban*.¹⁴ As the days went by on the *Titanic*, she noticed that her *rawbah* was slowly molding, the effects of the moist air and seawater. After her arrival in New York, she deeply lamented not only the *Titanic's* sinking but “*kif badna naʿmal laban?*”¹⁵

The largest luxury liner in the world began its maiden voyage on April 10, 1912 leaving Southampton at 12:15 p.m. Stopping at Cherbourg and then Queenstown, excitement mounted for all passengers and crew, for the rich and famous who were enjoying a luxurious cruise and for those whose main concern was to reach New York. Yet, with the sinking of the *Titanic* on April 15, as one newspaper commented, “there was neither breed nor birth in the courage that made all men equal that night. Peasant and merchant prince acted and died heroes of an equal stamp.”¹⁶ But the accounts of Syrian survivors tell a more complicated story.

Below Deck: Syrian Passengers and the Sinking of the *Titanic*

On the night of the sinking, passengers made a mad scramble for the lifeboats, the travelers in steerage among them. Amid the confusion and chaos, men, women, and children, stricken with fear, huddled together, shouting, weeping and praying. On the first-class deck, orders were issued that all men should stand aside and all women and children go below to Deck B. A similar message was given to steerage, reportedly the only place from which outcries were heard.¹⁷



Three surviving Arabs from the *Titanic* are shown here. Hinnah Yusuf Razi Darwish Tu'mah and her husband (not a passenger) are shown in the front row. Jirjis Yusuf Darwish Tu'mah and sister Mariyam Yusuf Darwish Tu'mah (back row) are also shown in this photo, taken years after the sinking. Photo courtesy al-Anwar February 10, 1998. Source: <http://www.arabamericannews.com>



This photo of Niqla Nasrallah was taken shortly before the event of the *Titanic*. He died during the sinking after helping his 14-year-old wife get on a lifeboat. Source: <http://www.arabamericannews.com>

Women were ordered to the front, men to the rear. When there was a push to go forward, the officers shouted at them to stand back and let the women go first. In a panic, steerage passengers pushed forward and men tried to get into the boats.

Disturbing accounts emerged from some of the steerage passengers themselves. Some recalled that many third-class passengers remained below deck, milling around aimlessly not knowing what had happened. The crew, not exceptionally helpful, gave them no instructions about what to do or where to go.¹⁸ Syrians with no English asked questions that appeared not to be understood.

Some passengers blamed the ship's stewards for not waking the steerage passengers in time and for ordering back to bed passengers who did initially realize something was wrong "because there was no danger."¹⁹ A Syrian survivor recalled the same – that upon impact with the iceberg, steerage passengers were told that everything was "all right."²⁰ Another, awakened by the sound of the crash and running up to the deck, was told by the officers to return to his quarters as there was "no danger,"²¹ while another couple were told that there was nothing to worry about.²² Accusations surfaced in a number of interviews after the sinking of hatches being slammed down to keep third-class passengers below deck while the boats were boarded, and of crew members trying to keep steerage passengers back as they rushed to the upper deck.²³ Indeed, the Arabic newspaper *al-Hudà* reported the shocking loss of Syrian passengers. It included a statement that Syrian passengers died

either by drowning in the icy waters, being “imprisoned” behind iron gates on the *Titanic* or held back by blocked doors in the hallway.²⁴

Others maintained that scores of steerage passengers, including women and children, “were drowned like rats” on the lower decks because the ship’s officers had assured them that there was no immediate danger. Those who managed to reach the upper decks were met by officers who either by persuasion or with revolvers shooting into the air, herded them back below.²⁵ Although women were able to push forward past the crewmen and reach the upper deck, some survivors recounted that stewards tried to keep them back as scores of men and women jumped overboard and drowned.²⁶ Four steerage men who made it to a lifeboat were ordered to leave. When they did not, one of the officers jumped into the boat, drew a revolver and shot the four dead.²⁷ Their bodies were thrown into the ocean.

Maintaining order on board was essential. In the hand of a ship’s officer faced with the possibility of pandemonium, a pistol was a method of control. Passengers spoke of the sound of shots fired around them²⁸ by officers as the boats were being lowered to avoid “a stampede into the small boats.”²⁹ There were threats to shoot if anyone panicked so as not to allow “those half-crazed men to get into the boats.”³⁰ Some such were shot down by officers as they attempted to force their way into the lifeboats, either with their families or alone.³¹ One Englishwoman saw two men trying to crowd out women shot by officers of the *Titanic* “right before my eyes.”³² Although there were denials that men were fired upon, and affirmations that revolvers were only discharged in the air to intimidate some steerage passengers who had “tumbled into a boat before it was prepared for launching,”³³ eyewitness accounts tell otherwise.

