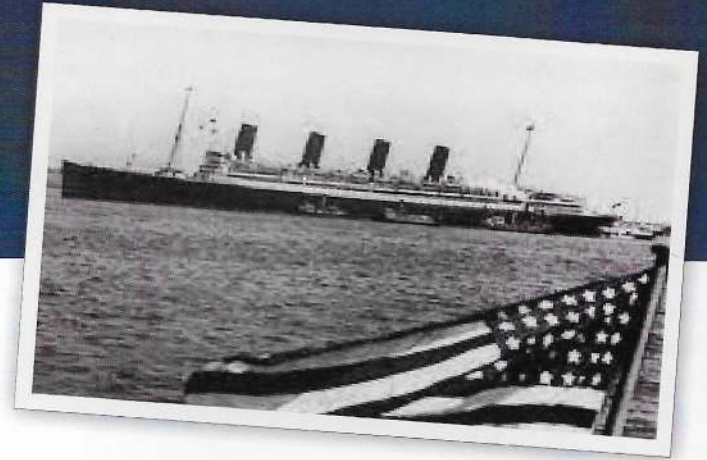


PART II: "Lady Surma on Visit to Aid Countrymen—Princess Regent of the Assyrian Nation Arrives Today on the Aquitania."

(Part 2 of 3)

by Christopher R. Nelson, Mar Shimun Memorial Foundation

Aquitania - New York Harbor (1926)



The Aquitania arrived in New York two days late on March 18th, 1926. "Tremendous gales and huge seas . . ." had left several windows smashed on B deck, 45 feet above the water line, and not a few of the 1,269 passengers had been ill. "This has been the worst winter both on land and sea that I have ever known," stated commander Sir James Charles.¹ Steadied in faith and her larger mission, Surma d'Mar Shimun stoically noted in her diary only that, "The first few days were uncomfortable due to the choppiness of the ocean." Undoubtedly relieved to be ashore, it was no small comfort that the Americans, not to be outdone by the Brits who'd sent her across the Atlantic on the "Ship Beautiful," had put her up in the Waldorf-Astoria for her initial days in New York.

The city, with its sun-blocking towers lining 5th Ave, crowded, bustling streets criss-crossed by hat and suit costumed businessmen, the mishmash of markets and their dazzling signs, immigrants from all corners of the globe, honking Model T Fords and other rumbling horseless carriages of the day, recalled Surma Khanum's first dizzying impressions of London in 1919. Then, as now, she had been less awe-struck by the size of the buildings, houses, and churches, than that they all seemed incapable of defense due to their wide windows and entrances. In the English countryside she had marveled at the sight of men in the fields freely going about their farming without armed guards.²

When asked by a reporter why she had come to America, Surma Khanum stated in blunt New York City fashion, "My mission in England and America is to save my nation from death, as thousands of people are dying yearly from starvation and disease, due to the tyranny of surrounding nations." She further elaborated: "I am over here because American friends of mine have invited me to come and I hope to deliver a number of lectures. . . . I will be in the United States only three or four months and in that time I hope to impress upon American people the need for responding to the Assyrian cause. Americans have been so generous during the war and since that there is not much doubt that they will hear me graciously."³

Unlike the novelty of her first visit to London six years earlier, when Archbishop Randall Davidson offhandedly remarked, "It is extraordinary to find so much civilization where one could naturally have expected barbarism,"⁴ Surma Khanum no longer looked the "chieftainess of an Eastern mountain nation" who "wore the woolen habit and veil [sic] of the religious order to which she belongs. . . . Her hair is now snow white, [and she] has the poise, manner, and speech of a woman of affairs of the Western world."⁵ One syndicated fluff piece (suspiciously originating in Constantinople) derogatorily described her as, ". . . a very old fashioned princess—a slight, white-haired woman of sixty, wearing eyeglasses . . ."⁶ She was in fact only forty-three, may have used reading glasses, dressed in western suit and hat, and wore a *yalikhta* (scarf) as a traditional head covering while in church. The Archbishop had privately expressed concerns insinuating that Lady Surma might not appear "Oriental" [my quotes] enough to arouse the curiosity of Americans. This was, after-all, the era of King Tut and Mah-Jongg crazes, when mysterious turban and robe flowing yogis from the Far East such as Sri Yogananda were packing venues like Carnegie Hall.

