

# The Finns on the Titanic

Peter Björkfors



When the Royal Mail Steamer *Titanic* set out from Southampton on her maiden voyage on the 10th of April 1912, she was carrying a total of 2227 people from over 25 countries. At least 63 of those were from Finland, and only twenty of them would ever reach America. The rest of them met an untimely death when the *Titanic* sank in the North Atlantic in the early hours of April 15th. Not very much is known of their conduct during those horrific hours. Some of those who survived later told their stories, others never talked about it.

The Finnish *Titanic* passengers came from all over Finland; from Kemi in the north to Helsinki in the south. Among them were entire families, like *Maria Panula* and her five children and *Helena Rosblom* and her two children. Eight of them were second class passengers; the

rest travelled in steerage. Some were returning to America after a visit to the mother country; others were going abroad for the first time in their lives.

Most of the *Titanic* Finns began their journey by boarding *s/s Polaris* bound for Hull on the 3rd of April, and from there on by train to Southampton. The ticket price depended on the travellers' ultimate destination in America as the train tickets were usually included in the price. The Rosblom family left Finland on March 27th and they were originally booked on the *Olympic*, *Titanic's* sister. However, Salli became sick in England and they had to go on the *Titanic* instead. At least three passengers took an alternative route via Sweden on their way to England. A group of four left Finland on the *s/s Urania* on 30th of March, intending to sail on the *Philadelphia* to New York. Upon arriving in Southampton they learned that their ship had been laid up due to a coal strike and they were offered berths on the *Titanic* instead. One of them, *Jakob Alfred Johansson*,

wrote a postcard to his family, saying how happy he was to be going on the largest and safest vessel afloat.

The Finns boarded the *Titanic* before noon on April 10th. In steerage, single men were usually berthed in the bow whilst women and married couples were berthed towards the stern. The *Titanic* was a brand new ship, and the third class rooms were far superior to those found on other ships. Jakob Johansson noted this in his diary: "We have got remarkably good accommodations and everything is clean and tidy. Big promenade decks and light fresh rooms." Others were undoubtedly thrilled that they got "näkkileipä" on board.

The *Titanic* set sail on the 10th of April, bound for New York. The third class passengers soon settled into their shipboard routine. Aside from the meals served three times a day, there were no organised activities for them. They passed the long hours at sea as best as they could; eating, sleeping, reading, playing cards or taking fresh

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air on deck. In the evenings, there were occasional festivities in the third class general room in the very stern. Though not nearly as luxurious as the first class areas, it was still a nice and comfortable room with a bar and a piano for the passengers' use. That, and orchestras improvised by some of the passengers, provided music for dancing. *Elin* and *Pekka Hakkarainen*, a newly-married couple from Helsinki, were among those who went dancing in the evenings. The lights were dimmed at 11 p.m.; encouraging the third class passengers to retire to their cabins.

Sunday, April 14th came and the Titanic had steamed about two thirds of the way to New York. *Jakob Johansson* remarked in his journal: "Sunday. It is raining, so everyone has to stay inside." The weather became clearer and colder during the day and *Jakob Johansson* later wrote: "It's getting cold so I will go to bed." This day, the Titanic's last, also held a special significance to *Anna Sjöblom* from Munsala, Finland. It was her eighteenth birthday, but she celebrated it laying sea sick in her bunk.

