



In the future the Assyrian will not "come down like a wolf on the fold," for a woman is to head the government of the new Assyrian nation. Lady Surma is expected to be the first woman president in the world—as she has been the first woman ambassador—so soon as the national parliament of the Assyrians is organized. Great Britain

Assyrian Princess Comes to the United States!

(Part 1 of 3)

by Christopher R. Nelson, Mar Shimun Memorial Foundation

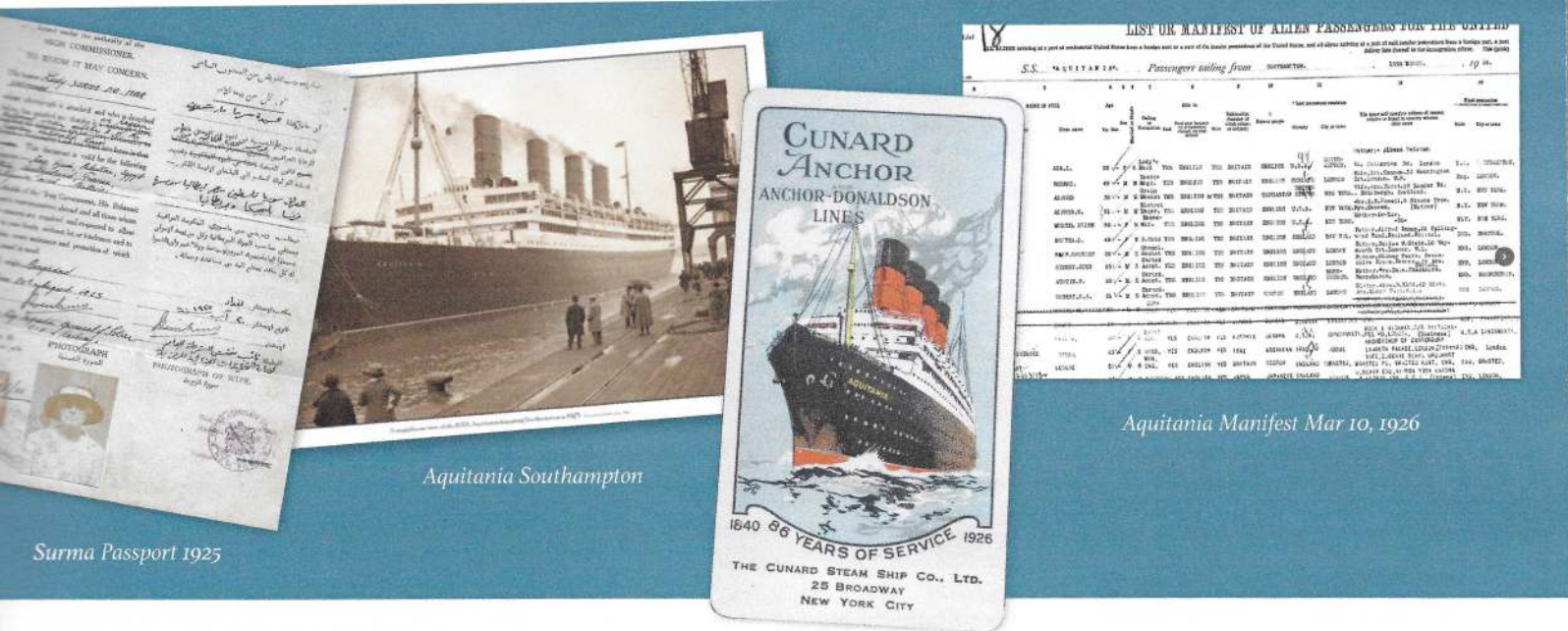
While contemporary Assyrians can be forgiven for not recognizing the Byronic allusion to ancient Assyria in this sensationalistic syndicated headline¹ announcing Surma d'Mar Shimun's impending arrival in the United States in early