Old friends and acquaintances from the homeland like Y.M. Neesan and Qasha Showil who had emigrated to America were some of her first visitors in New York, and as she crossed the continent over the ensuing months, growing Assyrian-American communities in New Britain, CT, Yonkers, NY, Detroit, MI, Philadelphia, PA, San Francisco, Sacramento, Fresno and Turlock, CA, enthusiastically welcomed her. Assyrian families, as well as mayors and civic leaders, greeted her at train stations, often with a bouquet of flowers, after which, banquets, picnics, informal teas and luncheons, and the occasional sight-seeing drive, were given in her honor. In Turlock, Dr. Isaac Adams--founder of the



Aquitania — New York (1926)



LADY SURMA ON VISIT TO AID COUNTRYMEN

*Princess Regent of the Assyrian
Nation Arrives Today on
the Aquitania.*

Assyrian colony there some fifteen years earlier—proudly welcomed Surma Khanum, who “. . . *Was well pleased with my idea of getting Assyrians onto farms,*” and “*Since [her visit], wherever she goes, she advertises this colony.*”⁷ As fate would have it, Turlock would be Surma Khanum’s final earthly abode almost a half century on.

But not all of the approximately 10,000 Assyrian-Americans⁸ at this time were overjoyed to see her.⁷ Upon learning of Surma Khanum’s arrival in New York, an Assyrian priest in Chicago notified Metropolitan, Mar Timotheus, that “*the motwa*” (local church committee), refused to send a cablegram welcoming her without his approval, and their priests would not have “*any busines dealing*” with her. Furthermore, “. . . *If you can help us not to be or get cheated by Surma or epescapals do kindly write to me and I will see that the Motwa gets the best and protecting points, from the Woolves. . . . I have been trying in a good way to get in to the people head that she is nothing but a woman and has no right to mix with the church affairs not here nor abroad, therefor if she does, [we] will not recognize her even as a nun or sister of charity.*”⁹ On the same day this letter was written, Surma Khanum noted in her diary: “*Representatives of the Nation and Presbyterians came to meet me. They don’t agree with each other much but they are saying that they will come together for peace and love.*”¹⁰

This antipathy towards Surma Khanum from the Metropolitan and his supporters in Chicago reflected deep-seated resentment regarding the election of twelve-year old Mar Eshai Shimun to the patriarchy in 1920 without his consultation, as well as long-festered misgivings about Church of the East reliance on the British and their American Episcopal affiliates. More trenchantly, it was the by-product of age-old misogyny in a traditionally male-dominated society. As George Lamsa explained to an American audience in Buffalo at this time, “*Women are not welcomed into the oriental scheme of life: mourning and wailing greet the announcement of the birth of a girl baby.*”¹¹ Close observers

of Assyrian culture, Anglican missionaries W.H. Browne and Arthur John Maclean, noted in the early 1890s: “*Too often women are the drudges who are ordered about by the men, do the hard work, carry heavy loads, whose education matters nothing, and who become prematurely aged through their heavy tasks, and also it seems through their too early marriages.*”¹² This was the woman’s place in the world in which Surma Khanum grew up and now she was being painfully reminded of it in America of all places.

Surma Khanum’s temporal leadership in this period was a consequence of crisis: World war, genocide, and the sudden deaths of two patriarch-brothers had thrust her into the forefront of Assyrian leadership. Prior to sending her to England to represent the Assyrian cause at the Paris Peace Conference in Versailles in 1919, Metropolitan Mar Yosip Khnanishu, on behalf of her ailing brother, then Patriarch Mar Poulos XXII, wrote, signed, and sealed an official letter addressed to the British Government: “*The honorable Surma Khanim, sister of the Patriarch, stands before your leadership as the wakil (or vekil—representative) of all the Assyrian Nation to present all our requests. Even though her presence is greatly needed by her people here, this is the person deemed worthy of this mission. Also, the nation has widespread confidence in her. We hope she will be heard and accepted for the sake of our nation, even though small, which is exhausted, persecuted, almost annihilated and had greatly endured during this great world war. --Members of the Assyrian National Committee in Baquba-Bet Nahrain. The humble Yousip Khnanisho, Metropolitan and Patriarchal Representative.*”¹³ This was the first time ever that a female had been recognized as an official representative, or ambassador, in the Church of the East--and perhaps anywhere in the world.¹⁴ And yet, Patriarchal seal or no, certain clergy begrudged her status, unable or unwilling to see “nothing but a woman.”

