

# PART III: Homecoming

(Part 3 of 3)

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As Surma d’Mar Shimun prepared to leave the United States after five months of travel and speaking engagements, Assyrians George Lamsa and Qasha Showil urged her to stay a little longer. They hoped she could return to Chicago to settle disconcerting Church of the East divisions there. Meanwhile, Bishop Perry and Reverend Emhardt of the American Committee to the Archbishop’s Assyrian Mission promised further meetings in Worcester and Fitchburg, Massachusetts, where higher returns were anticipated. Surma put away the farewell letter she had penned to Assyrian-Americans and agreed to continue speaking to anyone who might hear of the Turkish-led genocide that had devastated the Assyrian population in Kurdistan and denied them their rights to a homeland.

For two more months in the fall of 1926 Surma Khanum spoke at additional gatherings in New England and New York. A correspondent of the New York Evening Post reported: “I never heard so sad a tale told so quietly and I may also say so proudly. . . . She does not plead a cause, she states it. And she speaks of death with no more tremor in her voice than when she speaks of life. . . . Her composure is that of an artist today. Her sense of history is Oriental. Her power of adaptation is of the twentieth century.”<sup>1</sup> Still, despite near unanimous praise of her speeches, donations were hardly forthcoming, and Emhardt, ever concerned with expenses and “busy with a hundred other things so that it leaves the Assyrian cause behind,”<sup>2</sup> failed to secure the Worcester and Fitchburg events. Nor would a return visit to Chicago materialize. Surma Khanum was booked to sail on the S.S. Minnetonka for England on October 23rd.

Her final days in America were spent at the Emhardt home in Philadelphia where, with Mrs. Emhardt, she visited

1 Lowrie, Sarah D. “Descendants of the Mighty Assyrian Nation are Now Struggling to Secure Political and Religious Freedom in a Protected Corner of the Vast Domain Which their Ancestors Ruled.” New York Evening Post, 5 Aug 1926: 15.

2 Surma d’Mar Shimun, 15 Oct 1926. SurmaDiary: Mar Shimun Memorial Foundation (MSMF) Archives.

the Sesqui-Centennial International Exposition, a world’s fair celebrating one-hundred and fifty years of American Independence. Like her fundraising tour, the fair struggled with low financial returns, poor publicity, and bad luck (it rained 107 out of the 184 days it was open). In contrast, however, she was impressed by its being “well developed and organized.”<sup>3</sup> An 80-foot tall replica of the Liberty Bell suspended from a massive arch and illuminated by thousands of incandescent, multi-colored bulbs greeted visitors. As she passed beneath this luminous, fractured reminder of freedom from imperial oppression, Surma Khanum entered an expansive fairground dotted with pastel painted pavilions representing multiple countries, including two she was quite familiar with, Russia and Persia. In every direction were exhibition palaces, patriotic pageants, and colonial recreations to explore. Within forty-eight hours she would be sailing back into the harsh realities of refugee status, but for this one last carefree afternoon anyway, she might have dared to dream of an Assyria amongst the international pavilions of some future world’s fair.

She arrived in London on November 1st, staying with the nuns of the Sisters of Bethany at Lloyd’s Square, where she also stayed in 1919. She met up again with members of the Archbishop’s committee and other friends, and visited with her nephew Mar Eshai Shimun, now in his final year of college at Wescott House, Cambridge. Canon A.J. Mason, former head of the Archbishop’s Assyrian Mission and one of Mar Shimun’s guardian’s while there, wrote her: “. . . It will be best to be with your own people again. They will, I daresay, be somewhat disappointed to find that, in spite of all your labours in their case, there has not been the response that we might have hoped for. But at least they must feel you have done your best. If you have not succeeded in removing mountains, no one on earth could do it.”<sup>4</sup> Rev. F.N. Heazell, another former member of the Assyrian

3 Ibid. 21 Oct 1926.

4 A.J. Mason to Surma, 16 Nov 1926. SurmaCorr; MSMF Archives.

Mission, escorted her to the docks at Tilbury on November 18th where she boarded the S.S. Kaylan for Port Said, Egypt. After a stop-over in the Holy Land which included a visit with the Syriac-Orthodox Patriarch, Mar Ellias III, she was finally “home” in Mosul on December 20th, just in time for Christmas.

