

Published in the Penn-Franklin News on May 5, 2024.

## Steerage

Steven Ujifusa's "The Last Ships from Hamburg: Business, Rivalry, and the Race to Save Russia's Jews on the Eve of World War I" (2023) is a background story on the one hand of Czar Nicholas II's pogroms in Russia of the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It reads in some respects not unlike the immigration tragedy of the Americas today. For those earlier immigrants, too, there was no turning back. Misery and death were in their wake, or conscription into the deadly conflicts of the Russian army. On the other hand, the book is an incisive story of steamship capitalism of that day, a lesser-told story.

Between 1881 and 1914, more than 10 million people took flight by land and sea from Russia and other eastern European countries where conditions for survival were dire. About 25% were Jews; all were to face increasing, inevitable pushback as their numbers grew. These people had to pay for steamship transportation across the Atlantic, and that is how steamship capitalism plays into the central piece of the story.

The focus is on three very successful and wealthy businessmen: (1) Jacob Schiff, managing partner of the American investment bank Kuhn, Loeb & Co., who used a great deal of his personal fortune to facilitate the cause of escape; (2) Albert Ballin, managing director of the Hamburg-American Line, who assembled a supporting network of trains, stopping-off places such as Emigrant Village near his home city of Hamburg (but decidedly not in it), and grand and grander steamships with Hamburg as point of departure by sea; there was another steamship company, the Norddeutscher-Lloyd Line, for which Bremen was home port; and (3) J.P. Morgan, who built the International Mercantile Marine (IMM) trust solely, and not altogether successfully in the long run, with the intent to dominate the steamship industry for profit.

In common is how ships of the day realized their fullest profit potential. There were not separate steamships for touring travelers of leisure, the first or second-class passenger, with privacy aboard and the amenities of near normal life. There were not separate ships for immigrants, mostly too poor to book anything but not-too-private and unaccommodating steerage. All three classes were aboard all ships coming west, but kept separate for the most part aboard ship as ability to pay the transatlantic fare dictated.

The ships were built to optimize the mix for the purpose of maximum profitability, and shipbuilding was itself a big industry in the day with these purposes in mind. The IMM's White Star Lines Titanic was the eventual, high-end product of such a mentality, though perhaps Titanic is better known today for just the rich and famous aboard who were lost at sea. On its fateful maiden voyage in 1912 steerage was only about 70% full, but still filled with 708 people.

Ujifusa's book ends with Acknowledgements led by a reflective quotation from Abraham Lincoln: "As a nation, we began by declaring that 'all men are created equal.' We now practically read it 'all men are created equal, except negroes.' When the Know-

Published in the Penn-Franklin News on May 5, 2024.

Nothings get control, it will read ‘all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics.’ When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty – to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.”

Native and Latin Americans aside, our ancestors often immigrated, whether in chains or not, “in steerage.” This book is the story of just one slice of that larger story. You will relate to it in your own way, especially if genealogy is your thing.

Charles B. Greenberg  
Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation