

Many Waters Cannot Quench Love - Neither Can The Floods Drown It

By Joan Adler, Executive Director
Straus Historical Society, Inc. 2001

The world has long been aware of the enormous sacrifice made by Ida Straus when she declined a seat on one of "Titanic's" lifeboats and chose to perish alongside her husband of 41 years. There has been a Broadway play, many books, Hollywood movies, poems, songs, and thousands of articles written about the "Titanic" disaster and about those who lost their lives on April 15th, 1912. The facts of the Straus' last trip to Europe and the events leading up to their final voyage have never before been made public. This is a personal story about two people and their relationship with one another and with their family. The ending is well known, but the story of the Straus' final trip to Europe has never been told.

On November 11th, 1911, Isidor Straus' secretary wrote the Cunard Steamship Company Ltd. requesting booking on the steamship "Caronia" for January 6th, 1912. Their ticket would cost \$1,300 for two rooms and bath for himself and Mrs. Straus, and accommodations for a valet and maid at \$77.50 each. Another couple, the Speddens, was booked on the "Caronia" and also on the "Titanic" when she sank. Frederic and Daisy Spedden and their son Douglas were saved along with Frederick's favorite toy, a stuffed polar bear. Daisy Spedden mentions the Strauses in her diary, which also survived. The story of this family's experience has been turned into a marvelous children's book, *Polar, The Titanic Bear*, written by a descendant of the Speddens, Leighton Hammond Coleman III.

Beginning January 13th, 1912, Jesse, Percy and Herbert, the Straus' three sons, kept up a running correspondence with Isidor and Ida. Each of the sons was involved in the running of Macy's Department Store, the family business. Jesse, being the oldest, reported almost entirely on business matters. He kept Isidor abreast of the progress, or lack of progress, of the various departments in the store, gave him detailed financial accounts and wrote about merchandising decisions made in his absence. He wrote, "My Dear Parents." Percy, the second oldest, wrote to his parents at least once a week telling them about the weather conditions and about the activities of various family members. His letters included some news of business and city events. They began, "Dear Papa and Mamma." Herbert, the youngest son and fifth youngest of six surviving children, wrote "Dear Father." His letters contained news of the city and about other merchant's activities. Between the three brothers, Isidor and Ida were kept fully informed about politics, business and family news.



Throughout their time in Europe, it is clear from the information in their letters that Jesse, Percy and Herbert were responding to questions Isidor had asked. Each son wrote to Isidor about some aspect of business and in many cases seemed to be explaining or justifying an action or decision. Although we do not have all the matching correspondence, there is enough information to conclude that Isidor was very much a part of the family firm even though he was on a protracted European trip. The sons wanted to keep their mother informed about the health and well being of all family members.

From Jesse, April 2nd: "A few days after this reaches you we shall probably communicate with you by Marconi from the "Amerika:" on which we sail" Jesse, his wife Irma and their oldest child Beatrice were about to leave for a European vacation. While there, they planned to look for a school where Beatrice might receive French lessons.

From Ida to "Dear Children" from Claridges Hotel, London, April 4th: "Papa enjoys London so much more than Paris, and just revels in going about here. Do not imagine that I am brining a lot of presents, ... Papa would not allow me to shop for anything in Paris, except a hat pin for myself at Noarys and while there they showed me a gold bag with emerald and diamonds on the bars, which Papa gave me - We are just

shipping Marie back to Paris, as while there I could not get a maid in her place, ... she had been behaving very badly over here. When Papa sours on a girl you know there is a good cause, and he is disgusted with her. I have engaged a nice English girl now but as with the other do not know whether I can count on



her,.... I suppose tomorrow there will be a big egg hunt up in 105th Street. I wish I could be there to take part in it. You may not know that this is already the third day of Pesach (Passover) and that you should all be eating Matzos - Claridges does not serve them so we cannot do our duty.”

From Isidor to Rev. H. H. Redgrave, M. A., from Claridges Hotel, London, April 9th: “I learn from the Daily Telegraph ... of the dire distress you are attempting to aid in relieving in the Pottery Districts, with which my firm has been in business for almost half a Century. I ask you to accept enclosed order in the Manchester & Liverpool District Bank for Fifty Pounds to assist in the worthy work ...”