Surma Khanum held a ranking in the Church known as *brat qyama*, or “Daughter/bride of the Covenant.” In her



Lady Surma and Harpoot Assyrians of Worcester, MA (July 4, 1926)

own words: "... It has been the tradition of our nation that the sister of the heir should take the vow of celibacy and act as her brother's helper during his reign, ... and be known by a title which in English would be, 'The Bride of the Promise.' But this is not compulsory. It is of my own will I do it. ... My country must be my husband."¹⁵ And while this traditional role didn't preclude any spiritual authority, she was in fact more knowledgeable about Church customs than most clergy. As early as 1908, when she was twenty-five (and twenty-nine year old Mar Timotheus had left for India) Anglican missionary F.J. Blamire Brown described her presence at the early morning Easter Eucharist service in Mar Shalita church at Qudshanis: "... I was much struck with the way that Surma, the sister of Mar Shimun, took charge of the conduct of this service. Talk of suffragettes! Here was a woman, in her twenties too, saying what was to be done in the Patriarchal Church at the greatest service of the year. But Surma is no ordinary person; she knows more of the canons and service books than anyone else, and therefore Mar Shimun had entrusted the direction of the service to her."¹⁶

Despite her diplomatic and leadership qualifications, Mar Timotheus—who had been made a patriarchal representative ("qayoma") shortly after Mar Eshai's ordination at the suggestion of Surma Khanum herself—questioned the necessity of sending her to England and the U.S. since he himself had already been sent by Mar Shimun. His concerns about Episcopal oversight of the contending factions of the Church of the East in America, as well as Surma Khanum's prominent role in its Commission to Aid the Assyrian Nation, compelled Rev. William Chauncey Emhardt to respond: "This, we understand, Your Grace objects to because my conversation in Mosul was with Lady Surma who happened to be a woman. I suppose the presence of Mar Shimun who does understand English is not to be weighed in the consideration. ... Even granting that my negotiations have been with Lady Surma, I fail to see why discussions or agreements involving material help or educational assistance to a suffering people should be considered an infringement upon ecclesiastical prerogatives. Many delays have occurred in bringing our plans to a successful end because of our

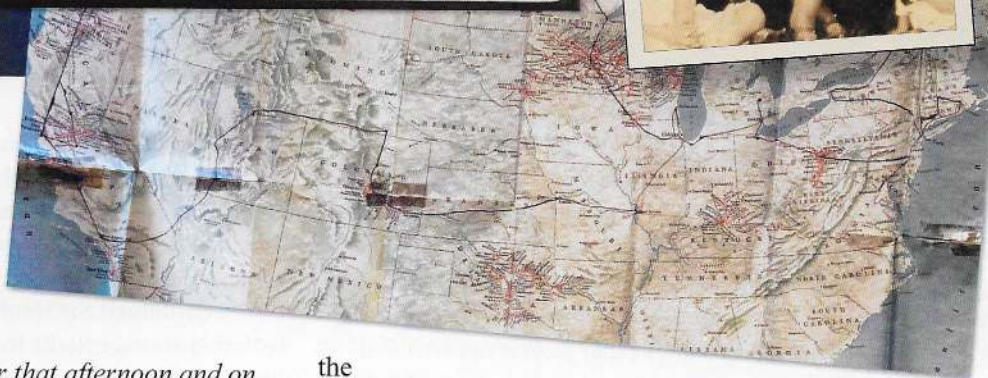
desire to show courtesy to Your Grace even in minute details. If Your Grace is prepared to assume full responsibility for our withdrawal of all offers of help to the Assyrian Church and people we will cease any further efforts along purely secular lines. ... If a request for immediate assistance and response is an ecclesiastical impropriety if conducted by and through a woman, then of course we must plead guilty. I am sure it is in conformity with the laws of charity, which in some instances deserve more consideration than proper ecclesiastical procedure. At the same time I question the necessity of having to obtain the consent of a representative before money is sent. ... I will merely state once more that if we cease all activities to operate through the Assyrian Church it will be because of impediments placed in our way by yourself. I sail June 10 and expect to see Mar Shimun in about three weeks in Canterbury and will place the matter before him, although I dislike bringing this matter to the attention of one of his years."¹⁷