Treaty of Lausanne) in Baghdad. They are on a research mission to gather data and information about the disputed border region with Turkey, north of Mosul (Surma would also meet with them in early February). The Assyrian levies are engaged in sporadic skirmishes with Sheikh Mahmoud's Kurdish warriors in the Suleimania region (east of Kirkuk) on behalf of the British and Iraq government. Church of the East Metropolitan (of India), Mar Timotheus, at the behest of Mar Shimun, is in the United States presenting the needs of the Church (primarily, for theological schools and a printing press), to the Episcopal representatives there. The Patriarch, seventeen-year old Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, whose educational course had been agreed upon between Mar Timotheus and the Archbishop of Canterbury, is passing through Jerusalem on his way to England to attend his first year of college. And in Mosul, his aunt Surma Khanum is writing to the British High Commissioner, Sir Henry Dobbs, to remind him of his pledges of two years prior that Assyrian demands for autonomy would have his government's "... closest attention." She diplomatically relays the results of a recent meeting of Assyrian maliks (chiefs/leaders): "... They all agree in one accord, imploring the British government to emigrate them to one of their colonies which climate agrees with, so that the small remnant may live in peace, and work to keep their existence. At the same time, not at all ungrateful for all favours and help that Great Britain has bestowed most generously to the Assyrians in the time of their greatest need and sufferings."³

1926 (using a photo from 1919), the American press of the twenties—preoccupied with woman's suffrage and all things Eastern and exotic—can be excused for exaggerating Surma's official political status; not to mention that of the phantasmal Assyrian "nation"/country itself. At the time this rehashed headline was reprinted, Surma Khanum (Lady Surma), as she was respectfully regarded, was in London advocating for an Assyrian homeland, uncertain if she would be continuing on to the United States. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, a fervid advocate of the Assyrians, had formulated an inter-denominational committee to raise funds for Assyrian relief and Surma Khanum—"Princess," "Ambadressess," "President"—was asked to lead the publicity tour. Over seven long months, she would visit over fifty cities in sixteen states across the country (including three Canadian cities), presenting the Assyrian plight to diverse groups of Americans, many of whom, to quote a colorful Irish reporter of the day, "... had thought the country and its people as extinct as the brontosaurus and the dodo, as dead as Nineveh and Jonah and his whale..."² Today's Assyrians know the empty-handed results of such attempts to secure a homeland in the Middle-East, but few are aware of Surma Khanum's significant role in these valiant but doomed efforts. This series of three articles fills in some of these missing gaps by focusing on the 1925-6 period during which the future of the Assyrian nation in Mesopotamia still hung in the balance.

Let us then travel back to the beginning of 1925. King Faisal of Iraq is meeting with representatives of the League of Nations Frontier Commission (sent in accordance with the

Up to this point Dobbs and the Colonial Office had been unsuccessful in locating a suitable country from their long, but ever-shrinking menu of colonial protectorates and dominions, let alone one that was willing to admit war refugees. The head of the Colonial Office in London, Secretary of State Leo S. Amery, personally sympathized with Surma and the Assyrian's desires, but his primary job was to ensure that Mosul, "... the most fertile and, since the subsequent oil discoveries, the richest part of the whole country," remain within the newly formed state of Iraq, and thus, under British control. The sine qua non, then, of any British help for the Assyrians would depend upon, "... The rapid improvement and training of



Aquitania Southampton

the Iraq Army in a short time to take the principal part in the maintenance of internal security and the control of the Iraq frontiers," with the not inconsequential result of reducing the British government's burdensome yearly expense of some three-million pounds in administering Mesopotamia.⁴

On the day she posted her letter to Dobbs in late March, Leo Amery and Sir Samuel Hoare (Sec. of State for Air) arrived for a personal inspection of the "Mosul muddle," as the British press was calling it. They met with Surma who expressed her fears that, without British support, the Iraqi Government wouldn't hesitate to scatter the Assyrians throughout villages in the Mosul vilayet. "If this plan is carried out I can only regard it as the final burial of our people," she told them.⁵ There were really only two acceptable options: Emigration out of Iraq, or a scheme for colonization supported and protected by the British.

Under no delusions as to British restraints and priorities, Surma Khanum was determined to lobby for a seat at the table of the decision-makers in Geneva; whether it be herself or a trustworthy representative.⁶ As she confided to Mrs. Edith Davidson, the Archbishop's wife, "... If there is not somebody to put the Assyrian cause strongly in the League, I fear that, having so big and important things to settle, our poor cause will be forgotten, or more likely will be soaked in Mosul oil."⁷ Fresh upon their return to London, Amery and Hoare met with the Archbishop and expressed their desire to do something for the Assyrians. Archbishop Davidson (no doubt, after talking with Mrs. Davidson) followed up with Surma on May 29th to inform her how impressed Amery and Hoare had been with her "appreciation of the perplexities of the problem," and asked if she was willing to go to Geneva to represent the Assyrian voice at the League's impending Frontier Commission. Before signing off, he provided encouraging updates about Mar Eshai who had recently accompanied him to Canterbury Cathedral for a large ceremonial funeral service in honor of Viscount Milner, former Sec. of State for Colonies. His Holiness, he added, was "getting on well" and "very popular"⁸ at St. Augustine's. The cheerful prospect of visiting with Mar Shimun no doubt factored into her decision whether or not to leave Iraq for the West again.

When the anxiously awaited League report was publicly issued on August 7th, 1925, Assyrian hopes of returning to their Hakkari homes were all but dashed. The writers recommended the placement of the region north of the temporary border above Mosul known as "The Brussels Line," firmly into the hands of Turkey, while the area south (i.e., the Mosul vilayet), and Iraq itself, would remain under British mandate for a theoretical twenty-five year transition period. Formal discussion and review of this report, which managed to satisfy none of the parties involved, was scheduled to take place at The League of Nations Enquiry Commission in Geneva beginning September 1st.

Within days a red-wax sealed envelope labelled, "On His Majesty's Service," in bold black letters, magically appeared at Surma's door: "Dear Lady Surma, ... Sir Samuel cabled me this morning that the Archbishop advises you to go to Geneva. I have provisionally arranged for a passage for you on the air mail leaving here on the 19th August ... —Air Headquarters, British Forces in Iraq (Baghdad)."⁹ Packed and ready bright and early at the appointed day and time, Surma Khanum was at the R.A.F. airstrip at Hinai, Baghdad where she boarded a twin-engine Vickers Vernon for the twelve-hour flight to Cairo—"the only civilian allowed this privilege" according to a British official—from where she was either flown or taken by boat to Marseille, France. From there she boarded the train to Geneva. En route, as the magnificent French-Swiss countryside passed through the window, she re-read the Archbishop's benediction to her undertaking: "We pray God that your presence in Geneva may be of real use to the plans we hope for as regard the settlement of your people in Iraq. I am certain that it is wise that you should be available in Geneva for settling before the authorities the needs and possibilities of the Assyrians."¹⁰

Arriving in Geneva on September 1st she was met by long-time friend Georges S. Reed and his wife. Reed, an ex-missionary of the Archbishop's Assyrian Mission (1905-1915), had seen her off in Basra, Iraq for her first trip to England in 1919. The Reeds drove Surma to the Hotel Russie, situated not far from