By all accounts the fundraising aspect of Surma Khanum’s tour of America was a failure — returns totaled only about 10% of the £22,000 (\$106,000) ultimately collected by the Henry Lunn Fund.<sup>5</sup> The audacious goal of £100,000 (\$485k US — \$7 million in today’s money) originated with the British High Commissioner of Iraq, Sir Henry Dobbs, who calculated this to be the minimum required to settle an estimated 10,000 Assyrian refugee families then in and around Mosul.<sup>6</sup> The irrepressible former minister and missionary, Sir Henry Lunn, ran with this number, instructing the Secretary of the Archbishop’s Committee, Canon J.A. Douglas not to, “. . . Ask for less than one-hundred thousand pounds. We shall want it all if we can get it. ‘Blessed is he who expected much’ and not little. I am quite clear about that blessing.”<sup>7</sup> Whether or not Surma Khanum felt this lofty goal achievable is unknown, but what she was clear about was that as much of what she brought in go towards the “repatriation” of Assyrians.<sup>8</sup>

But why, if the United States was the most prosperous and charitable country in the world, and Surma’s talks reportedly well-attended and received, had Americans donated so little? As it turned out, the much ballyhooed “prosperity bandwagon” of the Roaring 20’s wasn’t all that it seemed.

5 Lunn, H.S. *Nearing Harbour: The Log of Sir Henry S. Lunn*. London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1934. 211. Various English news references from the day validate this total. For U.S. returns I relied upon refs. fr. Emhardt & Perry in PerryCorr (17) f.596, and Lunn in Douglas (63): f. 387 which supported a number between \$10-15k. Note: £1 = about \$4.85 US. Federal Reserve Bulletin (1929).

6 Dobbs to Surma, 15 Aug 1926. SurmaCorr.

7 Lunn to Douglas, 25 Feb 1926. Douglas (63): 243-4.

8 Heazell to Douglas, 21 Nov 1926. Douglas (63): f. 398. Cf. SurmaCorr 14 May 1920.

While business may have been booming in urban centers like New York, Boston, and Chicago, “In the agricultural Northwest and Middle West there was a violent outcry for farm relief, but it could command only a scattered and half-hearted interest throughout the rest of the nation which was becoming progressively urbanized,” observed social-historian Frederick Lewis Allen. “Public spirit,” he added, “was at a low ebb; over the World Court, the oil scandals, the Nicaraguan [substitute: Assyrian] situation, the American people refused to bother themselves. They gave their energies to triumphant business, and for the rest they were in a holiday mood. ‘Happy,’ they might have said, ‘is the nation which has no history—and a lot of good shows to watch.’ They were ready for any good show that came along.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, tragic hardship tales of displaced Christian minorities in ancient lands more preferably associated with archaeology and oil booms weren’t as seductive to Babitt-esque business types lured by lectures on personal improvement and sales success.

At any rate, Surma Khanum’s American organizers acknowledged their own disorganization, admitting for example that they had mis-timed her initial East-Coast lectures during Easter holidays when the majority of potential wealthy donors were on vacation. And when they then sent her on to Canada it was learned, en route, that Lunn’s contacts there had been unreliable and so further events needed to be rescheduled or cancelled altogether. On top of this, an unexpected death in the Perry family, and spinal issues suffered by Emhardt created further complications. Surma Khanum, frequently traveling alone between cities, adapted and adjusted as only one well-inured to adversity can by staying faithful to her larger mission. Not until late April however did her hosts think that a traveling companion and assistant might be helpful for her, and so Emhardt scrambled to find someone. He considered his daughter at first, but she had taken ill. As it turned out, the wife of the inventor

9 Allen, Frederick Lewis. *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s*. New York: Harper & Row (1931). 156.



Thomas Edison was willing to loan her social secretary, Ms. Katherine Righter. Ms. Righter would accompany Surma throughout most of her Western journey.