Many saw men who were shot fall into the water, particularly those who attempted to jump into the lifeboats. Officers fearing danger shot them.³⁴ One report is given by Syrian survivor *Laṭīfah*, wife of *Sulaymān Dāwūd al- Ba‘qlīnī*, who told a reporter from Arabic newspaper *al-Hudā*, that as Syrian women and children were boarding lifeboats she saw three men shot and killed by officers as they attempted to save themselves.³⁵ Others claimed that when panic broke out in steerage, ship’s officers had to shoot three men who tried to force their way into the boats.³⁶

There is also a Syrian survivor, steerage passenger *Mubārak Ḥannā Sulaymān Abī ‘Āsī*, who claimed to have been shot at six times by two of the *Titanic*’s officers while attempting to board a lifeboat.³⁷ Yet another Syrian saw a passenger shot dead by one of the sailors. Two of *Fāṭimah Muslamāni*’s cousins, she claimed, did not drown but rather were killed by the crew, one as he attempted to board a lifeboat, the other while in it. Syrian survivor *Sa‘īd Nakid* also saw a man shot dead as he attempted to board a lifeboat.³⁸ When several men in steerage tried to rush the officers in charge of the lifeboats, they were initially kept at bay “by fist blows.” But as the passengers grew more terrified, the officers made use of their revolvers, first firing in the air, then directly at the men, hitting one passenger in the arm. Before the stern of the *Titanic* submerged, the occupants of the tenth boat saw scores of men struggling in the water.³⁹

Shā‘nīnah (Jirjis) Yūsuf Wihbah recalled armed sailors driving men away from the boats, shouting “women and children first!” As a cousin pushed her towards the

lifeboats, she saw the sailors shooting into the air to frighten the men. Twenty-five years later, she would still remember how passengers overcome with fear either went into shock or frenzy – unable to move or simply jumping into the icy waters.⁴⁰ For newlywed *Sīlānah Yazbak*, the sailors were harsh with the men who attempted to board the lifeboats.⁴¹

Maryam ʿAssāf confirmed the same. In an interview with the *Ottawa Citizen* she spoke of the shooting she had witnessed of steerage passengers. Many of those who rushed the lifeboats died, she stated, “at the hands of the captain and other officers of the ship.” As for those driven back, they never had a chance to escape.⁴² *ʿAssāf* insisted that when the ship stopped, there was panic, and everybody tried to rush on deck. “There they encountered officers as they went for the boats and then the shots were fired, some being shot dead.”⁴³ Even more disheartening was that not every woman and child who “desired” to be saved was rescued. Her own cousins, a young girl and two women also headed for Ottawa, drowned.

Ṭannūs Buṭrus Kaʿwī’s widow insisted that her husband did not die by drowning but was shot while trying to reach safety. One Syrian survivor, who had traveled with *Kaʿwī*’s husband and others from *Zghartā*, told her about his death and that of fellow passenger *Sarkīs Lahhūd*. *Kaʿwī*’s widow attributed his death to the misfortune of being in steerage and not in first class, where she believed more attention was given to rescuing passengers.⁴⁴

The picture emerges: steerage passengers slowly making their way around the ship towards the rear carrying their bags and boxes; others suddenly awakened by the tremendous crash, running about in terror and confusion, not knowing what was happening. Of those who boarded third-class at Cherbourg only 33 percent survived, 15 percent of them men. “Neither the chance to be chivalrous nor the fruits of chivalry seemed to go with a third-class passage.”⁴⁵ Those passengers were left to shift for themselves. “A few of the more enterprising met the challenge, but most milled helplessly about their quarters – ignored, neglected, forgotten.”⁴⁶

For many Syrians and others who could not read or understand the English signs, despair intensified as they huddled around those who realized what was happening. They simply did not know what to do. One Arab-American newspaper was quick to allude to the lack of a “common thread” binding the Arabic-speaking passengers with Americans and Europeans.⁴⁷ This created a serious setback for the Arabic-speaking Syrians who could not communicate with the crew or other passengers. The newspaper, in an emotional editorial, reminded readers that the Syrians did not know a number of languages like their American and European counterparts. While some could generally communicate with the crew, Syrian women, specifically in third class, could not. The lack of English added to the confusion as many passengers wandered aimlessly below deck having to basically think for themselves. As a result many were lost as the lifeboats were being lowered.

The tribulations of third-class passengers trying to reach the lifeboats prompted survivor *Adal Qiyāmāh*’s father to write a letter recommending that relatives and all émigrés purchase second-class passage.⁴⁸ He gave this advice because the gates in

third class would be shut in a sinking ship, and lifeboats would be more accessible from second-class berths.

Decades after the sinking of the *Titanic*, survivors still recalled the true and honest attempts of many to guide steerage passengers to the upper decks at the height of the disaster. One Arabic newspaper, commenting on American and English newspaper coverage of the courage and brave behavior of the men on the *Titanic*, extolled the courage of the Syrian men, reminding readers that of all the Syrian passengers, “only four men survived.”⁴⁹

But it was the memories of the survivors that remained focused on the sight of the ship’s decks lined with people hoping for rescue: the cries of hundreds of fellow passengers struggling for their lives and combating approaching death in the icy waters of the Atlantic. There were cries and moans from the ocean that steadily swelled into a “long continuous wailing chant” sounding like “locusts,” as one survivor recalled.⁵⁰ A Syrian survivor, a young boy at the time of the sinking, years later, commented that all his life he would never forget the voices of frightened people facing death, their screaming and their groaning.⁵¹

Mourning the Dead, Assisting the Living: Arabic Press and Societies

Worldwide coverage of the sinking appeared in major newspapers, with local coverage focused on families affected by the disaster. Arabic newspapers in New York did the same, initially reporting the catastrophic event, and then concentrating on details concerning Syrian passengers. Syrian newspapers, *Mir’at al-Gharb* and *Al-Bayān*’s coverage began on 16 April; *al-Dalīl*, *al-Hudā*, and the weekly *al-Sā’ih*, all carried front-page coverage.⁵² The first reports in the daily Arabic newspapers did not mention that Syrian passengers had been on board. The enormous number of drowned victims and reports that women and children appeared to be among those saved were repeated in paper after paper. Calling it a calamity of enormous magnitude and the gravest of all disasters, a horror that no human could ever imagine, these Arabic newspapers spoke of the American, English and European passengers, of Astor and his wife, of William Stead, who was on his way from London to New York, of Major Archibald Butt and Benjamin Guggenheim.⁵³ Even *Lisān al-Hāl* of Beirut included a tribute to Stead.⁵⁴ Articles and editorials were similar to *al-Hudā*’s on the 17 April.

