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Swedes on the *Titanic*: Some Glimpses

Claes-Göran Wetterholm*

*Där var folk från alla kanter
Svenskar, finnar, engelsmän
Och av dessa emigranter
Säg, vem känner alla dem?*

There were people from all countries
Swedes and Finns and English, too
But of all those emigrants
Tell me, where did they all go?
—Swedish *Titanic* song published 1912

While the sinking of the *Titanic* is the most well-known of all shipping disasters in the annals of maritime history, it is, perhaps, less well-known that Swedes and Swedish-Americans represented the third largest passenger group aboard the *Titanic*. Almost one-third of all third-class passengers came from Scandinavia and Finland.

The Swedish *Titanic* passengers were a representative cross section of the different types of emigrants. Some were seeking a better life; some were leaving Sweden because of the lack of freedom; and some were simply returning home after visiting relatives in the old country.

Although stories surrounding first-class passengers and their accommodations are most familiar to us today, it is important to remember that the *Titanic* was built mainly for the lucrative emigrant trade. Even third-class passengers were well taken care of, because the White Star Line, the owner of the ship, knew well the importance of satisfied customers who would not only return but also recommend others to travel with the company's ships.

Most of the Swedish passengers left via Göteborg on 5 April 1912 aboard the Wilson liner *Calypso*. Although few records exist for this particular departure, one traveler bound for America wrote these lines:

Ten o'clock at night we left the quay in Gothenburg with the big and steady North Sea steamer *Calypso*. It was so late at night you couldn't see any familiar faces from the ship. Most certainly I, too, had someone there waving to me. Oh how they cried and how they were waving from the ship and from the shore. At least 3,000 people had gathered. At the moment the

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ship started to move, a Swedish-American began to sing the hymn “Shall we gather at the river.” They sang under tears both from the ship and the quay.

Some did travel via Malmö and Copenhagen instead, and among these were Alma Pålsson and her four children. The youngest, Gösta, was only two years old. Alma’s husband, Nils, had left two years earlier and had managed to raise money for the family’s tickets working as a streetcar conductor in Chicago.

Edward and Gerda Lindell, also leaving via Malmö, were seeking a better life in the New World. Edward had been working for four years in the shoe factory in Ramlösa, located in the province of Skåne in southern Sweden. Edward wanted to go to America and Gerda could see no reason why she couldn’t go with him; so they left.



Edward and Gerda Lindell. Courtesy Gunilla Genrup. Photo © Claes-Göran Wetterholm Archive, Stockholm.

The North Sea has a notorious reputation for storms and bad weather, and the travelers from Göteborg were more than happy to finally see land and the city of Hull on the English east coast. They boarded the London train and to many the sight of such a large city was breathtaking. From London they were

transported down to Southampton and the ships for which they had bought their tickets. But here there was a big surprise awaiting many of them—their ships were cancelled.

A strike in the British coal mines had deprived the shipping companies of coal. The White Star Line and other companies had to cancel trips and stop their ships. There was one ship, however, that was to leave because of a special occasion—the *Titanic* was embarking on her maiden voyage.

“As mother came to pick up our tickets the man told us we had been transferred,” Beatrice Sandström later recalled. Her mother Agnes, her sister Marguerite, and herself were going back to San Francisco, where Hjalmar was waiting for the family. He had no idea his family was on the *Titanic*. The man giving Agnes the tickets reassured her: “You don’t have to worry ma’am, because this ship cannot sink.”



Beatrice Sandström. Courtesy Karin Breman.
Photo © Claes-Göran Wetterholm Archive, Stockholm.

The Lindells were very impressed. “We have been down to watch the Beast.” The ship was simply enormous, and “Beast” was the closest Gerda could come in describing the ship in the postcard to her parents.

Mauritz Ådahl, from Asarum Parish (Blek.) in southern Sweden, was disappointed. He had arrived in Southampton on 5 April only to find that his ship, *Philadelphia*, was not leaving. He could have stayed a few more days to enjoy the family. However, the stay in America was only to raise money enough to build a house for Emily and the daughters. "Yes, my little darling, I dreamt of all of you at home and was just so surprised to wake up and discover I'm so far away."

August Wennerström, on the other hand, was more than pleased to leave the Old County. He was a socialist who was known by the nickname "The Yellow Fear." His name really wasn't Wennerström, but rather, Andersson. In Copenhagen he had obtained a false passport and a friend, Ivar Vennerström, gave August the new name without even knowing it.

Wednesday, April 10, was the scheduled departure day. In many emigrant hotels and "emigrant homes" people had been gathering, and they now all headed to the enormous ship in the harbor.