While the Episcopal organizers might not be blamed for the hollow commitments of the vicars of Fitchburg and Worcester, for example, or the fickleness of other religious bodies that had apparently signed on to the Committee primarily for its public relations value, there are several perplexing oversights, which, if accurate, would be less forgivable. 1.) The lack of larger, more diverse, secular events on Surma's schedule. Service clubs like Rotary, Kiwanis, and Lions Club, were popping up across the United States at this time and quite popular—were they even considered as potential fundraising venues? 2.) Radio. With over \$500 million in sales in 1926, radio had been rapidly expanding and increasingly popular.<sup>10</sup> Since Lunn himself had helped organize her BBC appearance earlier in the year, and the Chairman of the Episcopal Relief Committee was S. Parkes Cadman, a popular newspaper columnist and radio personality who had pioneered the broadcasting of sermons in the early 1920s, where was Surma's U.S. radio appearance? Even more baffling is that Cadman, whose name figures prominently on the Committee letterhead, never appears to have advertised Surma Khanum or the Assyrian cause. 3.) Dr. Robert E. Speer, Secretary of the Board of Presbyterian Missions, was a long-standing and influential missionary advocate of the Assyrians based in New York who Surma had in fact written to about potential American government assistance, but for some reason wasn't included in the Lunn Committee. E.W. McDowell, who had lobbied U.S. Congress in early 1924 to admit Assyrian refugees into the United States, had written Dr. Speer that he reach out to Lunn and the Archbishop's Mission. Speer was happy to help (recommending in turn that the Committee reach out to the Rockefeller Foundation), but this was well into June when Surma Khanum was already reaching the end of her

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 137.



originally planned stay in America, and Speer then on his way to China.

In the end, perhaps the most satisfactory explanation for why Americans contributed so little, especially in comparison to the English, is the most obvious one, namely, the fact that Assyrians were largely unknown to Americans. As an increasingly alarmed Emhardt expressed to Canon Douglas in June, “*The ignorance of our people regarding the Assyrian is even greater than anticipated.*”<sup>11</sup> The Armenians, on the other hand, “. . . were known to the American school child in 1919 only a little less than England,” according to President Coolidge's successor, Herbert Hoover.<sup>12</sup> Americans had donated tens of millions of dollars to Near East Relief (then known as “The American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief”). J.D. Rockefeller himself, through his foundation, was alone responsible for \$600k by 1918, and the American Red Cross had raised over \$10 million by 1920. All in all, between 1915 and 1930, about \$110 million (\$1.25 billion today) was collected for Near East Relief.<sup>13</sup> Significant portions of this did in fact go towards helping Assyrians, but the vast majority was earmarked for Armenian orphanages, refugees, food and clothing. N.E.R. was founded with Armenians in mind when U.S. Ambassador to Constantinople, Henry Morgenthau, Sr. grew increasingly alarmed at the reports of atrocities committed against the Armenian peoples in 1915. American Protestant missionaries had been proselytizing and working amongst Armenians and Assyrians since the 1820s and 1830s respectively, but had gained a much greater foothold amongst the Armenian Orthodox Church than the Church of the East Assyrians who came to favor the Anglicans. Capturing the collective conscience of Ameri-

<sup>11</sup> Emhardt to Douglas, 2 Jun 1926. Douglas (63): f. 339.

<sup>12</sup> Hoover, Herbert. *Memoirs: Years of Adventure, 1874-1920*. New York: Macmillan Co. (1951). 385.

<sup>13</sup> Barrs, Elizabeth Berit. “Marketing the Golden Rule: Near East Relief and Philanthropy's Role in the Political Economy, 1915-1930.” *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers, University of Montana* (2020). 9; Near East Foundation: <https://www.neareast.org>.