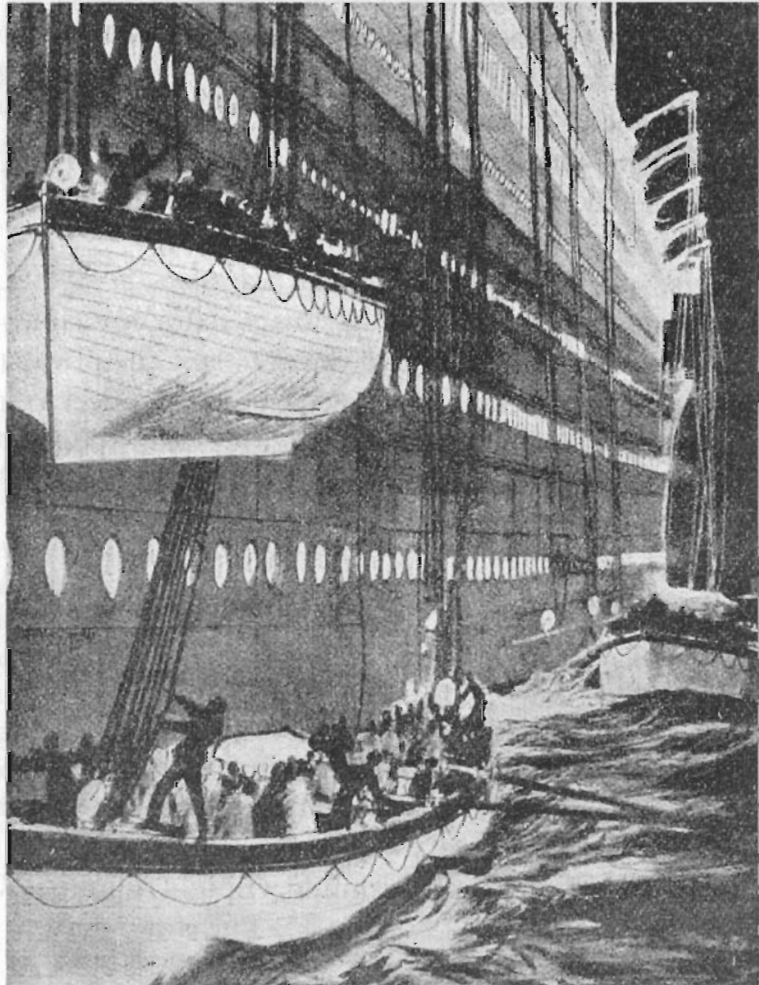
Twenty minutes before midnight, most passengers were asleep in their cabins. In the crow's nest up in the foremast, look-out *Frederick Fleet* suddenly spotted an iceberg right in the Titanic's path. He warned the bridge and efforts were made to avoid colliding, but it was too late.

The Titanic struck the iceberg on her starboard side.

*Juho Stranden* was among those Finns who had their cabins in the very bow of the ship. He was awoken by the rumbling impact that seemed to echo through the hull. He immediately went on deck and saw the ice on the forward well deck that had been knocked off the berg as it passed. *Elin* and *Pekka Hakkarainen* had their cabin towards the stern and they had just gone to bed when

the collision occurred. He jumped up and went to see what it was; saying he would be right back. *Elin* went back to sleep. When she woke up about an hour later, she realised that the floors were slanting. She never saw *Pekka* again.

All the Finnish passengers reacted differently to the impact. Some were alarmed while others did not think much of it. Some found out by themselves that the ship had struck an iceberg; others were informed by





Amanda Josefina Nieminen



Juho Verner Salonen

stewards or by fellow countrymen. In the words of *John Niskanen*, who warned his friend *Erik Jussila*: "nouse ylös kuolematas katsomaan" (= get up and see your death).

The passengers in third class were ordered by stewards to put on life jackets and assemble in the general room. Some were literally driven out of their cabins by the water rushing in. *Erik Jussila* had gone back to his cabin to get his coat when the water suddenly started rushing in.

While first and second class passengers were urged to the lifeboats on the top deck, the third class passengers were only urged to wait in their own parts of the ship. There was a virtual maze of corridors and stairs that separated them from the boats that were their only salvation. At first, locked doors and iron gates hindered them from accessing the second and first class areas, including the boat deck. Some stewards

escorted small groups of women and children from third class to the boat deck. Some found their own way through the winding corridors. Some remained under deck until the doors were unlocked, and by then it was often too late.