Archbishop of Canterbury,
Randall Davidson & Edith Davidson



Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem, Jan, 1926



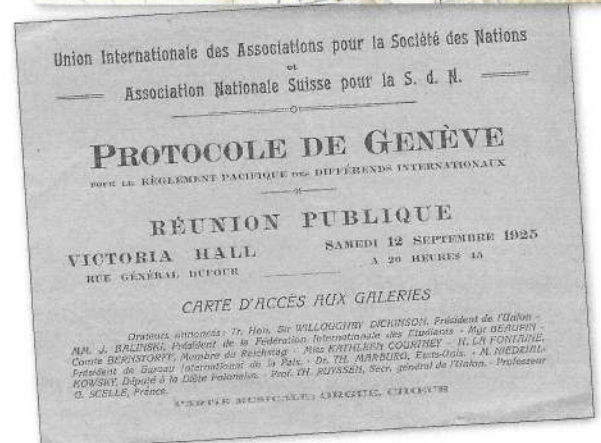
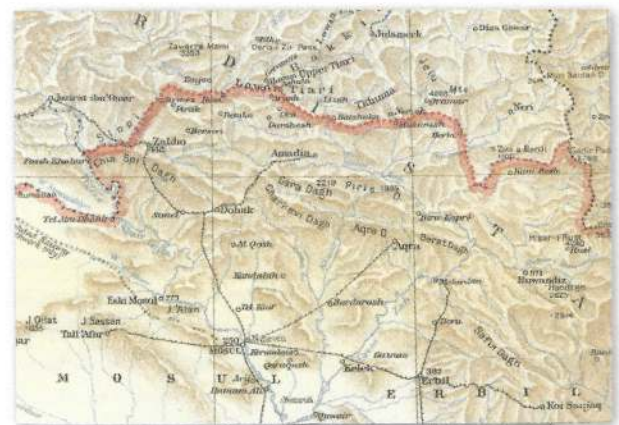
the League Secretariat on the Quai du Mont-Blanc, facing Geneva harbor where the Rhone flows into Lac Lemman. The salubrious autumn alpine air and vistas of snow-capped Mont Blanc reminded her of the Patriarchal See of Qudshanis. She and the Reeds somberly reflected on the ten extraordinarily painful years that had passed since she last saw her home. A period in which over a quarter-million Assyrians (between a third and half of the total population) had lost their lives in the Turkish organized genocide during the war.¹¹ Four of her brothers and many close relations had perished. The survivors were now refugees wanting nothing more than to go home and rebuild their lives. These tragic losses weighed heavily and though she sensed the increasing impossibility of winning back their Hakkari homes, Surma Khanum wasn't about to let the League representatives, or anyone else for that matter, forget the Assyrians. Within the first several days she requested personal meetings with three committee chairmen: Aristide Briand (French Foreign Minister), Bo Osten Unden (Swedish Foreign Minister), and Edvard Benes (Czech Foreign Minister). Whether or not Briand or Unden found time in their busy schedules to talk informally with her or not is unknown, but Edvard Benes of the Czech delegation promised his personal support for the "aspirations of the Assyro-Chaldean people and their rights" at the opportune occasion.¹²

Meanwhile, British delegate Leo Amery, was battling with Tewfik Rushdi Pasha of Turkey over borders and boundaries. Straight out of the gate, Tewfik charged the British with staging military demonstrations to exert influence over the council, while Amery exposed the Turks for violating the Mosul provisional boundary. When pressed as to the well-being and security of Kurds and Assyrians on their side of the border, Tewfik refused to provide any assurance. In contrast, Amery promised protection for the Assyrians, so long as they were placed under Iraq's sovereignty. He even made a last-ditch effort for an expansion of the Iraq border north of the Brussels Line that would include the Hakkari, or at least part of it. Tewfik responded with cool indifference. Perhaps because at that very moment Turkish military forces were violently expelling some eight-thousand (Syriac Orthodox) Assyrians from the Goyan region, just north of the Line.¹³

Shots had been exchanged between patrols of Iraq and Turkish military north-west of Zakho and news-headlines announcing imminent war flashed across the world. Sir Samuel Hoare commented to the Colonial Office that the Turkish rationale for this timing and action could only be explained by a calculated attempt to create an unfavorable situation on the frontier so as to provoke a plebiscite, or popular vote, on the issue (an Arab majority populated the region). This latest aggression was therefore seen for what it was, a prelude to punitive action against the last of the Assyrian "rebels" remaining in Turkish territory.