From Rev. H. H. Redgrave, M.A. to Mr. Straus, September 13th, 1934: “For 22 years now I have kept secret from the world a matter in which the British public would have evinced the most profound interest, namely, the last letter which your beloved Father, Isidor Straus, wrote on earth, only the day prior to the day he and your saintly Mother joined their ship of destiny - The Titanic.”

Isidor and Ida Straus were booked on the maiden voyage of the “Titanic” along with Ida’s new English maid, Ellen Bird, and Isidor’s valet, John Farthing. They boarded in Southampton England on April 10th, 1912 after having been issued ticket number 17483.

On April 14th Isidor and Ida cabled from the “Titanic” to Jesse on the “Amerika.” At the time, ship-to-ship cables were a novelty and used most often to send friendly messages. Isidor wrote: “fine voyage fine ship feeling fine what news.”

On April 15th, Nathan Straus, Isidor’s beloved younger brother, cabled Jesse from New York: “Delighted with message everything fine. Nathan.”

The story of the sinking of “Titanic” need not be told here. It is well known by all who read these pages. What may not be as well known is the fact the Ida Straus refused to leave her husband’s side, refused a seat in a lifeboat, and perished with him. Her maid, Ellen Bird, did accept a seat in one of the lifeboats. Ida Straus gave Ellen Bird her fur coat saying, “I won’t be needing this.” After surviving the disaster, testifying before an investigative Senate Committee and after some of the furor about the accident had died down, Ellen Bird went to the apartment of Sara Straus, the Strauses oldest daughter, and offered to return the coat. Sara told Ellen to keep it as Mrs. Straus had given it to her; wanted her to have it. After “Titanic,” Ellen went to work as a maid for a family in Tuxedo Park, NY. In the 1920’s, Jesse Straus dined in a Boston hotel restaurant where he was approached by a waiter who introduced himself as Ellen Bird’s husband. At the time, Jesse didn’t think to record the man’s name and, as far as this writer knows, that was the last that was heard of Ellen Bird.

On April 17th, unaware that the “Titanic” had sunk, Irma Straus wrote from the “Amerika” to her children at home “Two days ago the captain knocked at our door at seven o’clock in the morning to tell us to come on deck and see two big ice-bergs. - We only had time to put on nappers and fur coats and go on deck.”

On April 18th Jesse received word from Liverpool: “regret no news yet of mr and mrs isidor straus.”

A Macy’s employee, Altmeyer, in Paris, cabled Jesse on the 18th: “have been exchanging cables with newyork answers are that no definite news will be obtainable until Carpathia carrying survivors reaches Newyork. Altmeyer.”

Percy cabled Jesse from New York on the 18th: "Father and mother not on Carpathia which picked up seven hundred survivors just have unconfirmed rumour that baltic due queenstown carries two hundred fifty more survivors walter beer meet you on tender plymouth with later news if any. Percy."

An undated cable from Percy reads: "Badenoch arrived his story gathered from survivors leaves no hope Mother refused to leave father danger realized too late both showed perfect courage and composure to the end = Percy." John A. Badenoch, Macy's Grocery buyer, was on the Carpathia, the rescue ship.

On April 24th, 1912, John Badenoch wrote:

"Dear Mr. Percy: As per your request, I submit herewith the facts as desired. About 1:30, on the morning of April 15th, I was awakened by the unusual sounds of activity on the deck over head. Just then the fog-horn blew and I got up and looked out of the port hole. It was a perfectly clear star light night and the sea was without a ripple. Of course I immediately realized that either we or some other vessel was in trouble. I then went into the companion-way and saw a steward who informed me that it was the Titanic that was in trouble. He said they had been in communication with her since twelve o'clock and at that time, which was about 1:45, had just received her last message in which it was said she was sinking. The discipline about the Carpathia was perfect and she was using every ounce of steam to hurry her to the scene of the accident.