In a poignant editorial, *al-Hudā* reminded readers that the majority of Syrians aboard ship were emigrating to better their circumstances but, as a result of the sinking, left this world for the “eternal one.” They had sought freedom but became prisoners of fate. What happened to these Syrian passengers was not only a catastrophe but also a disaster for the community as a whole.⁵⁵ Another paper commented that the Syrians were dealt a great misfortune by this maritime disaster and that fate had ended the dreams of their fellow-countrymen who were bound for “this country” for work, enterprise and the fulfillment of great hopes and dreams.⁵⁶

In those first weeks, for those desperate to know the fate of family and friends,

New York's Arabic newspapers published queries from readers requesting information about certain passengers.⁵⁷

The Arabic newspapers were the mouthpiece of the immigrants and the homeland. News of the sinking of the *Titanic* affected every Arabic-speaking individual on both sides of the ocean. That period saw massive emigration from Greater Syria and for many, relatives and friends may have booked passage on the ship. It fell to the Arab-American newspapers, Syrian clubs and individuals to uncover and publish as much reliable information as possible so that a husband in Canada, an uncle in San Francisco, a sister in Cleveland, or a father in New York would know for a fact if the presence of a relative aboard the *Titanic* was to be celebrated or mourned.

One of the first announcements was made by the secretary of the *Ittiḥād al-Sūrī*, ʿAbbās Abū *Shaqrā*, informing the Syrian community in New York that the club had taken upon itself to care for survivors. “Last night they were brought in ... A committee has been appointed to receive them and comfort them ...”⁵⁸ The seven-member delegation⁵⁹ was there when the *Carpathia* docked, the sole delegation representing the community at the port of arrival.⁶⁰

Syrian survivors were taken to three New York hospitals. The *Muntadā* and the *Nahḍah*, both prominent clubs of the Syrian community, checked the hospitals for Syrian passengers admitted, taking the names of those they found. By telephone from St. Vincent Hospital, *Dāwūd Hadāri*, president of the *Ittiḥād*, supplied the Arabic newspapers with the names of the Syrian survivors there.⁶¹ From the Hebrew Shelter, *Tawfiq Biskintī*, one of the *Ittiḥād*'s members and another delegation member, called in with more information and to verify names of survivors and other passengers.

One survivor, *Fahīm Rūḥānā al-Zaʿinnī* of *Tūlā* in the *Batrūn* informed *Biskintī* that of the twenty-three Syrian survivors, a number to be subsequently corrected, only four were men. *Biskintī* reported that approximately one hundred and twenty-five Syrians had originally boarded the *Titanic*, although the first estimate he had been given by the survivor was between ninety-five and one hundred and five.⁶² *The New York Times* cited the number of Syrians lost as eighty, a number given by Father Francis Wakim who was caring for the Syrian survivors.⁶³

The number of survivors is the same as that given by *Maryam ʿAssāf* in an interview after she arrived in Ottawa. The dead, she said, numbered one hundred and two. Of this number, eleven were on their way to Ottawa.⁶⁴ A Canadian newspaper, reporting on the loss of one Syrian family, stated that “over one hundred people from Mount Lebanon were on the boat when the ship struck the iceberg and only a few were saved.”⁶⁵ *Al-Hudā*'s passenger count changed on 20 April – one hundred and twenty to one hundred and thirty Syrians had boarded and thirty-one survived, many of them women and children.⁶⁶ In a *New York Times* report, Syrian survivor *Silānah Yazbak*, less than a week after being rescued, put the number of Syrians who boarded at one hundred and fifty-four.⁶⁷

Later it was reported that the number of Syrian passengers exceeded one hundred and thirty, of whom only thirty-one survived.⁶⁸ *Al-Sāʿih*'s reported number of passengers was the same – there had been over one hundred and thirty Syrians on

board but only thirty survivors.⁶⁹ On 10 May *al-Bashīr* informed its readers that New York's English newspapers gave one hundred and twenty-five as the number of Syrian passengers who boarded the *Titanic*, this information given to *al-Bashīr* by one *Salīm Sarkīs*. A few days later *Lisān al-Ḥāl* and *al-Barq* were still reporting the same.⁷⁰ The numbers were even higher in some Arabic newspapers and among the community where estimates exceeded one hundred and sixty-five passengers.

Syrian societies and associations in New York worked hard and together to collect as many details as possible. Individuals searched for family members and others, among them Dr. *Amīn Haddad*⁷¹ and Mr. *Ṣamū'īl Barbar* whose painstaking efforts also assisted in discovering the correct names of the passengers.⁷² It became a community effort, regardless of village, town or denomination. Everyone was ready to help in whatever way possible, including donating food, providing shelter, or fundraising.