Before Surma Khanum was even scheduled to meet with

Brussels Line

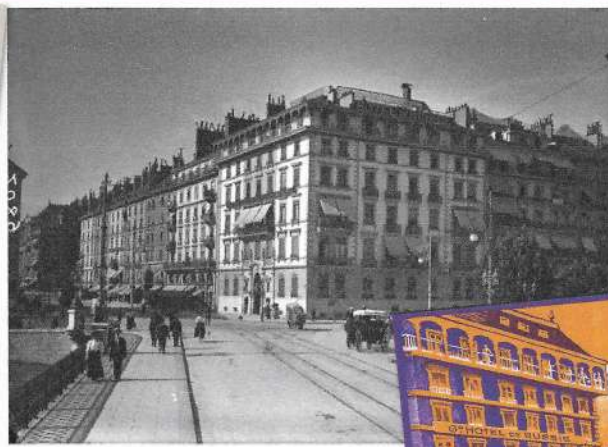


Union Internationale des Associations 1925

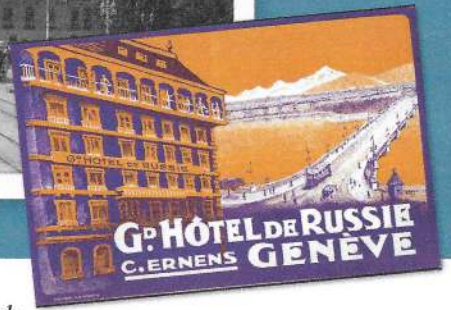


THE LADY SURMA D'MAR SHINUM WHO REPRESENTED THE ASSYRIAN CHRISTIANS AT GENEVA

Surma Khanum, London, 1925



Hotel Russie, Geneva, circa 1905



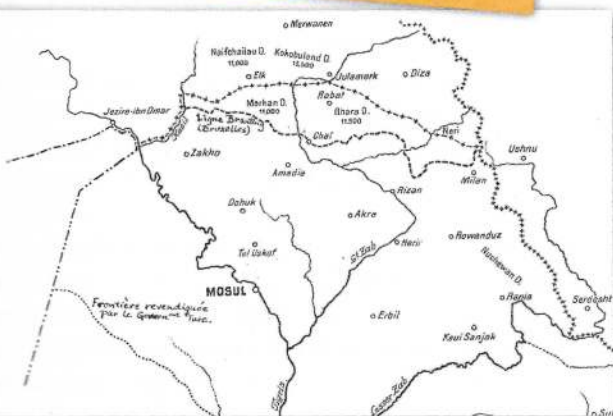
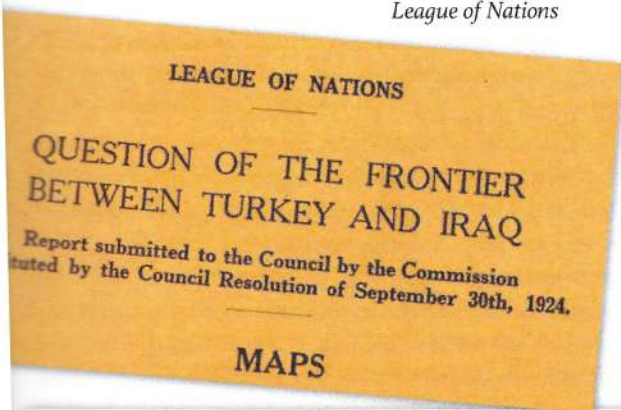
League officials, the contentious dispute had to be handed off to the Hague for an advisory opinion regarding procedural issues raised by the Turks. Undeterred, Surma managed to secure an audience with League officials at 10:30 am on September 22nd. Georges Reed and his wife escorted her along the Geneva waterfront to the League Secretariat. Though the discussion seems to have been undocumented, it's safe to say she told them what she told the Women's International League of London a month later: "We do not ask Great Britain to let us revenge ourselves on the Turks. We only ask to be assured of peace, and above all of security. It has always been the great wish of the Assyrians to be under British rule, and all they desire now is that they may be permitted to settle in the healthy, open country north of Mosul, where they can maintain their own language, religion,

and schools, free from Turkish interference. Our people fought on the side of the Allies during the Great War, and we only ask in return that the little remnant now left of our nation may continue in peace and liberty." ¹⁴ Reed testified to the powerful "... impression she made on the greats of this world gathered there," adding that, "... she had the stature of a queen among them and Rabbi Dr. Browne would have been proud of her." ¹⁵