At about 3:15 we sighted the first life boat and it was alongside at 3:45, just as day was breaking. This first boat was about three quarters filled with people about one quarter of whom were women. None of those rescued in the first life boat knew whether or not your Father and Mother were on the Titanic. The second boat which came alongside about fifteen minutes later was fairly well filled, and almost exclusively with men. There were not more than four or five women in that boat. From one of the passengers on this second boat, I received the information that Mr. & Mrs. Straus were aboard the Titanic. It was not until the third boat arrived that I was able to get a Titanic passenger list and verify the statement that your Father and Mother were booked as passengers. I watched every boat load with intense interest and while it was almost impossible to distinguish the faces of the first arrivals, it was quite day light by the time the fourth or fifth boat arrived. After that they unloaded four boats at one time, two on the port side and two on the starboard side. As I could not watch all these boats unloading, I described your parents to a fellow passenger, so that they would not be brought aboard unobserved by me. After that, however, the boats came in singly. About from the sixth to the ninth boat, two of them came in with not over twelve people in her and the other not having more than twenty people.

At 7:30, we had taken in all the boats in sight. We then steamed at slow speed into the wreckage and again lay too expecting to find more boats. It was then about 8:30 o'clock and the Captain of the Carpathia seemed to think that he had taken aboard all who were in the boats. I then spoke to an officer who appeared to be one of the White Star men, (he was the third officer) and asked him to tell me whether or not all of the Titanic's boats had been accounted for. He refused at first but when I stated my reason for knowing and insisted on an answer, he told me that all the boats had been accounted for and that in his judgment there was almost no hope for those who were not already rescued. Thinking possibly that your father and mother had been taken aboard and I had missed them, I covered the entire ship from bow to stern, and searched the saloon, second and steerage. Also looked in every stateroom, irrespective of its occupants so that I could satisfy myself beyond a doubt whether or not they were aboard. By this time it was almost ten o'clock. I then wrote the message which you received Thursday morning, handed it to the Purser and explained to him the absolute necessity of getting it off at once. He replied very courteously that he would do the best he could but that the muster was just being made and that it must take precedence over private messages. This I accepted as being reasonable. The muster was not completed until noon time when they assured every one that the names had been sent to the

offices of the line in New York. I fully expected that such being the case, all the names of the survivors would be published in the New York papers by three o'clock that afternoon. Later in the afternoon, I asked the officer if any of the private messages had been sent and he replied that he did not think any of them had been sent, but that they would surely be sent that night."

(Note: Mr. Badenoch wrote a rather lengthy description at this point about the difficulty he had getting a message sent. He believed his message was not sent until late Wednesday.)

"Realizing how anxious you would be to get the most accurate information about the last that was seen of your Father and Mother, I circulated among the survivors and although many claimed to have some knowledge of their actions, those whom you have personally interviewed are the ones I finally decided could give the most authentic account. From what I heard on board and that which I have learned since, I think that the statement given to you by Mr. Woolner is the most accurate. All the survivors agree on one fact and this is if the proper discipline had obtained, there is not the least doubt but that your Father and Mother would have been saved.

Taking the statements of eight or ten of the survivors and comparing them, I believe that the following can be considered the most accurate.

Mr. & Mrs. Straus were in bed at the time of the accident. Immediately after the boat struck they were seen in the companion-way, in bath robes. At this time an officer, as well as several of the passengers assured them that there was no trouble and the best they could do would be to return to their rooms. The maid's story after this is that your Mother seemed to realize the danger and prepared to dress, requesting your Father to do likewise. To hurry matters, she sent the maid for his valet to assist him in dressing. Shortly thereafter they both appeared on deck, fully clothed, mingled with the other passengers and discussed the danger in a perfectly calm and collected manner. They evidently did not believe that there was any great danger of the ship sinking. On the advice of the Captain, they put on life preservers over their fur coats, and assisted other passengers in doing the same. By that time the boats were being filled with women and children and your Mother was asked by an officer in charge and urged by your Father to get into one of the life boats. She refused to do so and insisted that the maid take her place in boat No. 8. They stood by while other boats were being filled, all the while your Father continuously urging your Mother to enter one of them. Finally when it became apparent that there was no hope of the Titanic staying afloat, your Father insisted that your Mother enter the second from the last boat that was being launched from the side they were on. She still refused, saying she would not go without him and when the officer in charge, again urged her to enter, and, in fact, attempted force, aided by the urging of your Father, she placed her foot in the boat, thinking at the time that your Father would accompany her. Just then, some demonstration seems to have been made by the men standing around and the officer in charge ordered all the men back. Mr. Isidor, thinking that your Mother was safe in the life boat, stepped back with the other men. Your Mother, looking around and seeing that your Father was not with her, got out of the boat, went to where your Father was standing and put her arms around him. The officer in charge seeing that it was no use in trying to get your Mother to leave your Father ordered the boat lowered away. Your Father and Mother then walked to the opposite side of the ship and when last seen were standing, clasped in each others arms, calmly waiting for any help that might come. Just what happened after that is not quite clear, but I believe they did not attempt to enter any other boat or make any effort to get away, caused, I believe by the unruly behavior of a number of the passengers.