Letters of condolence were published in the Arab-American newspapers. Editorials reflected on the role of fate in human lives. Eulogies in poetic form were published in the Arabic newspapers extolling the passengers' chivalry and courage and grieving the death of life. Reporting covered the masses and prayer services for the lost souls such as the memorial for the "martyrs of the *Titanic*" at the Syrian Orthodox Cathedral in Brooklyn.⁷³ In Utica, New York, on 14 May, the Syrian Charitable Club held a memorial service for "those who were buried with the *Titanic*."⁷⁴ According to information submitted by *Fāris Yūnis Ayyūb* to *Mir'at al-Gharb*,⁷⁵ many Syrians and Americans attended as Father *Lūwīs Latīf* offered prayers for the dead. Following mass, a group of the Club's young men delivered eulogies for the lost passengers. After the service the mourners walked to the Syrian Club's hall, all wearing black arm bands or ribbons.

Eventually reports appeared on the recovery of the victims' bodies and the respect shown at their burial amid the sounds of mournfully tolling church bells⁷⁶ reflecting the sadness and shock of a community overcome by the cruelty of fate. Fellow countrymen had suffered and fallen victim to a catastrophe so powerful that every émigré and immigrant was affected by the tragedy.⁷⁷

In Arabic, the Syrian community in New York and elsewhere read of the *Titanic* and their countrymen.⁷⁸ Syrians were reminded that not only American and English male passengers had earned the respect of the world for their bravery, but Syrian men as well.⁷⁹ The numbers proved it – "only four" of these men having survived. *Al-Hudā* on 23 April printed an editorial extolling the courage of the men and the Syrian women who had refused to be separated from their husbands and desperately fought to protect their children.

Information gathered about the survivors or about the lost Syrian passengers was published. *Al-Hudā* advised that only upon arrival of the rescue ship *Carpathia* would the names of the survivors be confirmed.⁸⁰

The sinking of the *Titanic* brought the community of Arabic-speaking people together to tend to the survivors' needs. *Al-Muntadā al-Ittiḥād al-Sūrī*⁸¹ immediately called for assistance from the Syrian community. In a statement published in the Arabic newspapers, the *Ittiḥād* announced that it would do whatever was needed to provide comfort for the

survivors. It created a special committee that specifically dealt with emergency matters and also served as a contact center for information about the passengers.⁸²

Survivors were alerted that they should report their information to charitable organizations and the owners of the RMS *Titanic*, White Star Line. They were also advised to remain at their declared address so they would be eligible for charitable funds.⁸³ If in hospitals they were not to leave until contacted by the *Titanic* General Relief Committee. *Al-Hudà* reported that each survivor received between one hundred and fifty and two hundred US dollars.⁸⁴

Meanwhile survivors were also alerted by the *Muntadà* that a fund had been established to assist them as much as possible and that its special committee was prepared to help them in any way. Syrian newspapers in New York quickly called for donations to assist those now bereft, in many cases, of everything they possessed.

Naming the Living: The Manifest of Alien Passengers

Coverage by Arabic newspapers published in New York in 1912 includes a written account of what otherwise would have disappeared from recorded history. Such print media proved valuable especially for those seeking information about family members. In the case of *Kafar Mishkī* the village's sole survivor was able to confirm the names of her fellow passengers.⁸⁵ Another survivor, returning to Youngstown, Ohio, provided accurate information about a fellow townsman, *Ḥannā Ṭannūs Mu'awwad*, because she had seen him board and was travelling with him. Although his name appeared in anglicized form in the lists of third-class passengers, she supplied his proper Arabic name and village of origin. The Syrian community would recognize *Ḥannā Ṭannūs Mu'awwad* but not John Thomas.⁸⁶

The names of steerage passengers on the *Titanic* did not appear in the initial English language lists reaching New York, while first- and second-class names were published and updated as quickly as possible.⁸⁷ When third-class names began to materialize, specifically those of the Syrians, many were misspelled or corrupted beyond recognition. *Sulṭānah Būlus*'s husband, scanned the Canadian newspapers for his wife and children's names, but failed to recognize them.⁸⁸ *Titanic* survivor *Mubārak Ḥannā Sulaymān 'Āsī*'s name appears a number of times in various versions: Barak Hannah, Hanna Moubarak,⁸⁹ Moubarek Borak, Mr. Hanna, John, Hanne Moubarch, and John Borak. In 1912, neither "Syrians" nor their country or language were familiar or recognizable in American society.⁹⁰

The Manifest of Alien Passengers aboard the *Carpathia*, the ship that carried the survivors to New York, includes the names of passengers listed as Syrian along with the names of their cities or towns of origin. Most are unclear and confusing, incorrectly spelled or transcribed, no doubt by an officer unfamiliar with the Arabic language.

For example survivor *Ādāl Qiyāmah*'s "last permanent residence" is recorded on the Manifest as *Michonel*. In actuality the name of her hometown was *al-Shwayr*. The *Darwīsh* family's village of origin – *Tibnīn* – appears as *Abuin* while for *Fāṭimah*

Muslimānī the same town is rendered *Cedmen*. And the *Nakid* family's town is 'Bogharta' in Mount Lebanon instead of *Zghartā*.