Surma Khanum remained focused on fundraising for the Nation's present and future survival. Out of a long list of Sir Henry Lunn's Assyrian and Iraq Christian Committee members in the U.S., William Emhardt in New York and Bishop James deWolfe Perry in Rhode Island, appear to have been the only active organizers (with George Lamsa brought on to schedule the western half of her trip, almost as an afterthought). Despite plenty of lead time, they were disorganized and uncoordinated. Hardly a week after Surma Khanum had arrived, Perry frantically wrote to Emhardt, "I feel very much in the dark regarding her present moves. Not a word has come to me reporting her arrival in America or her immediate plans. Is the publicity department of our Church helping us in news items and announcements? In some way her presence in the country should be publicly noticed. Not a person whom I have met, American or Assyrian, has heard of her arrival. Unless the Associated Press, or some other agency, is active in the matter, her mission outside the circle immediately interested will fall flat."¹⁸

"I am sorry that we have not kept you fully informed concerning Lady Surma," Emhardt quickly replied. "We have been at our wits end in our endeavour to keep abreast



Map - Lady Surma US 1926



with our work. [Thomas] Burgess is seriously ill and away; and our office force reduced by illness. I have been making many short trips and returning for brief visits in New York. Lady Surma arrived two days late, March 18th. She met a few people at the house of Mrs. Baker that afternoon and on the twenty-third we had our larger meeting. Lady Surma spoke rather well and to the point without notes. I do not know what the returns from the meeting will amount to. I enclose her itinerary as arranged."¹⁹

Her itinerary, like the disquieting delineations of the Assyrian nation itself, expanded and contracted over the ensuing months, while Surma Khanum gamely adapted. She began her lectures in Yonkers, before moving on to Washington, D.C. where she visited the White House on April 3rd, as a guest of British Ambassador Sir Esme Howard. President Calvin Coolidge was notorious for being taciturn in social gatherings, but his spirits were apparently lifted during his twenty minutes with Surma Khanum who, "... Found President Coolidge very talkative. I had been told that he rarely said anything and I expected him to shut his mouth and keep it shut, but he was very talkative with me. He has a very nice personality and I think he must be a wonderful man."²⁰ The President expressed faith in her ability to accomplish her mission. From there she took a train to Canada, lecturing in Montreal and Ottawa, before returning to New York via Niagara. Days later she was in Connecticut, and then off to Philadelphia, Detroit, and eventually Chicago. From the Midwest through Colorado and Utah to the West Coast, and back through Canada. When all was said and done she travelled through sixteen states (and three Canadian provinces), speaking at approximately eighty organized gatherings over a seven-month stretch. She lectured at churches (from the pulpit in one instance) and church groups, clubs, drawing rooms, banquets, the Y.M.C.A./Y.W.C.A., schools, a worker's co-op, and gatherings organized by Assyrian-Americans.