It is now history all over the world that they displayed the most magnificent courage, self sacrifice and devotion known to modern times.

Yours respectfully, John A. Badenoch

The family was notified on April 26th that Isidor's body had been recovered and was sailing to Halifax aboard the steamer Mackay Bennett along with the bodies of 205 other victims of the "Titanic" disaster. Isidor's body was returned to New York on the Boston Express train on May 3rd, accompanied by Mr. James Reilly of Macy's. Maurice Rothschild acted as family agent, arranging all details of the identification and transfer of Isidor's remains. A private funeral, officiated by Rabbi Samuel Shulman of Temple Beth-El, was held at Isidor and Ida's home, which was also Percy's home at 2745 Broadway (105th Street), on May 8th, delayed a day in the hope that Ida's remains would also be recovered. Ida's body was never found.

Isidor was buried in the Straus-Kohns family mausoleum at Salem Field Cemetery in Brooklyn New York. On May 4th, 1928, a deed was drawn for a family plot on Myosotis Street in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx and another Straus family mausoleum was erected. This mausoleum consists of a group of three buildings, one for the each of Isidor and Ida's sons, Jesse, Percy and Herbert, and their families. Isidor's body was moved to Woodlawn Cemetery where he is interred in a stone replica of a galley ship in the courtyard of the three buildings. There is an inscription on the wall upon which the galley ship sits. It is dedicated to both Isidor and Ida. "Many waters cannot quench love - neither can the floods down it." Oddly enough, R. H. Macy and his family are also buried at Woodlawn Cemetery.



Memorial services for Isidor and Ida Straus were held around the world. 6,000 people attended the service at Carnegie Hall on May 12th and many thousand stood outside in the rain, unable to gain admittance to the hall. A reported 40,000 attended memorial services for the Strauses. Within two months of the sinking of the "Titanic," a committee was formed, contributions were being collected, and Straus Park was planned as a memorial to the nobility and heroism of the Strauses. It was dedicated April 15th, 1915.

85 years later, the Park is still the focal point of this Upper West Side neighborhood's activities. A not-for-profit group, Friends of Straus Park, hold regular events including art shows, concerts, neighborhood cleanups, plantings and readings. Memory, the beautiful allegorical statue looks down on the people of New York, seemingly happy not to have been forgotten. Her design, by the artist Augustus Lukeman, was chosen because it "represented a scheme of peaceful contemplation over a sheet of water, leaving it to the meditative public to muse over the sacrifice the same element demanded of the Titanic disaster." (*Elegant New York*, Seth Lowe's West Side) A quote from the Bible is inscribed on the stonewall behind "Memory."



In Memory of Isidor and Ida Straus
Lovely and Pleasant Were They In Their Lives
And In Their Death They Were Not Divided
11 Samuel 1:23

To obtain more information about the Strauses, the Straus Historical Society, Inc., or to make a tax-deductible contribution to the Society, please contact Joan Adler, Executive Director, c/o Straus Historical Society, Inc., Post Office Box 416, Smithtown, NY 11787-0416. Phone: 631-265-0383, FAX: 631-724-4487. E.mail: info@straushistoricalsociety.org