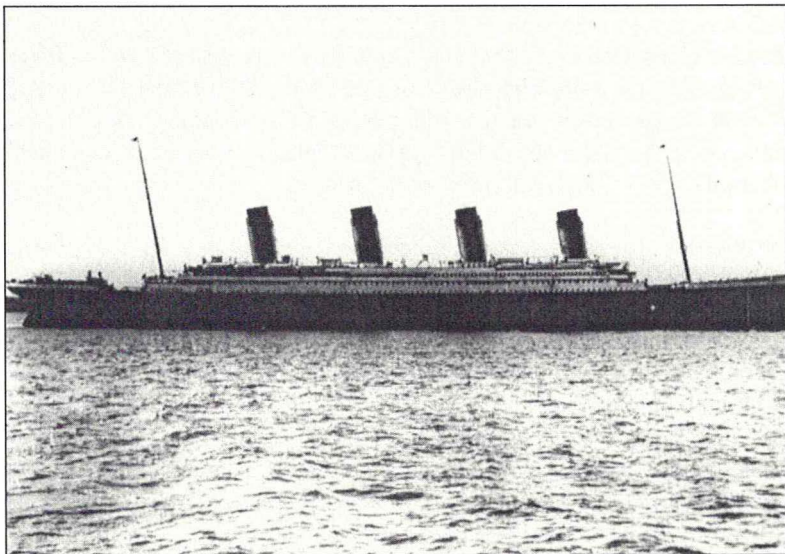
Titanic was, at the time of her maiden voyage, the largest ship in the world. Although her slightly older sister ship, the *Olympic*, had been surpassed by the *Titanic*, they were actually twins with very slight differences. Had the *Titanic* not sunk, just a month later she, in turn, would have been surpassed by another ship, the *Imperator*, in Germany. The fierce competition between the shipping lines forced bigger and bigger ships to be built.

The lifesaving rules, on the other hand, were completely outdated and very few of the liners crossing the North Atlantic before the *Titanic* had lifeboats for everybody aboard. This didn't concern the travelling public too much; they just demanded even bigger, faster, and more luxurious ships.

Axel Welin, a Swedish engineer from Stockholm, had much earlier understood the dangers associated with having insufficient lifesaving equipment, and designed a new type of davit. The *Titanic* could have carried at least thirty-two (and up to sixty-four) lifeboats; but, because the law did not demand more than a certain number and because lifeboats were expensive, it was decided to cut the number down to twenty lifeboats for 1,178 people. This was actually more than the law required.

And so the *Titanic* left. She headed for Cherbourg on the French coast and Queenstown, the port of Cork on Ireland. There were finally 2,207 people aboard, 898 of whom were members of the crew. "Here are people from all countries," Carl Robert Carlsson had written on a postcard to his father, Emanuel, in Vessigebro (Hall.) on the southwest coast of Sweden. "The boat is

so big she hardly moves for waves as big as houses," he continued. "You might think the trip is hard and boring but had I known everything would go so well, I would have brought Anna along. Adieu." Anna was his sister, but it is doubtful whether he actually meant that. He was escaping the military service and, just like August Wennerström, he had bought a false passport in Copenhagen.



Titanic in Queenstown 11 April 1912. Photo © Claes-Göran Wetterholm Archive, Stockholm.

The third-class passengers were, as much as possible, divided into their different nationality groups. Families and women travelling on their own were quartered in the stern section of the ship; single men in the forward section. They had their dining saloons in the middle of the ship on F-deck and a long corridor, popularly called "Scotland Road" by the crew, connected the bow and the stern. The general room and the smoking room were under the aftermost deck, the poop deck, and there was a piano there as well. Although a brochure for the *Titanic* boasted about an orchestra playing, this was exclusively for the first-class and second-class passengers. The third-class passengers had to entertain themselves. And so they did.

Selma Asplund said it was awful. She, her husband Carl, and their five children had tried to settle in Sweden after living some years in Massachusetts, but they couldn't find their old roots and so decided to return to Massachusetts. Carl at times thought the trip was unbearable: "[I]t's awful as it is. Since we left

England they've just been drinking, dancing, and playing cards," he remarked to Selma. "If this goes on, well it's going to be the last trip we make over the Atlantic."

The third class had its open promenade space forward and aft on the ship. The boat deck was strictly for first class and second class and there were barriers and guards to make sure no third-class passenger trespassed. Even if they had been allowed up on the boat deck, they probably wouldn't have found their way. The *Titanic* was an enormous steel labyrinth, and an experienced sailor, like Second Officer Lightoller, was almost two weeks aboard the *Titanic* before he found his way without any trouble.

On Sunday, 14 April, a good number of ice warnings reached the *Titanic*. One of the last warnings, however, was never delivered. The wireless operators were so busy they couldn't leave their station, and a vital message warning about ice and icebergs in the *Titanic's* direct path was left on the desk in the Marconi station.