Certain American and Canadian newspapers erroneously identified some Syrians as coming from "Assyria" and speaking "Assyrian." Harry Bullis, for example, met with "one of the Assyrian survivors," hoping to get information from her about his family.⁹¹ *Shā'nīnah* (*Jirjis*) *Shāhīn Yūsuf Wihbah* was identified as Assyrian by the *Youngstown Vindicator* in Ohio;⁹² and when *Fahīm Rūhānā al-Za'innī*'s escape from the sinking *Titanic* emerged in a story in the *Niles*, Ohio, local newspaper he was also labeled "Assyrian."⁹³

The names of married women also created confusion. For instance, Catherine Joseph's surname was adopted from her husband's first name. The same occurred with *Hinnah* "Darwich" whose husband's first name, *Darwīsh*, was given as her family name on the Manifest. *Amīnah Mubārak* and her sons' surname was recorded, as "George" on the Manifest as their father's name *Jirjis* had been anglicized to *George* in the United States. *Šāfiyah Hālūt* does not appear as a survivor, but was eventually identified as "Maryam Yusif" (*Ibrāhīm*).

With such inconsistency in spelling and names making identification of passengers so uncertain, it was up to the Syrian community in New York to determine the identities of their fellow countrymen who had boarded the *Titanic*. Arabic newspapers published the names of survivors and victims. Names were first taken from American newspapers⁹⁴ and later from the survivors.⁹⁵

Mourning at Home

As for the Syrian people, they, like the rest of the world, mourned the tragedy. Individuals and entire communities felt the effect. Life for the families of both survivors and victims would never be the same. The memory of the *Titanic* loomed large each time someone left home to board a ship to the *Mahjar*.

The story of the Arabic-speaking passengers who boarded the *Titanic* belongs to the annals of world history and also to the history of the Arabs and their emigration. News of the sinking of the *Titanic* spread to all parts of the world. Massive numbers of relatives and families frantically waited at the White Star Line offices in New York for news and reassurance that family members were safe. Anxiety grew with the initial reports since "very little was known of the fate of the passengers who were not in the first or second cabin."⁹⁶ Even grimmer was learning that passengers on the rescue ship, *Carpathia*, were the only ones saved.⁹⁷

In the villages of Syria, principally within present-day Lebanon, almost every family was affected by the loss of a relative or friend. The ill-fated news of the sinking spread quickly, from village to village, from town to town. In *Sar'al*, already lamenting the confirmed fate of a mother and her two young children, the town's mourning was deepened with word that eleven others were missing.⁹⁸ In *Zghartā*, church bells rang the death knell for its men and women while the streets filled with

weeping families and friends. In *Kafar Mishkī*, in the impecunious hills of the lower *Biqā'* Valley, villagers bemoaned the fate of all who had emigrated save for one who survived. This town lost one of the largest numbers of Syrians as a result of the sinking.⁹⁹ At the same time, *Tuḥūm* grieved the loss of four of its men who left behind three young widows and ten children under the age of fifteen. Since the massive memorial service at that time, the same words are repeated in *Tuḥūm*: “The essence of time is very harsh and isn’t worth a cent”.¹⁰⁰

In *Ḥardīn*, the town that lost eleven young men, the largest loss of any single Syrian town, the dirges began and continue to echo until today. Hundreds attended the funeral procession bewailing the fate of their fellow villagers,¹⁰¹ and a century later a *zajal*¹⁰² improvised the day the news reached the village is still recited.

<i>Ibkī wa nuwhī yā Ḥardīn</i>	Weep and lament, oh <i>Ḥardīn</i>
<i>°Ala-al-shubbān al-gharaqānīn</i>	Over the young men who drowned
<i>Ḡharq minkī ihda °ashar shabb</i>	Eleven of your young men drowned
<i>Bi sinn al-khamsah wa °ishrīn</i>	Around the age of twenty-five
<i>Minhum sab°ah °azzabī</i>	Seven of them bachelors
<i>Wa al bāqīyah mujawwizīn</i>	And the rest married
<i>Mā fihum wāhid shāyib</i>	Not one of them was old
<i>Kullun fī al-khamsah wa °ishrīn</i>	All were around twenty-five years old
<i>Wa Rājī māṭ bil-jidrīn</i>	And Raji ¹⁰³ died of small pox

Those who survived would eventually relate the heroism and fearless courage of the town’s young men who faced death dancing the *dabkah*¹⁰⁴ and singing to the tune of the *mijwiz*¹⁰⁵ while others huddled together and prayed in Arabic for salvation.

As for *Tibnīn*¹⁰⁶ and the nearby town of *Bint Jbayl*,¹⁰⁷ not one man survived, leading to the wails of mourning reverberating in both villages and in Michigan City and Detroit.

The sudden loss of loved ones, on whom so many hopes had been pinned, made the deepest impact on the families of the victims, no matter what village, town, or region of what was then Syria and from where they hailed.

A century has passed since the sinking of the *Titanic*: an historic maritime disaster that profoundly affected passengers, crew, families and communities alike. Much has been written about it, yet much was overlooked. This has been an attempt to supply a missing part of the history of this calamitous event and so record now the long neglected story of the Arabic-speaking passengers, or at least the beginning of the story of who they were and why they boarded. Like their fellow-passengers, whether in first or second class or steerage, they form part of the history not only of the sinking of the *Titanic*, but of the history of immigration.

Leila Salloum Elias is author of The Dream and then the Nightmare: The Syrians Who Boarded the Titanic – the story of the Arabic-speaking passengers (Damascus: Atlas for Publishing and Distribution, 2011). She is also co-author of The Sweets of Araby

(2011) and two books currently in press, Scheherazade's Feasts: Foods of the Medieval Arab World, and Sweet Delights for A Thousand and One Nights.