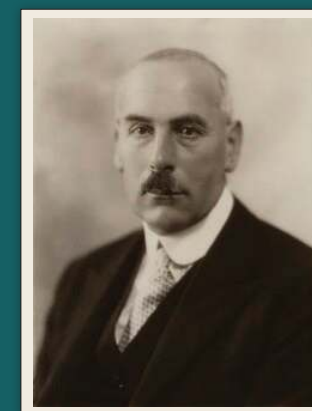
cans when “the Armenian

Question” arose during World War I was therefore a natural consequence of the long-standing missionary bonds between Americans and Armenians. In England, however, the much smaller Assyrian community was better known because of their ties with the Archbishop of Canterbury's Mission dating back to the time of Mar Rowil Shimun in the late 1870s. Regular appeals for aid by the Archbishop of Canterbury, as well as numerous news articles, pamphlets, memoirs and books by ex-missionaries, travelers, military and political officials further educated the public about the Assyrian peoples. No small part of this public recognition was due to Surma Khanum's initial visit to London in 1919 as an official representative of the Assyrians during the Paris Peace Conference negotiations, and proceeds from the sale of her own book on Assyrian church customs and the murder of her brother, the patriarch Mar Benyamin, published with the help of Dr. Wigram in 1920, also went towards early Assyrian relief efforts.<sup>14</sup>

The comparison of \$110 million raised on behalf of Armenians by N.E.R. (over a period of fifteen-odd years) to the \$105k raised by Surma Khanum, Sir Henry Lunn, et al. over a period of less than a year, really isn't fair for many reasons, the most obvious being the stark contrast in populations.<sup>15</sup> Also, N.E.R. was a well-oiled fundraising machine with professional public relations men like Charles V. Vickrey of the Layman's Missionary Movement who canvassed businesses and forged state and city co-operating inter-denominational committees to support the Armenian cause. They also had a Division of Pictorial Publicity that focused exclusively on wealthy donors, and publicized the atrocities against Armenians in the media.<sup>16</sup> Artistic posters and other catchy visual ads were mass-marketed, effectively capturing

<sup>14</sup> E.g. *Living Church* (63), 1920: 864 or *St. Andrew's Cross* (35), 1920: 73. <sup>15</sup> At least 3 million Armenians to 200,000 Assyrians at this time. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical\\_Armenian\\_population#1923](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_Armenian_population#1923), and various sources of the day est. an Assyrian pop. of between 150k-200k (including Chaldeans and Syriac-Orthodox).

<sup>16</sup> Barrs. 10; 13.



Sir Henry Dobbs  
High Commissioner of Iraq  
1923-1929

the hearts, and pocket-books, of millions of Americans. By the time Surma Khanum arrived in 1926 she was not only up against her own committee's disorganization and poor planning (as well as the aforementioned indifference and antagonism within her own Church), but American donor fatigue. As Frederick Lewis Allen reiterates: “*Americans were tired of reality,*” and “. . . *Genuine public issues, about which the masses of the population could be induced to feel intensely, were few and far between.*”<sup>17</sup>

When the Treaty of Angora officially came to a conclusion in the summer of 1926 the British government dropped its facade of “unofficial” promises to repatriate the Assyrians.<sup>18</sup> The moral and ethical responsibility of protecting their “Smallest Ally” had been hashed out in Parliament the year before (with Surma Khanum watching on from the sidelines) when they more or less came to a conclusion of domestic and imperial interests first. Reports to and from the Foreign Office were now emphasizing the Assyrians stranded in Iraq who no longer “*had a wish to return to their old homes*” in Turkey, rationalizing that even if a large enough amount of land could be obtained for them, “. . . *there is every reason to believe that the creation of an Assyrian enclave on the Iraq side of the frontier would have aroused resentment on the part of Turkey and prejudiced the successful application of the bon voisinage (neighborly relations) clauses of the Treaty of Angora.*”<sup>19</sup> Nevermind that most of these Assyrians referred to were not from the mountains in the first place, but rather the Urmia plains or Iraq itself, and that native resentment toward Assyrians had been exacerbated, if not manufactured, by their privileged status as British levies. In its 1926 colonial report to the League of

<sup>17</sup> Allen. 156.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Lt.-Col. A.T. Wilson to Civil Commissioner (Baghdad), 4 Aug 1919 in *India Office Records (L/PS/10/833/2)*: p. 191-193; ColRpt (1927): 27-8; Col. J.J. McCarthy, Nov 1933 RCAS (20):159; W.A. Wigram, 18 Nov 1936 in *RentonCorr*; etc. All reference unofficial “encouragement” of Assyrians to think that their return was assured.