As the sun set and stars began to twinkle, the temperature dropped considerably. It became very cold and there was even a fear that the freshwater tanks would freeze. The stars were shining bright, the sea was a dead calm, and it was finally like running over a mirror. Mother Nature had prepared an incredibly beautiful setting for the tragedy that would soon come.

Agnes Sandström had put her daughters to bed. She was sitting on her bunk talking to her cabin mate, Elna Ström. Elna was going with her daughter to her husband in Indiana. As they were to leave Sweden, Selma had scalded her arms and their departure had been delayed. They came to travel on the *Titanic* instead, and now Agnes and Elna talked of going up on deck. "As we sat there talking there was a bump, something was hitting us. We couldn't understand that at first but then later on they came to tell us the ship had hit an iceberg, there was a hole but it would soon be fixed, and then we would be under way again."

There was certainly more than a hole. With her 46,000 tons, the *Titanic* had smashed sideways into an iceberg. The iceberg didn't cause a gash, only smaller holes that were strategically located. About ten seconds after the first impact, *Titanic* was more lost than a derelict wreck. Three hundred tons of water entered her hull every minute, but her pumps were capable of pumping out only one hundred fifty tons per minute. All that could be done now was to keep the ship afloat long enough to save as many lives as possible.

The stewards in the different classes were told to keep their passengers as calm as possible. In the confusion that arose, some obviously took this order too

seriously, with the result that doors to the third-class quarters were closed and guards put out to ensure that nobody entered where they weren't supposed to enter. Thus, the majority of the passengers were locked in on a sinking ship as the lifeboats began to leave.

Agnes Sandström gathered her children and, accompanied by Edna Ström and her daughter, began the long walk up to the boat deck. Some stewards had now been ordered to guide third-class women and children up to the boats, but there were over seven hundred third-class passengers, many of whom were in family groups. In such a chaotic atmosphere it was hard to keep the men behind.

Alma Pålsson was told to dress and bring her children, with life jackets on, to the boat deck. She was travelling alone with her children, and to properly dress them all seemed to take an eternity. She used far too much time! In order to keep them happy, she brought her mouth organ.

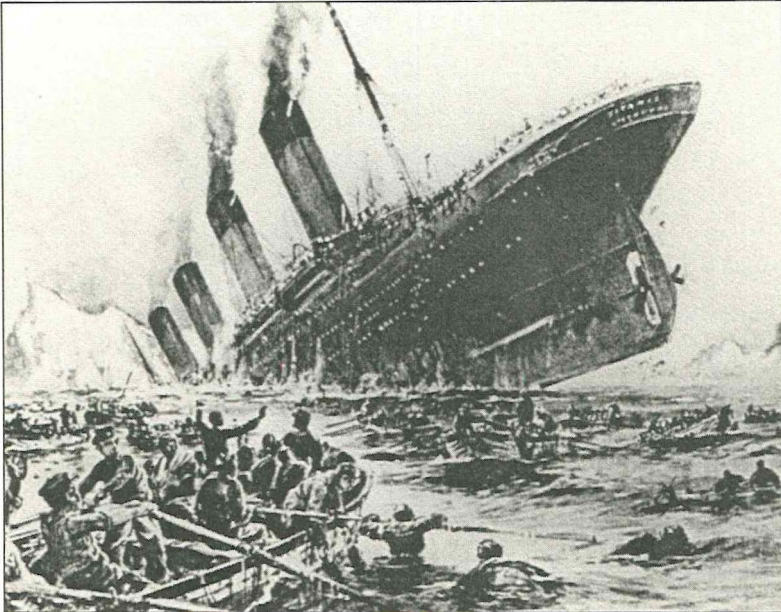
August Wennerström didn't really take the situation seriously. At one point, he and some other Swedes danced around some other third-class passengers, who had put on their life jackets. In the beginning it all seemed just fun.

As the *Titanic* sank lower and lower, bow first, in the sea, the reluctance to step into a lifeboat disappeared. But many still refused to believe or understand. Agnes Sandström finally reached the boat deck. She thought that the Ströms were behind her but, as she turned around, they were gone and Agnes never saw them again. "As I came on deck there were ropes everywhere, ropes, ropes, ropes. I sat down on some ropes and said to myself 'I'm fed up. I can't do it any longer.' But our cabin steward saw us and told us to go to the lifeboat. He first helped the girls into the boat and then me."

She was in lifeboat 13, one of the last to leave the sinking ship and one of the few to be loaded to its full capacity. As soon as the lifeboat entered the water, the sailors began to row in order to get as far away as possible from the sinking *Titanic*.