Endnotes

- 1 For more reading on this subject, see Philip Hitti, *Syria: A Short History* (New York: Collier Books, 1959) and *The Syrians in America* (New York: George H. Doran, 1924).
- 2 “*fawziyah al-haj ibnah* ٩ • *‘amā* tataadhakar am^{am} wāhid^{am}: “*gharaqā wālidī fatazawajāt wālidatī bi-ghayrihi wa-tarakatnā*”. *al-lubnāniyūn fī al-taytānik*. Part 5. *al-Anwār*, Beirut, 1 March 1998.
- 3 Ṭannūs, brother of *Titanic* victim Buṭrus Sim‘ān ‘Āṣī. *al-Anwār*, 21 December 1979, and Philip Hitti, *The Syrians in America* (Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2005), 52.
- 4 Najīb Qiyāmah, father of *Ādāl Qiyāmah* from letters dated between 1912 and 1914 sent to his family in Shwayr. These letters were published in *al-Anwar* 8 March 1998 and 22 March 1988. See especially Michel Karam, “*rasā’il najīb qiyāmah wālid al-nājīyah min gharaq ‘al-taytānik’ ta’kusu širā’ al-muhājirīn al-lubnāniyīn qudd amwāj al-mašā’ib fī niyūyūr*”, *al-Anwar*, Beirut, 22 March 1998.
- 5 The land of emigration.
- 6 *Hardīn* is a village in the district of *al-Batrūn* in the north of today’s Lebanon, approximately 1100 meters above sea level.
- 7 Michel Tanios Karam, *al-Lubnāniyūn fī al-Taytānik* (Beirut: Dakkash, 2000), 186.
- 8 20 April 1912.
- 9 Chronological ticket numbers as well as information from the survivors confirm that fellow villagers travelled together. Ticket numbers 2684 to 2688 inclusive were purchased by passengers related to each other from the towns of *Figḥāl*, *Tuḥūm* and *Kafar ‘Abīdā*. Following these were the *Kafar Miškī* passengers who held ticket numbers 2689 to 2697 inclusive, while tickets 2698 and 2699 were held by two Arabic-speaking passengers.
- 10 *dūrbakkah* is a hand-held Arab drum.
- 11 ‘ūd is an Arab lute.
- 12 Helene Karam Kiamie on Adele Kiamie in a telephone interview on 25 January 2000.
- 13 Starter needed to make yogurt.
- 14 Yogurt.
- 15 ‘How are we going to make yogurt?’
- 16 *The Globe and Commercial Advertiser* (New York), 19 April 1912.
- 17 First-class survivor Daisy Minahan, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 21 April 1912.
- 18 Steerage passenger Ellen Mary Mockler, Irish survivor. (See entry for Miss Ellen Mary Mockler, Encyclopedia Titanica (www.encyclopedia-titanica.org))
- 19 Steerage passenger Anna Kate Kelly, Irish survivor, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 25 April 1912.
- 20 Steerage passenger *Maryam ‘Assāf*, Syrian survivor, *Ottawa Citizen* 24 April 1912.
- 21 Steerage passenger, *Hannā Ṭannūs Mu‘awwad*, Syrian victim of sinking. “Twelve-Year-Old Survivor of the *Titanic* Disaster Reaches Columbus,” *Columbus Evening Dispatch*, 24 April 1912, 1.
- 22 Second class passengers, *Anṭūn and Sīlānah Yazbak*, *Lisān al-Hāl*, 10 May 1912.
- 23 Swedish survivor Gunnar Tenglin, and Irish passenger Ellen Shine, *Burlington Iowa Hawk*, 2 January 1998.
- 24 17 April 1912.
- 25 *Edmonton Bulletin*, 25 April 1912.
- 26 Steerage passenger Kate Mullen, Irish survivor, *Salt Lake Herald*, 20 April 1912.
- 27 *Salt Lake Herald*, 20 April 1912.
- 28 Steerage passenger Charles Dahl, *Edmonton Bulletin*, 19 April 1912. See also coverage by BBC News on 21 January 1999 of *Titanic* items sold at auction in Devizes, Wiltshire, England. Included was a letter written by second-class passenger Ellen Walcroft describing the scene as the lifeboat she was in was being lowered into the water. As steerage passengers jumped into the boat, an officer, fearing danger, shot the men. (“Old Letters Fetch *Titanic* Prices,” *BBC News*, 21 January 1999).
- 29 First-class survivor Daisy Minahan, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 21 April 1912.
- 30 First-class survivor Caroline Bonnell, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 19 April 1912.
- 31 Second-class survivor Lillian Renouf, *Newark Evening News*, 19 April 1912. Second-class survivor Ada Ball confirmed the same, seeing one passenger jump into her lifeboat, be ordered out, then jump back in as the boat was being lowered and being shot by one of the ship’s officers, *New York Tribune*, 21 April 1912.