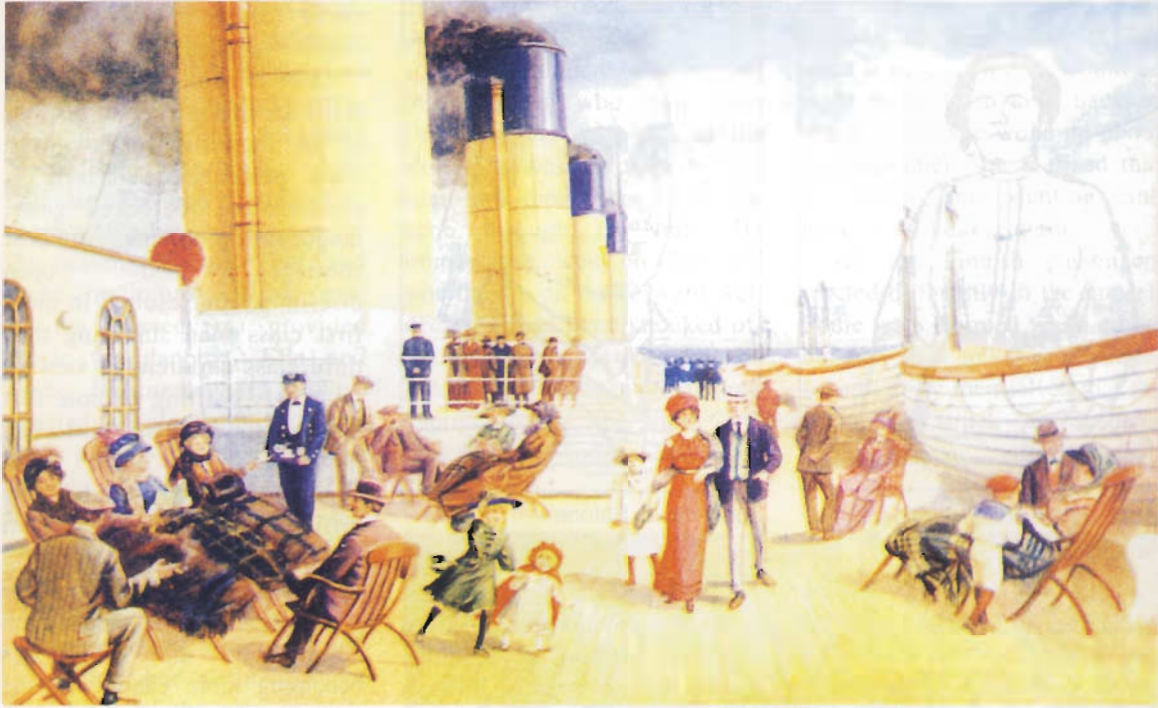
Amidst all this turmoil, some of the Finnish passengers were surprisingly calm, and those were generally the ones who survived. *August Abrahams-son*, *Johan Sundman* and *Eino Lindqvist* dressed warmly and "just went up to the boat deck". *Erik Jussila* came up to the boat deck and was denied access to three different boats. Then he literally jumped into lifeboat number 9 or 11 as it was descending. Eighteen year old *Anna Turja* got up to the first class areas. At first, she did not realise the seriousness of the situation, but stood for a while listening to the ship's orchestra before getting into one of the lifeboats. By that time, most of the boats had left. There were

twenty of them; only half the number needed.

One of the most horrific statistics of the Titanic disaster is the fact that so few third class passengers survived. A combination of locked gates, language problems, lifeboat shortage and open discrimination resulted in more first class men surviving than third class children. In view of this, it is baffling to note that none of the Finnish third class passengers who were saved ever testified to having had any difficulties reaching the boat deck. Perhaps this was due to the legendary Finnish *sisu*.

By 01.45 in the morning on April 15th, the scene was becoming more chaotic by the minute. *Maria Panula* had managed to reach the boat deck, but she had lost some of her five children in the crowds. Now she was roaming around the deck, hysterical. She had already lost one child to drowning back in Finland. *Jakob Johansson* managed to push *Anna Sjöblom* into the overcrowded lifeboat number 15 through a window on A-Deck. As the lifeboat descended, a man jumped into it from the deck above and landed feet first on *Anna's* head, nearly breaking her neck.