Selma Asplund later said they had decided to die together. She was standing at one of the last lifeboats when, suddenly, seamen grabbed her daughter Lilian and threw her into the boat. Then Felix, the youngest boy, was thrown down too. Selma was very upset. She turned to her husband and asked him why he had done that. From the boat sailors were crying "Bring the children's mother down! Take their mother in the boat too!" Instantly she was thrown into the boat. As she looked up, she barely had time to see Carl and her three sons rush to the other side. They wanted to find another boat.

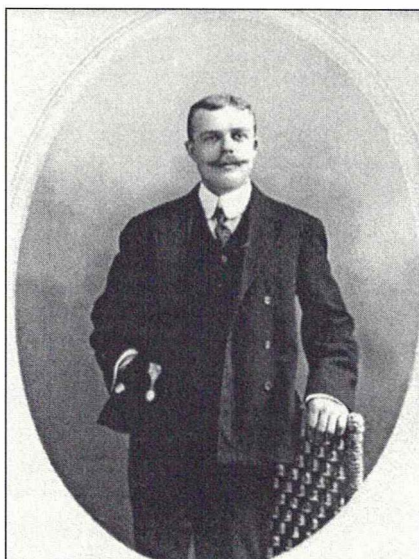
As the last lifeboat (boat D) left, there were still around 1,500 people aboard the ship. Among them were Alma Pålsson and her four children. Because it had taken her too much time to dress the children, she had missed the boats. She met August Wennerström and begged him to hold one of the children. He tried to help her, but at the same time the bridge area where they were standing quickly sank and a large wave carried them all into the water.



Titanic sinks. Illustration by Willi Stöwe. Photo © Claes-Göran Wetterholm Archive, Stockholm.

Wennerström lost the baby but managed to swim to a collapsible lifeboat (boat A). It was full of water and some one hundred fifty people fought around it. Wennerström finally managed to climb into the boat together with a few others, among them Edward Lindell. His wife, Gerda, was in the water without a life jacket. Wennerström tried to hold on to her but eventually lost his grip, and she immediately disappeared. Her hands were cold and her fingers were much thinner. As Wennerström lost Gerda, her wedding ring slipped silently into the bottom of the boat. "The bodies floated so tight together you almost thought you could walk upon them and in our strange little craft one after the other fell down and died." Wennerström later recalled that Edward Lindell had lost all power and, in front of Wennerström, his hair had turned white. He then died. Lindell's body was thrown overboard to keep the lifeboat afloat.

Mauritz Ådahl did not find room in a lifeboat. He jumped into the water with his life jacket and minutes later he froze to death. His body was later recovered by the cable ship *Mackay-Bennett*. His watch, which was found in a pocket, had worked fourteen minutes after the *Titanic* sank. It had stopped at 2:34 in the morning of 15 April 1912.



Mauritz Ådahl. Courtesy Hjördis Ohlsson.
Photo © Claes-Göran Wetterholm Archive, Stockholm.

The *Carpathia* arrived around four o'clock in the morning and picked up 712 survivors. But 1,495 people had died! The largest and most modern ship in the world had disappeared, and with her the belief in safe technology.

From the water-filled lifeboat A, eleven men and one woman had survived. They eventually climbed into another lifeboat, and boat A was left to drift with three bodies. Almost a month later, the boat was found by White Star Line's *Oceanic*. The bodies were buried at sea, but the boat was recovered. In the bottom of the boat a ring was found. The ring was brought to New York, where it was established that it was a Swedish ring. The ring was then forwarded to the Swedish Consulate in New York, where it was established that the ring belonged to Gerda Lindell. Since she was dead, the ring was sent to Stockholm to the Foreign Office, which sent it to Malmö, where Gerda's father claimed it. The ring has since been a treasured artifact in the family.

Alma Pålsson's body was found. She was well dressed but her four children were all gone. The body of a young boy, about two years of age, was also recovered. The seamen aboard the *Mackay-Bennett* were so moved by the little boy that they decided they would pay for his gravestone. Although there is no name on this gravestone, it is dedicated "To the memory of an unknown child." Later it has been assumed that this is Alma's youngest son, Gösta Pålsson. By a strange coincidence, his grave and Alma's grave are located one and one-half meters from each other.



Alma Pålsson and three of her four children. Photo © Claes-Göran Wetterholm Archive, Stockholm.

August Wennerström survived and lectured about his experiences from the *Titanic*. The former socialist later formed a company of his own and settled in Culver, Indiana, where he lived until his death on 11 November 1950. On his gravestone he kept his assumed name—Wennerström.

Of one hundred twenty-three Swedish passengers, eighty-nine died and thirty-four survived. The calamity had an enormous impact on an entire generation of Swedes and the interest in the *Titanic* seems to be as great today as it was in 1912.