<sup>19</sup> Report by His Britannic Majesty's Government to the Council of the League of Nations on the Administration of Iraq for the year 1927. London: 1928. 19 [ColRpt].

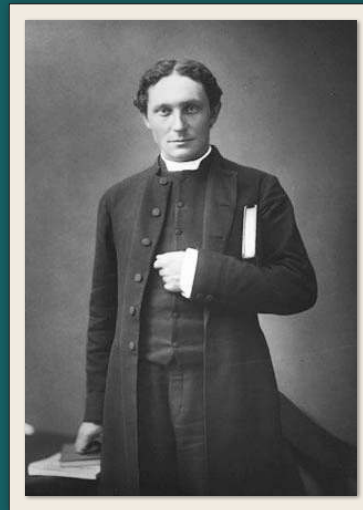


Rev. J.B. Panfil

With my kindest regards to  
you, & humbly asking your prayers  
Yours very sincerely  
Surma



Rev. E.W. McDowell



Can. A.J. Mason



Rev. F.N. Heazell

Nations, the British effectively contradicted Surma Khanum's understanding (or at least, hope) that the money she was helping raise would go towards an Assyrian homeland with the verdict that: "No form of local administrative autonomy can be organized for a people scattered in small groups over a wide area, and it has not been found practicable to create a special territorial enclave within the present frontiers of Iraq into which the 20,000 Assyrians could be settled as a united community. There is no uninhabited area large enough and climatically suitable for this purpose."<sup>20</sup>

In other words, the British Mandatory power refused to be seen as helping one group (Assyrians) at the expense of others (Arab, Kurds, Yezidees, . . .). The Chancellor of the Exchequer quelled any lingering anxieties of the conservative contingent in the House of Commons by assuring them that, "No payments have been made [from public funds] during the last 3 years on the support and maintenance of Armenian, Assyrian and Greek refugees."<sup>21</sup> Canon Wigram echoed the chagrin of all long-time Assyrian advocates when he caustically commented: "With regard to the cost of settling the Assyrians in the British Empire or elsewhere, this was estimated at half a million [pounds]; Great Britain's annual expenditure was 8 hundred million, and to say she could not afford it was if a man with a thousand a year refused to pay 12 shillings 6 pence for damage done by a revolver which he had himself put into the hands of an irresponsible boy."<sup>22</sup> As Wigram and others pointed out, the "we promised them nothing" party of M.P.s seem to have willfully ignored or outright dismissed the inconvenient fact that British tax-payers had been saved millions in military expenditures protecting the nascent country of Iraq through its liberal use of the Assyrian levies since 1922. Having essentially lost major opportunities to repatriate the Assyrians back into the Hakkari just after the war ended, the British were now stuck with funding the resettlement of their former ally, while

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 1926: 17.

<sup>21</sup> House of Commons Debate: "Foreign Refugees and Nationals (Payments)." British Parliament, 28 Jun 1926, v. 197, c825W.

<sup>22</sup> Stafford, Lt.-Col. R.S. "Iraq and the Problem of the Assyrians." Royal Institute of International Affairs, v.13, no. 2 (Mar-Apr, 1934): 183.

continuing to use the Levies to help stabilize Iraq. Since precious British tax-payer money wasn't on the table, that left the good-will and charity of friends of the Assyrians like the Archbishop of Canterbury, who in turn called on Surma Khanum. The continuing cost of maintaining the refugees until they were settled, according to McDowell, was ten-cents per person per day and so at 20,000 the refugee-relief meter was running at \$2,000 a day.<sup>23</sup> Even with the Lunn Fund's eventual collection of \$105k this would have lasted only about two-months, so the clock was rapidly ticking on finding a place to settle the Assyrians.