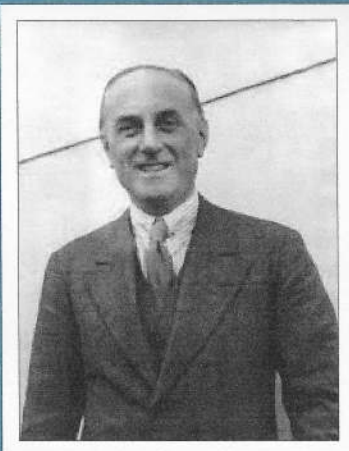
Surma Khanum's mission in Geneva accomplished, she took a train to the French port-town of Calais and boarded the ferry for the Channel crossing to Dover, England on the 26th. Surma's frank discussions with Amery and Hoare, her presence in Geneva, and her persistent appeals to Christian conscience inspired Archbishop Davidson to action. On September 28th, he called upon Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, who publicly promised his Government would not lose sight of "this important aspect of the problem." ¹⁶ Another public appeal from the Archbishop followed a week later, and from this, a special Assyrian and Iraq Christians Committee was formed under the leadership of Sir Henry Lunn. Described by a Canadian reporter as a "visiting British knight, European tourist organizer, and apostle of unity among churches and brotherhood among nations," ¹⁷ Lunn, together with Amery, suggested bringing on board long-time Assyrian advocates like Lord Cecil, Dr. Wigram, Rev. Heazell, and of course, Surma Khanum herself (who was then staying as a guest of Canon Mason at Canterbury). Out of this committee sprouted the idea of a fundraising tour in America, to be organized by their Episcopalian colleagues in New York.

Within days, the Archbishop cabled Surma Khanum to officially request her presence in the United States. A second cable followed the next day from William Chauncey Emhardt, Field Director of the American Episcopal Church. Emhardt, whom Surma had met on his visit to Mosul in the summer of 1924 to discuss potential Assyrian emigration to America, and Mar Shimun's educational plans, also informed her that she'd soon be receiving correspondence between himself and Mar Timotheus regarding the latter's claims that the Patriarchal Family had made him patriarchal "regent" (as opposed to "qa-

League of Nations



Brussels Line



Samuel Hoare



Leo S. Amery



Leo Amery, Geneva, 1925



Sir Henry Lunn

yoma," or representative/plenipotentiary) in October of 1920. Quickly thereafter, a third telegram arrived, this one from the Assyrians in Chicago who felt slighted by Mar Timotheus' suspension of two priests and ordination of another of his choosing. It read: *"Kindly visit America. Your command will be honored by all parts. Church needs you for organization. Others fail."*¹⁸ Her fundraising tour of America had suddenly taken on the added dimension of peace mission amongst her own people.

On the 21st of November, the Permanent Court of International Justice at the Hague re-confirmed the League's authority to make a definitive determination about the frontier issue between Turkey and Iraq, and that this decision would be made through majority voting process. The Turkish delegates stalled for time by refusing to vote, claiming to require unanimous approval from their National Assembly back in Angora first. They were over-ruled. Silence would be a no-vote, and so they would be bound by the League's ruling.

Surma Khanum wasn't one to passively wait around for the League's verdict on her countrymen's fate, or for final confirmation of her trip to America. She had more meetings with the Archbishop and others during this time, attended the opening of Parliament by the King and Queen, and sat in on a debate in the House of Commons over the new Anglo-Iraq Treaty.¹⁹ She held speaking engagements at several events arranged by Lunn's Relief Committee that included church gatherings, clubs, schools, women's groups, and even radio (on Wednesday, February 17th, at 7:40 pm, sandwiched between Beethoven and Chopin, Surma Khanum introduced thousands of London listeners of the BBC to "Assyrian Christians").²⁰ She also caught up with Mar Shimun at Canterbury, filling him in on all that had transpired, especially with regards to Mar Timotheus.