The last lifeboat was lowered at 02.05, and the Titanic began to sink more rapidly. Twenty Finns had managed to get away safely. At least 43 were among the 1500 still left on the Titanic. As to the remaining moments of their lives, one can only speculate. What were their thoughts as



they arrived on the boat deck, only to discover that all the boats were gone? Did Maria Panula ever find her missing children? Was *Wendla Heininen* trying to cling to the overturned collapsible lifeboat? Were *Karl* and *Jakob Viklund* among those clinging to the stern as it stood on end? Were *Amanda Nieminen* and *Juho Salonen* – an engaged couple – among the “mass of humanity” that survivor *Archibald Gracie* later described in his book? We will never know.

From the lifeboats, 700 people saw how the Titanic sank. As the stern lifted higher from the water, there was an increasing cacophony of noise as everything crashed forward.

The final moments are best described by Anna Sjöblom: “I watched the steamer every second of the last few minutes she was afloat. The bow went down out of sight. Then the steamer, without a sound, except for the shrieks of the people still on board, stood right up on end. It stood there for several moments, then slid straight down into the water.”

The Titanic left hundreds of people in the water, crying for help. The cries rose to a continuous, horrifying wail before the people started dying, one by one. Anna Turja heard it all from her lifeboat: “We heard it long afterwards, that wailing. But in the end it was almost like a hymn, and then it stopped.” It was a sound

that would haunt the survivors for the rest of their lives. After that, they had nothing to do but wait until the Cunard liner *Carpathia* arrived with daybreak. At 08.00 a.m., all the survivors were on board and she went on to New York.

The *Carpathia* arrived in New York on April 18th, and many of the Finns were taken to St. Vincent Hospital to recover from their ordeals. They had lost everything they had and were in a strange country. Almost all of them had lost loved ones in the disaster. About a week later, they continued to their intended destinations in America. *Mathilda Backström* lost her husband and both her brothers in the sinking. Therefore, she

saw no point in staying in America. She returned to Finland and gave birth to a girl in June; one of many orphans of the Titanic disaster. John Panula was in America waiting for his family to arrive upon finding out that the Titanic had gone down. Several days later he got the final word that his entire family had perished.

In Finland, the entire nation was in shock. Jakob Johansson's wife, Anna, did not find out about the disaster until several days afterwards

when she saw the headlines during a trip to the city. She had four children. In all, almost thirty Finnish children were orphaned by the Titanic disaster. Relief agencies sprang into action and the White Star Line gave some financial compensation to the bereaved families. Still, the lives of loved ones could not be compensated.

The most poignant and touching reminder of the Titanic disaster and its Finnish aspect can be found in the

Canadian coastal town Halifax. In Halifax' Fairview Cemetery, about 150 of the victims recovered from the sea are buried. Among the long rows of similar headstones, three can be found with the following inscriptions: Wendla Maria Heininen. Died April 15th, 1912. Jakob Alfred Johansson. Died April 15th, 1912. Jacob Alfred Wiklund. Died April 15th, 1912.

The remaining forty Finnish victims of the Titanic disaster found their graves in the cold Atlantic.

