



cherbourg-titanic.com

11/01/2011 - French passengers embarking in Cherbourg

On 10th April 1912 at 6.35 p.m, the *Titanic* dropped her anchor near to the Central fort in Cherbourg. The stop-over lasted for an hour and a half, just enough time for the *White Star Line* tenders *Nomadic* and *Traffic* to transfer 281 passengers of 26 different nationalities: American, English, Belgian, Canadian, Croatian, Greek, Italian, Lebanese, Polish, Russian, Syrian, Uruguayan ... and French.

21 French passengers embarked in Cherbourg and 16 of them survived the catastrophe. Amongst them were Pierre Maréchal, Berthe Leroy and Louise Laroche, just 21 months old at the time.

Pierre Maréchal: the superstitious passenger



Pierre Maréchal (1883-1942), son of Eugène Albert Maréchal (Vice-admiral) was an astute business man from Paris. Director of the aeronautical company *Paulhan et*

Cie, he boarded the *Titanic* (1st class) in Cherbourg to open new offices for his company across the Atlantic.

In a series of as yet untold memories he published on January 18th 1951, the daily paper *Aurore* relates his surprising premonition concerning the crossing.

"Mr. Pierre Maréchal, a Parisian called to the United States on business by the aeroplane constructor Curtiss, had the choice of making the crossing on the liner Le Savoie from our Transatlantic company or the Titanic":

? Le Savoie is due to leave on the 13th, declared Mr Maréchal, and I'm superstitious!

He therefore booked his crossing on the Titanic, but not without worrying his wife. Half-Italian, half-Irish and apparently doted with a great talent for premonition, she had begged her husband not to board the English liner.

? I don't know why, but I'm sure that this voyage will have an unhappy ending.

Four days after the liner's departure, Mrs Marechal was playing bridge with some friends in Italy. Suddenly, she dropped her cards and fainted. She was unconscious for several hours and burst into tears on awaking, announcing that a great catastrophe had happened.

On the evening of April 14th, Pierre Maréchal was playing cards in the Café Parisien with friends. They stopped their game when an officer arrived and suggested they put on life jackets and go up to the deck. Pierre Maréchal was able to board lifeboat number 7.

"When we stopped, three quarters of a mile further on, the scene which was taking place before us created a particularly beautiful picture. On a perfectly calm sea, under a sky with no moon sprinkled with millions of stars, the enormous Titanic was lit up from her water line to the embarkation deck as if set down on the water. The bow was sinking into the black water". [New York Sun, Sunday 21st April 1912]

Pierre Maréchal stayed in New York for a week before returning to the port of Le Havre on the evening of May 2nd on board the liner *Le Savoie*.

Berthe Leroy: Lady-in-waiting for rich Americans



Berthe Leroy (1884 ? 1972), a young woman from a modest background in Compiègne (Oise), was a seamstress. In 1910, she started working for the rich, American Douglas family as a lady-in-waiting.

After a stay in France in 1912, the family decided to return to America to celebrate Mr Douglas's 53rd birthday. Berthe boarded the Titanic in Cherbourg on the same ticket as Mrs Douglas (No. PC 17661). During the stopover in Queenstown, she sent a postcard to her mother: "I would love you to be able to visit this ship. I am so happy on board this beautiful liner". She kept with her memories of a luxury crossing on board the Titanic: the fortunate passengers on board were invited to numerous parties, receptions and dinners.

When the collision happened and Berthe left her room, the corridors were dark and deserted and it was difficult to reach the upper deck. She made her way by following the fluorescent lighting from cabins. She was one of the last passengers to board the second-to-last life boat (no. 12).

"I saw the ship sinking slowly, the life rafts, filling up one by one and being lowered into the sea and this immense iceberg dominating the scene, so white against the clear, starry sky, surging out of the sea, of a rare calm, smooth as a mirror".

Once on board the *Carpathia*, she found her employer. On arriving in New York, they learned that the body of Mr Douglas was on board the *California* and heading for Halifax. She made a promise to Mrs Douglas on that day to remain with her. After Mrs Douglas's death in 1945, she decided to move back to France and made her last transatlantic crossing on board the liner *France*.

Louise Laroche: the children of the *Titanic*



Louise Laroche, aged just 21 months, boarded the *Titanic* in Cherbourg on April 10th 1912 with her family in 2nd class (the Laroche family: the 281 passengers). Her father Joseph, was lost in the disaster whereas Louise was taken on board lifeboat no. 14 with her mother and elder sister.

She never talked about the Titanic for the rest of the century. It wasn't until October 1994 that she accepted to talk to Olivier Mendez, one of the founding members of the *Association Française du Titanic*.

"We had all been terribly affected. My mother has great difficulty talking about the disaster and she kept those atrocious images within her for the rest of her life. We also received no compensation until 1918 and so ran into extreme financial difficulty... For example, my mother brought us up with her fear of travelling and it is because of this that I never went to Boston when the Titanic Historical Society wanted to bring together the survivors" [Interview with Louise Laroche by La Presse de la Manche, 20th April 1996]

On April 19th 1996 on the initiative of Mr Mendez, she unveiled a commemorative plate on Lawton-Collins quay, the old landing pier for the *White Star Line* tenders, in memory of the Titanic passengers that embarked in Cherbourg.

Louise Laroche also had a special story as her father Joseph Laroche was the only known black passenger on board the Titanic. Originally from Haiti, he had left his native island for France at the age of 15 to take up engineering studies in Beauvais then Lille under the tutorship of the Bishop of Haiti. He started his career as an engineer working for *Chemins de fers électriques souterrains* (the Paris underground). He married Juliette Lafargue on March 18th 1908 who he had met through his English teacher Maurice Lafargue, Juliette's brother. In 1911, Joseph made the decision to return to Haiti with his family and take up a job as Maths and Physics teacher at the secondary school in Cap-Haiti. The racial discrimination Joseph Laroche suffered from in France stopped him finding a well-paid job in the country.