- 32 *Morning Call*, 20 April 1912.
- 33 Colonel Archibald Gracie, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 19 April 1912 stated that “The shot was fired into the air and when the foreigners were told the next would be directed at them, they promptly returned to the deck without confusion or panic.”
- 34 Second-class survivor Ellen Walcroft, *BBC News*. 21 January 1999. Among the items sold at auction in Devizes, Wiltshire, England was a letter written by Walcroft describing the scene as the lifeboat she was in was being lowered into the water.
- 35 19 April 1912.
- 36 First-class passenger J.A. Brayton, *Easton Daily Express*, 9 April 1912. There is no passenger with the first initials of this survivor. He then should be assumed to be first-class passenger George Brayton.
- 37 *Wilkes-Barre Record*, 22 April 1912.
- 38 *Waterbury Republican*, 25 April 1912.
- 39 First-class passenger Canadian survivor Mary Fortune, *Montreal Gazette* 20 April 1912.
- 40 *Sharon Herald*, 14 April 1937.
- 41 *Dhawq Dāghīr* recalling his sister’s description of the events. See Michel Karam, *al-Lubnāniyūn ‘ala al-Taytānīk*, 118.
- 42 *Montreal Gazette*, 24 April 1912.
- 43 *Montreal Gazette*, 24 April 1912.
- 44 Karam, 170. Survivor Ḥannā Māmā related the events of her husband’s death to the widow, and that of another Zaghartian, *Sarkīs Laḥḥūd*, who was also shot dead. She claimed they had not died as a result of drowning.
- 45 Walter Lord, *A Night to Remember* (New York: Bantam Books, 1955), 129. He also maintains that distinctions between the three classes were not as a result of a set policy but rather due to no policy at all (129).
- 46 Lord, 130.
- 47 *al-Hudā*, 17 April 1912.
- 48 Written on 25 February 1914. See *al-Anwār* 22 May 1998. In fact, included in the letter sent back to a friend, the extra amount of 15 English pounds served for the upgrade of his relative’s ticket.
- 49 *al-Bashīr*, 10 May 1912.
- 50 Survivor John “Jack” Thayer. See “Vivid account of how the Titanic sank by survivor Jack Thayer, 17, resurfaces in time for centenary,” *The Telegraph*, 25 March 2012.
- 51 *Ilyās Niqūlā Yārid*. See Elias Nicola-Yarred, “I Survived the Sinking of the Titanic,” *Awake Magazine*, 21 October 1981.
- 52 *al-Sā’ih*’s first issue was published approximately one week after the sinking.
- 53 See also *al-Barq*, 14 May 1912.
- 54 30 April 1912.
- 55 *al-Hudā*, 17 April 1912.
- 56 *al-Bayān*, 23 April 1912.
- 57 These queries were published free of charge until on 7 May *al-Hudā* announced that inquiries would continue to be welcomed and published, but that a charge would be applied.
- 58 *Mir’at al-Gharb*, 19 April 1912.
- 59 *Mir’at al-Gharb*, 19 April 1912 and *al-Sā’ih*, 23 April 1912. Readers were asked to contact the Committee about any of the Syrian passengers. On the 23rd, a letter written by the Secretary was published in *al-Sā’ih* informing the community again to contact the Committee if there were any queries about the Syrian survivors.
- 60 *Mir’at al-Gharb* 19 April 1912.
- 61 *Mir’at al-Gharb*, 19 April 1912.
- 62 *Mir’at al-Gharb*, 19 April 1912.
- 63 25 April 1912.
- 64 The *Montreal Gazette*’s headline on 24 April, “Many Syrians Drowned” was accented with the sub-headline “102 out of 125 on the Titanic Perished.”
- 65 *Chatham Daily News*, 27 April 1912.
- 66 20 April 1912.
- 67 *New York Times*, 25 April 1912.
- 68 *al-Bayān*, 23 April 1912.
- 69 23 April 1912.
- 70 13 and 14 May 1912, respectively.
- 71 In the spring of 1892, Dr. Ameen F. Haddad was secretary of the New York Syrian Society. The objective of the society was to look after newly arrived Syrians and aid them in getting suitable employment. On 3 May 1892, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported on the second meeting of the society and its aim to look after immigrants. One week later readers were informed that Siloe (?) Haddad, Ameen’s brother had opened a night school for Syrian young men at the doctor’s office at 95 Washington St. At the same meeting vice-president of the society Dr. Edward P. Thwing brought attention to the erroneous statement made in a report published in a local paper. He corrected the number of Syrians in New York to be “only about 1000” not 25,000. The same newspaper on 28 January 1893 reported that the society which proposed establishing an institution to teach English to Syrian newcomers was incorporated in Albany.
- 72 *al-Dalīl*, 20 April 1912.
- 73 *Mir’at al-Gharb*, 29 April 1912 – services held