Name	Age	Place of Residence	Destination
Abrahamsson, August	20	Dalsbruk	Hoboken, New Jersey
†Alhomäki, Ilmari	20	Salo	Astoria, Oregon
Andersson, Erna	17	Kulla, Strömfors	New York
†Backström, Karl	32	Keitala, Strömfors	New York
Backström, Mathilda	33	Keitala, Strömfors	New York
†Berglund, Karl Ivar	22	Sund, Åland	New York
†Collander, Erik	27	Helsinki	-
†Gustafsson, Anders	37	Keitala, Strömfors	New York
†Gustafsson, Johan	28	Keitala, Strömfors	New York
†Gustafsson, Alfred	20	Kökar, Åland	Waukegan, Chicago
†Hakkarainen, Pekka	28	Helsinki	Monessen, Pennsylvania
Hakkarainen, Elin	24	Helsinki	Monessen, Pennsylvania
Heikkinen, Laina	26	Jyväskylä	New York
†Heininen, Wendla	23	Laitila, Turku	New York
†Hiltunen, Marta	18	Kontiolahti	New York
Hirvonen, Helga	22	Dalsbruk	Monessen, Pennsylvania
Hirvonen, Hildur	2	Dalsbruk	Monessen, Pennsylvania
Honkanen, Eliina	27	Saarijärvi	Indianapolis, Indiana
Hämäläinen, Anna	24	Kiihtelysvaara	Detroit, Michigan
Hämäläinen, Wiljo	0,8	Kiihtelysvaara	Detroit, Michigan
†Ilmakangas, Ida	27	Paavola, Oulu	New York
†Ilmakangas, Pieta	25	Paavola, Oulu	New York
†Johansson, Jakob	34	Munsala	Olympia, Washington?
†Jussila, Aina	21	Paavola, Oulu	New York
Jussila, Erik	32	Elimäki	Monessen, Pennsylvania

†Jussila, Katriina	20	Paavola, Oulu	New York
†Kallio, Nikolai	17	Kauhajoki	Sudbury, Ontario, Canada
†Lahtinen, Anna	26	Kemi	Minneapolis
†Lahtinen, William	30	Kemi	Minneapolis
†Laitinen, Kristina	37	Helsinki	New York
†Leinonen, Antti	32	Änggelby, Helsinki	New York
Lindqvist, Eino	20	Dalsbruk	Monessen, Pennsylvania
†Mäenpää, Matti	22	Kauhajoki	Sudbury, Ontario, Canada
†Mäkinen, Kalle	29	Ikaalinen	Glassport, Pennsylvania
†Nieminen, Manta	29	Karinainen	Aberdeen, Washington
Niskanen, Johan	39	Kivijärvi	Boston
†Panula, Ernesti	16	Ylihärmä	Coal Centre, Pennsylvania
†Panula, Jaakko	14	Ylihärmä	Coal Centre, Pennsylvania
†Panula, Juha	7	Ylihärmä	Coal Centre, Pennsylvania
†Panula, Maria	41	Ylihärmä	Coal Centre, Pennsylvania
†Panula, Urho	2	Ylihärmä	Coal Centre, Pennsylvania
†Panula, William	1	Ylihärmä	Coal Centre, Pennsylvania
†Pekoniemi, Edvard	21	Heinola	New York
†Peltomäki, Nikolai	25	Helsinki	New York
†Riihivuori, Sanni	22	Ylihärmä	Coal Centre, Pennsylvania
†Rintamäki, Matti	35	Kauhajoki	Sudbury, Ontario, Canada
†Rosblom, Helena	41	Raumo	Astoria, Oregon
†Rosblom, Salli	2	Raumo	Astoria, Oregon
†Rosblom, Viktor	18	Raumo	Astoria, Oregon
†Salonen, Johan	39	Karinainen	Aberdeen, Washington
Silvén, Lyyli	18	Torneå	Minneapolis
Sinkkonen, Anna	30	Parikkala	Washington, D.C.
†Sihvola, Antti	21	Strömfors	Mountain Home, Idaho
Sjöblom, Anna	18	Munsala	Olympia, Washington
†Strandberg, Ida	22	Turku	New York
Strandén, Juho	31	Kitee	Duluth, Minnesota
Sundman, Johan	44	Munsala	Cheyenne, Wyoming
†Tikkanen, Juho	32	Pihlajavesi	New York
Turja, Anna	18	Oulainen	Ashtabula, Ohio
Turkula, Hedvig	65	Jalasjärvi	Hibbing, Minnesota
†Wiklund, Jacob	18	Munsala	Montreal, Canada
†Wiklund, Karl	21	Munsala	Montreal, Canada
†Äijö-Nirva, Iisakki	41	Kauhajoki	Sudbury, Ontario, Kanada

Saved: 20

Lost: 43

Total: 63