Surma Khanum's presentations frequently began with

the recitation of the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic, from which she proceeded to an overview of the history of the Assyrians and the Church of the East, leading up to the people's fight to preserve their life and religion in a hostile region: "The Assyrian people, of whom others know little in these times, were once the greatest nation in the world . . . [they] have maintained their integrity as a nation through all the centuries since the ancient Assyrian Empire fell through the revolt of Nabopolassar, [and] are now living in Iraq, which is a British mandate. . . . After the Turks had massacred a great many of the Assyrian tribes who were subject to them, Assyria went into the war. The Assyrians expected that the Russians would send them help. They left their houses and went up to the top of the mountains. I was with them all the time. Then we fought our way to Persia, which was occupied by the Russian military. . . . The Assyrian women are as brave as their menfolk in time of war, when they carry the food and ammunition to the frontlines. . . . I have seen a woman carrying two children and with some few clothes also carried on her back. . . . The Russians did a great deal, but they withdrew from Persia, and we were left there all alone, with Turks, Persians, and Kurds fighting us. . . . With the collapse of Russia, the Assyrians did not know what to do, but the Russians left them a supply of ammunition and a few officers. We did not know where the British troops were. . . . Then we also left the country, nearly 50,000 people--running, fighting as we went. In a trek of twenty-five days we lost thousands of the people. There was a village of fifty houses with four or five families in each, and only one young man was left. But we fought our way to the English at Baquba, and my people were taken care of, so that they almost forgot their miseries. . . . They [30,000+ Assyrians in Iraq] have no home, and what we hope for them is to found a home for the people.



Los Angeles, CA (May 1926)

Worcester, MA (July 1926)

Bishop James De Wolfe Perry

There are [also] 15,000 Assyrians in Russia, always asking if a settlement has been found where they can join their brothers. . . . The hot climate of the [Mosul] region where they now live is unsuited to these mountain dwellers, who are slowly giving way to famine and disease. The present plan is to provide a home for them in the mountains of the northern part of Iraq, where conditions are similar to those of the mountains of Kurdistan where the Assyrians lived before the World War, being compelled to give up their ancestral homes as a result of that conflict. . . ."²¹

She spoke with ease, in fluent English, somewhat dispassionately when summarizing historical highlights, then more emotionally when recalling her personal experiences of the sufferings of her people, especially the women and children. Sometimes she commented on current affairs, even predicting another world war, before deftly bringing it back to her people's cause: "I do not believe the League of Nations will ever stop wars. Just at the present time the Far East is tottering on the brink of another struggle, a war that may become world-wide in scope. Mussolini is always hinting of war with Turkey. If that comes, the whole region will be drawn in the vortex, and whatever the outcome, it will be very grave. We have had enough of wars and fighting. During the World War we sided in with the Allies and were assailed by the Turks, the Kurds and the Persians. My brave people have been cut down from a prosperous race of a quarter of million to less than 50,000. We have suffered and have lost our homeland."²²

Bishop Perry remarked, "She has charmed everyone who has met her, and she is addressing her audiences with great power and noticeable effect. The presentation of her story is indeed quite masterful. . . . Lady Surma's presence has won immediate attention and has commanded interest in her cause."²³ One spellbound female writer in Denver was "moved as if in a dream" listening to the "Princess . . . tell of her country and countrymen . . . describ[ing] boundaries and cities in such a vivid, convincing way that it was almost

as good as being there oneself."²⁴ And yet, despite rave reviews of generally well-attended talks and receptions, and meetings with groups of wealthy and influential people, the donations were barely trickling in. Perry was quick to acknowledge that her schedule had not been well-managed. Emhardt blamed Sir Henry Lunn's "haste and optimism" for tentative arrangements in Canada, before adding: "We have been completely handicapped by lack of cooperation on the part of religious bodies. They all accepted membership on the Committee, but have other engagements or found difficulties when we suggested their arranging a meeting."²⁵

Meanwhile, back in Mosul: "The people in the hills are becoming more and more desperate as time passes and no definite word is given them as to their future,"²⁶ wrote E.W. McDowell of the American Presbyterian mission to Surma on April 16th. Relief fund distribution had been taking longer than expected--"three-four months instead of one"--and the longer the delays continued, the more desperate the people were becoming. McDowell mirrored the general anxiety among Assyrians in Mosul that this fundraising campaign might be their last hope for land settlement. He himself, however, was encouraged by her trip to Geneva and conversations with Amery and Hoare, whom he knew possessed a great deal of influence.