- on 28 April 1912, presided over by Bishop Rafa'il.
- 74 *Mir'at al-Gharb*, 22 May 1912.
- 75 *Mir'at al-Gharb*, 22 May 1912.
- 76 *al-Dalil*, 4 May 1912.
- 77 The disaster brought devastating news as well to businesses and companies that had cargo for them. Two New York newspapers on 20 April published the *Titanic's* Commercial Cargo Manifest which included names of two businesses owned by Syrians. H. Mallouk, for instance, had in the cargo hold on board the *Titanic* one case of laces, while Bardwil Bros. had eight cases. These are the same Mallouk Brothers and Bardwil Brothers that advertised their goods in Arabic newspapers published in New York during this time, the former having its main store at 80 Greenwich Street in the city and the latter wholesaler at 90 Washington Street. These companies were still operating in 1930, as noted in the *Syrian American Directory Almanac* for New York City businesses, Bardwil Brothers as importers and manufacturers of oriental rugs, art, linens, laces handkerchiefs and lingerie and H. Mallouk & Co., importers, linens, handkerchiefs, lingerie, and laces.
- 78 Even as late as 15 June, one Arabic newspaper continued to commend the brave efforts and noble actions of the captain and crew of the *Carpathia* for their rescue of passengers (*al-Dalil*).
- 79 *al-Bashir*, 10 May 1912.
- 80 17 April 1912.
- 81 The Syrian Unity Club of New York.
- 82 *Mir'at al-Gharb*, 17 April 1912.
- 83 *al-Dalil*, 20 April 1912.
- 84 20 April 1912.
- 85 New York Syrian newspaper *Mir'at al-Gharb* under the heading 'sā'ilīn man hiyā maryam 'assāf min kafar mishkī' confirmed the names of and identified the passengers from *Kafar Mishkī* who travelled with 'Assāf' (identified as Kafar Mishkian Zād 'Assāf, wife of Quzmā Dāhir) in its 10 May edition. The names were sent in to the newspaper by Jirjis Khalil Ibrāhīm of Ottawa, Ontario and given to him by 'Assāf.
- 86 *al-Hudā*, 2 May 1912. This name was confirmed by survivor *Shā'nīnah* spouse of Jirjis Yūsuf of *Fighāl* who had last seen *Mu'awwad* and his son clad in their lifejackets.
- 87 As reported in one newspaper on receipt of a telegram from Commander Decker of scout cruiser *Chester* "Carpathia states that list of first and second class passengers and crew sent to shore. *Chester* will relay list third class passengers when convenient to *Carpathia*." *Easton Daily Express*, 18 April 1912.
- 88 In fact, the *Chatham Daily News* in Canada reported on 22 April that "it would seem to indicate that the party had arrived in Detroit safely and that a surprise was being arranged."
- 89 This name appears in *Marriages, Births, Deaths and Injuries that have occurred on board during the voyage* (PRO London, BT 100/259-260).
- 90 Hilda Hellstrom, a third-class passenger on collapsible C, spoke of her lifeboat as "full of Italians." She and her friend wrapped their coats around the "poor Italian children who were almost frozen stiff from the terrible cold" when in fact, there were no Italians on the collapsible, but rather a large number of Syrian women and their children. Saloon Steward William Burke, when questioned about Lifeboat 10, assumed that one of the men whom he needed to be placed at the oar was an "Italian" and therefore spoke to him in his language, but then discovered that Nishan Krekorian was in fact an Armenian. Another example is a 1910 census of Kulpmont, Pennsylvania where the mother of *Titanic* victim Dāhir Abī Shādīd is labeled as "Servian" as opposed to Syrian by the census taker.
- 91 Syrian survivor *Kātrīn Rizq Būlus*.
- 92 24 April 1912. Michigan's *Dowagiac Daily* coverage of the arrival of *Hinnah Darwīsh Tu'mah* and her two children to the city to join her husband also identified them as Assyrian (3 May 1912).
- 93 *The Niles Daily News*, 25 April 1925 described him as an "exceptionally well-spoken Assyrian."
- 94 Initial announcement of names from wireless messages to these newspapers.
- 95 Such is the case of survivor *Nāṣīf Qāsim Abī al-Munā* from the village of *Shānay* in the Shouf region of present-day Lebanon. As reported in *Mir'at al-Gharb* (*thalāthah gharaqa minhum ithnān wa najā wāhid*) 27 April 1912) he provided the names of the two passengers accompanying him on the trip in his interview with the editorial board of the paper. He also gave an eyewitness account of the sinking of the ship.
- 96 *Edmonton Bulletin*, 16 April 1912.
- 97 On 18 April the same newspaper printed the wireless message from Captain Haddock of

- the steamship *Olympic*, relayed by the *Celtic* on April 16 in Cape Lace, Newfoundland: “Please allay rumors that the *Virginian* has any of the *Titanic*’s passengers. Neither has the *Parisian*. I believe the only survivors are on the *Carpathia*. The second, third, fourth and fifth officers and the second Marconi operator are the only ones saved.”
- 98 *Chatham Daily News*, 23 April 1912. Research thus far has not confirmed the number given in the newspaper, announcing that 11 other relatives of her family were also missing.
- 99 The impact of the loss remains today as was noted not too long ago by one *al-Nahār* newspaper writer, suggesting, as late as 1995, that the inhabitants of the village initiate litigation against the insurers of the White Star Line.
- 100 *al-Anwār*, 1 March 1998.
- 101 *al-Anwār*, 15 February 1998.
- 102 Popular Arabic informal verse typically extemporized.
- 103 In fact, within moments of receiving word of the sinking, came more unexpected and tragic news of another death in the town. One of *Hardin*’s young men, *Rājī Khūrī*, it was announced, had died of smallpox. *al-Anwār* 15 February 1998
- 104 An Arab folk dance native to Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine, where the dancers perform in a line holding each other’s hands, stamping and thrusting legs forward to the beat of the music.
- 105 *al-Nahār*, 12 January 1998; the *mijwiz* is the Arab double-pipe usually made of bamboo reeds.
- 106 A town in today’s south Lebanon in the Governorate of *al-Nabaṭīyah*, within the district of *Bint Jbayl*.
- 107 The second largest town in today’s south Lebanon in the Governorate of *al-Nabaṭīyah*.