As a new year was underway and snow drifted down on London, Surma received confirmation of her worst fears from her brother Rab Khaila Dawid (Commander in the Assyrian Levies, and father of Mar Eshai). He related intelligence that the Iraqi Government was indeed making plans to scatter the

Assyrians willy-nilly in villages across Iraq. She lamented in her diary: *"Dear Lord, what will happen to these poor Assyrians among the politics of the world."*²¹ After several long walks over the next couple of weeks, and much prayer in the evenings, she debated whether her presence back in Mosul or in America would be more beneficial. Her people had failed to achieve autonomy through either military or diplomatic means. That left one untried option: capital. If enough money could be raised they might be able to purchase enough land from the Kurds in the North for a homeland. Lunn had made a public appeal for one-hundred thousand pounds (about half-a-million dollars) with which to do this. His Committee had so far managed to raise over twenty-thousand pounds (in no small part due to Surma's efforts), which was helping the Goyan refugees in Zakho and others in Mosul. If this kind of money could be raised in war-depleted, downtrodden England then surely the prosperous bandwagon of America would be willing to contribute. Still, five-hundred thousand dollars seemed a tall order. She reminded herself that the Hakkari mountaineers had surmounted impossible odds against their very existence four-times as long as the United States had been a country, and that hope alone was not a survival strategy. And then there was the troubling rift in Chicago... She wrote to Dr. Emhardt in New York on January 29th agreeing to come to America.

As a prelude to her lectures in the U.S., she told a gathered crowd of influential personalities at London's Mansion House on February 1st: *"Alas, we have no homes, but there is much land in Iraq where we could settle ourselves if only the League of Nations would make up their mind that we have a right to some place to live. We are independent people and do not wish to live on alms all our lives. Idleness is bad for every nation. We are an ancient civilisation, and we do not want our nation to die. We want a means to live."*²²

Anxious Assyrians in Mosul, after having digested the disappointing League results issued in mid-December, had written and signed another petition: *"... Our mind is not changed and our requests are the same [as the] first one which has been submitted to your Excellency, i.e. either our small lands under the British Mandate, be returned at any possible way, if not, we beg to emigrate us to any of the British Colonies [where] the climate and*

LONDON PROGRAMMES.

(Continued from the previous page.)

WEDNESDAY, Feb. 17, 1926.

THURSDAY, Feb. 18, 1926.

FRIDAY, Feb. 19, 1926.

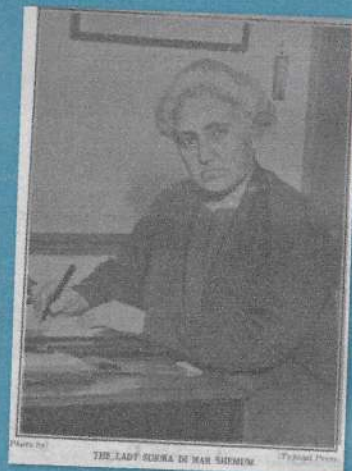


Lord Cecil at the Hotel Beau Rivage, overlooking Lake Geneva, where he is attending the Conference.

Lord Cecil Geneva 1925



Lady Surma, London, 1925



Surma d'Mar Shimun, London, 1925

water would suit us, and [where] we would be relieved miseries and dark

from our anxieties, future; because in Iraq we cannot live in any way. As our request is simple and we are a very small nation (or family), we trust that the British Government will take a kind action, and we shall be granted one of the two humble requests. We believe that our request will be heard and will receive a favourable reply."²³ Surma received and translated this petition from Mosul, handing it over to the Archbishop for presentation to the British Government on the 28th. The following week, she returned to Canterbury with Dean George Bell to visit with Mar Shimun. She proudly watched him conduct Holy Communion at St. Augustine's chapel alongside two English deacons, fondly recalling guiding him through his very first communions and church consecrations in the Assyrian villages of Amadia five years earlier. Next morning, her passport arrived from the American Consul.

Back in London, she attended communion at the Church of St. Philip where the Priest requested a prayer from the congregation for her safe and peaceful trip. Sir Samuel Hoare had left a note for her at Lambeth: "I write to wish you every success in your journey to America. You can rely on Mr. Amery and myself to do everything in our power to ensure fair treatment for your people."²⁴ On the 8th, with Mar Shimun in attendance, she talked over her travel plans one final time with the Archbishop, and Bishop Charles Gore recited a poem in her honor. A farewell luncheon was held for her at the National Liberal Club at Whitehall Place, hosted by Lunn's Assyrians and Iraq Christians Committee the following afternoon.