Emhardt likewise made a sincere, though awkward, attempt at praise and optimism when he notified her brother Rab Khaila Dawid in Mosul on July 30th: "It has been a great pleasure to have had Lady Surma in America. She has served the Assyrian cause remarkably well in the larger issues. Very little money has been raised as the result of her efforts, but she has brought the people to realize that the Assyrians still exist. It will seem strange to you that more than ninety-nine percent of our people have no idea of the existence of your nation. Thanks to Lady Surma's efforts, this condition has been changed to a great extent." He cheerfully added: "I believe that if in the autumn we follow up her work, a generous response may be obtained."²⁷

Nevertheless, the meagre returns, coupled with

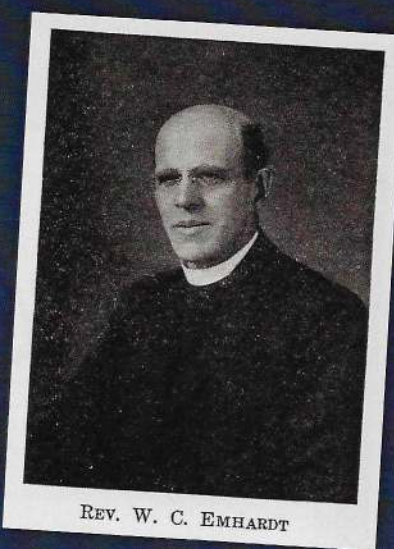


Mar Timotheus — New York (1924)



Worcester Assyrians Welcome Lady Surma with Honor.

Lady Surma — Worcester, MA (July 1926)



REV. W. C. EMHARDT

several un-answered letters to the Assyrian Club in Chicago, seemed the final straw, so Surma Khanum drafted a farewell letter to the Assyrians in America as she prepared to leave. In it she expressed joy at having visited with them and implored them to "... Tie yourselves together, and establish an organization that comprises your brothers of all backgrounds. ... I hope that you will try to unite with all of your brothers in America. You will show great support and accomplish much for your brothers in the Middle East in different ways. At one time, you had such unity and understanding amongst each other. I have respect for those individuals who played a role in establishing that brotherhood with a good objective. Farewell. May God bless you and protect you in all your endeavors. May God make you and all of us shine upon him. May God help us work in this world according to His divine will to perfect humanity and Christianity commanded of all of us. Your true friend, Surma."²⁸

Seemingly resigned, she somberly wrote to Perry

from the Hotel McAlpin in New York on August 17th: "I leave America, not because I have to, but my mission has absolutely been a failure, and I have no future hope, even if I stay a little longer. I must admit, that I am most discouraged. This failure will mean everything to my people." The note was punctuated with a final caustic comment: "The Committee on this Mission have never met, even for once, since I came to this country."²⁹

The collective dream of a modern Assyrian Nation and country was crumbling like a castle of sand. Having exhausted all viable options to achieve national self-determination and autonomy, there seemed nothing left but to return to her people and submit to whatever fate awaited amid the eternally shifting winds of Middle-Eastern power politics.

(To be Continued)

END PART II

¹ "Aquitania Delayed 2 Days By Storms." *Yonkers Herald*, 18 March 1926, 17.

² "The Assyrian Dinner at the Lyceum Club." *Guardian*, 4 November 1919, 8.

³ "Assyrian Woman Ruler Is Visitor in Kenosha Today." *Kenosha News*, 14 May 1926, 1 & 26; "Nineveh Kings' Successor in New York." *Province*, 23 May, 1926, 9.

⁴ Middleton, Edgar C., "Lady Shimun Wins London's Admiration as a Crusader Pleading for Assyrians." *New York Herald/Sun* (orig: *Daily Mail*) 25 April (20 March) 1920, 76.

⁵ "Lady Surma di Mar Shimun," *Daily Echo*, 12 December 1925, 3.

⁶ "She's An Old-Fashioned Princess." *Hammond Times*, 9 April, 1926, 16.

⁷ Isaac Adams to Helen Hohenthal, 1930 in: Hohenthal, Helen A., et al. *Streams In A Thirsty Land—A History of the Turlock Region*. Menlo Park: City of Turlock, 1972, 102.

⁸ David G. Malech, et. al. to Surma, 31 August 1927. *SurmaCorr*: MSMF Archives. Note: Of these, Malech estimates about 2-2.5k Church of the East Assyrians, w/ approx. 5k being Protestants and the rest Chaldean-Catholics. Another source (f.n. 21) est. 12-14k Assyrian-Americans at this time.

⁹ Joash J. deKelaia to Mar Timotheus in: Mar Aprem, Mar Abimalek Timotheus: A Biography. Trichur, India: Mar Narsai Press, 1975, 113-14. Note: Spelling errors retained from source.

¹⁰ *Surma d'Mar Shimun*, 26 March 1926. *SurmaDiary*: MSMF Archives. Trans. fr. Syriac.

¹¹ "Quota Club Hears Of Oriental Life," *Buffalo Times*, 9 March, 1926, 18.

¹² Maclean, Arthur John and William Henry Browne. *The Catholicos of the East and His People*. London: SPCK Press, 1892, 99-100.

¹³ Mar Yosip Khnanishu, 27 August 1919. *SurmaCorr*: MSMF Archives. Trans. fr. Syriac.

¹⁴ Several news sources of the 1920-1 period mention this possibility of Surma being the first recognized female ambassador/representative in the world: E.g., "Business Women in the Far East," *Woman Citizen* (vol. 5), 12 June 1920, 55; "Is President of Assyria," *Highland Recorder*, 30 September 1921, 1; etc.

¹⁵ "Chosen of Her People." *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 31 October 1919, 5; *Lancashire Evening Post*, 1 November 1919, 3; "Princess of Assyria Here," *San Francisco*

Examiner, 5 June 1926, 14. Note: While a vow of celibacy (along w/vegetarian diet) is voluntarily undertaken, this is not equivalent to being a "nun," as communal monasteries in the Church of the East virtually disappeared after the destruction of Tamerlane in the 14th century.

¹⁶ *Anglican Missionary Quarterly* III (70). ATOUR Pub./Lulu Press, 923.

¹⁷ Emhardt to Mar Timotheus, 22 May 1925. *SurmaCorr*: MSMF Archives.

¹⁸ James deWolfe Perry to W.C. Emhardt, 24 March 1926. *PerryCorr* (17) f. 596.

¹⁹ W.C. Emhardt to James deWolfe Perry, 26 March 1926. *PerryCorr* (17) f. 596.

²⁰ "Surprised to Find Coolidge Talkative--Assyrian Princess, Guest Here, Tells of White House Thrill." *New Britain Herald*, 16 April 1926, 1.

²¹ "Assyrian Nation in Sad Distress--Princess Regent Described Sufferings and Struggles of Ancient Race." *Gazette*, 7 April 1926, 9; "Woman Makes Strong Plea For Assyrians: Aunt of Young Patriarch Over Mesopotamian Christians Tells People's Tribulations." *Sacramento Bee*, 16 April 1926, 18; "Appeal for Assyrians Expressed." *Los Angeles Times*, 30 May 1926, 9; "An Assyrian Chieftainess." *Westminster Gazette*, 14 January 1926: p. 8.

²² "Princess Predicts New War; Questions Power of League." *Bulletin*, 5 June 1926, 1.

²³ James deWolfe Perry to Archbishop Randall Davidson, 14 April 1926. *PerryCorr* (17) f. 596.

²⁴ Martin, Susan Hubbard. "Little Sketches of Home Life: Shaking Hands with Royalty." *Jefferson County Republican*, 8 July 1926, 4.

²⁵ Emhardt to Perry, 20 April 1926. *PerryCorr* (17) f. 596.

²⁶ E.W. McDowell to Surma, 16 April 1926. *SurmaCorr*: MSMF Archives.

²⁷ Emhardt to Dawid d'Mar Shimun, 30 July 1926. *SurmaCorr*: MSMF Archives.

²⁸ *Surma to Assyrians in America*, 10 August 1926. *SurmaCorr*: MSMF Archives. Trans. fr. Syriac.

²⁹ *Surma to Perry*, 17 August 1926. *PerryCorr* (17) f. 596.