On the morning of the 10th she boarded the S.S. Aquitania in Southampton and at 1pm the clanging of a bell announced their departure. Surma Khanum stood on deck beside fellow passengers observing several steam-billowing tugs guide the majestic ship from the quay. Such unity of purpose, she knew, was the only way the divided denominations of her people would ever launch a nation of their own. Lines were slackened, tossed into the water and reeled in. Vibrations rippled across the deck as the giant propellers began churning below; black

coal smoke billowed out of the four red cylindrical smokestacks. The "Ship Beautiful," as she was affectionately known, slowly slipped away from England, then glided forth as a series of deep guttural horn blasts shouted independence from shore. The fluttering dove handkerchiefs and waving hands of the anonymous English men and women on the dock shrunk into the distance. "Princess, Ambassador, President" Surma Khanum was on her way to America.

(To Be Continued . . .)

¹"Lady Surma of Assyria," *Portage Daily Register*, 02 Dec, 1925, 32; 30 Jan, 1926, 4.

²"Belfast Rotary Club—A Problem of the Middle East," *Northern Whig*, 2 Jul, 1924, 9.

³Surma d'Mar Shimun to Sir Henry Dobbs, 7 Jan, 1925. SurmaCorr: Mar Shimun Memorial Foundation Archives.

⁴Amery, L.S. *My Political Life*, Vol 2: 1914-1929. London: Hutchinson, 1953. 307-310; *British Colonial Report* (1925), 12.

⁵Surma to L.S. Amery, 9 May, 1925. SurmaCorr: MSMF Archives.

⁶9 May, & 12 May, 1925. SurmaCorr: MSMF Archives. Note: American missionary E.W. McDowell was considered.

⁷Surma to Edith Davidson, 31 Mar, 1925 in Bell, G.K.A., *Randall Davidson Archbishop of Canterbury*, vol. 2. (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), 1189.

⁸Randall Davidson to Surma, 29 May, 1925. SurmaCorr: MSMF Archives.

⁹British Air HQ to Surma, 07 Aug, 1925. Ibid.

¹⁰Randall Davidson to Surma, 22 Aug, 1925. Ibid.

¹¹David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors, Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I*, (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2006), 300-1.

¹²V. Finersly to Surma, 17 Sep, 1925. SurmaCorr: MSMF Archives.

¹³Note: None of these people had taken up arms against the Turks in World War I.

¹⁴"An Assyrian Woman Ambassador," *The Vote* (London), 29 Jan, 1926, 1 & 2.

¹⁵Georges S. Reed, "La Mission de L'Archeveque de Cantorbéry Aupres des Chrétiens Assyriens," *Le Monde Non Chretien* 84 (Oct-Dec, 1967): 31. Note: W.H. Browne, Anglican missionary to the Assyrians (1886-1910) had tutored Surma in her youth.

¹⁶Bell, G.K.A., 1189-90.

¹⁷"Unhesitating Adhesion Urged by Sir Henry S. Lunn to Secure World Peace," *The Gazette*, Montreal, 3 Mar, 1926, 5.

¹⁸Rev. George Azoo; Rev. Nestoris Malick; Baba Badal; M. Sargis to Surma. 5 Dec, 1925. SurmaCorr: MSMF Archives.

¹⁹Feb 2, and Feb. 18, 1926 respectively. SurmaDiary: MSMF Archives; *British Parliament* (HC) 191, 18 Feb, 1926.

²⁰RadioTimes, BBC (#125), 12 Feb, 1926, (19:40) 12.

²¹Surma, 4 Jan, 1926. SurmaDiary: MSMF Archives.

²²"Lectures & Meetings. Assyrians & Iraq Christians Committee," *The Times* (London), 26 Jan, 1926, 12; "Plight of Iraq Christians," *The Guardian* (London), 2 Feb, 1926, 12.

²³League of Nations (R610/11): 50818/25888.

²⁴Sir Samuel Hoare to Surma, 7 Mar, 1926 in Shimun XXIII, Mar Eshai, *The Assyrian Tragedy*. (Annemasse, 1934), 21.