In August, 1927, Mar Eshai Shimun arrived in Mosul to assume leadership as Patriarch of the Church of the East. He found Assyrians divided as to whether to settle down in Iraq, continue living as nomads, or press for resettlement somewhere in the British Empire, or elsewhere. The money Aunt Surma had helped raise to settle Assyrian refugees in and around Mosul had dwindled down to £4,000. Administrative Inspector Major W.C.F.A. Wilson was claiming that "fewer than 500 families remained to be settled," and these 500 he referred to as "malcontents".<sup>24</sup> Mar Shimun, though only nineteen years old and fresh out of college, recognized British constraints and intentions with regard to settling the Assyrians, and was under no illusions as to where their true allegiances lay. He was aware that their number one priority was not only to stabilize and make Iraq self-supporting, but also to maintain amicable relations with the Turks. And he felt keenly their treatment of the Assyrians as a problem to be solved, or rid of altogether. He unhesitatingly took up the role of confronting their convenient mistruths and incessantly reminding them of Assyrian assistance during the war and after, immediately pointing out to Dobbs, for instance, that the number of unsettled families was certainly higher, and that those "malcontents" had been settled on unsuitable lands in Kurdish-run villages where they were treated like serfs. Of course, the British Foreign

<sup>23</sup> The Missionary Review of the World. Funk & Wagnalls, Co. New York. (49): 447-8. Jun, 1926.

<sup>24</sup> Stafford, Lt.-Col. R.S. The Tragedy of the Assyrians. George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London (1935). 54-55; cf. ColRpt 1928: 18.

Office wasn't going to let facts get in the way of policy progress and a year later Wilson was reporting that the number of unsettled families had steadily dropped to 350, and by the end of 1930 below 300 — no doubt, the remaining "malcontents."

The money from the Lunn Fund was filtered through representatives of the Archbishop's Mission, namely Americans Father Panfil and E.W. McDowell, who in turn worked directly with both Wilson and the Assyrian tribal leaders themselves. In addition to assisting with settlement into villages, it was used to buy food, medicine, and clothing, as well as provide seed, stock animals and agricultural implements to farmers. It lasted until 1933 when a final £73 was used to launch a new relief committee run by Assyrian Hormuzd Rassam. It should be pointed out too that Iraq government funds were also used to assist in relief efforts of the displaced Assyrians in the form of cash payouts and certain tax remittances. But over and above this or the Lunn Fund itself, the most reliable and lasting source of financial aid to Assyrian families throughout this difficult period was derived from the steady incomes of those who had sons serving in the Assyrian Levies employed by the British.<sup>25</sup>

Contemporary critics might look back and claim that nothing was accomplished since there is no Assyrian homeland and the calamitous events of the early 1930s led to further dispersal and divisions within the Assyrian community. They may claim, for instance, that Surma Khanum and other Assyrian leaders were used by the British government to further their expedient political aims in the region. And once used, forcibly exiled. This cynical viewpoint fails however to account for the lack of viable options, limited resources, and an almost unimaginable and unprecedented array of setbacks, tragedies, and obstacles to securing a home for themselves in the region. It seems deeply unjust to judge falling short of an unreachable financial goal—let alone effecting the creation of a nation-state out of disunited and dispersed peoples on non-existent uninhabited land—a

<sup>25</sup> ColRpt 1926: 18.

"failure." Nevertheless, Surma Khanum was compelled by a sense of unwavering duty to her church and nation (not as some so-called scholars have carelessly alleged, for "political ambitions") to attempt the impossible. The New York Evening Post correspondent who had heard her speaking in the Adirondack Mountain retreat in Upper-State New York in the summer of 1926 reflected: "Someone said to me after the gathering was over: 'How pathetic that she should have to tell this thing to so few of us and to so futile an audience, so far as international influence goes, at the mere summer time gathering of people who can do nothing but write a few checks!' . . . There were enough people there, and in them was enough power to hold public opinion and make the cause of that tragic people resound from one end of this country to the other. But that may not be the way the plight of this wandering nation will be eventually turned to a safe homecoming. It may come about some other way, apparently at least. From the stroke of a pen by a potentate who will have been moved in ways he himself cannot analyze to an act of justice that he may judge merely as an act of good-natured concession to someone's casual suggestion. Many suggestions infinitely repeated are unrecognized at the last turn of the scales. We live in strange times and respond to promptings that we only a little comprehend."<sup>26</sup>

Surma Khanum may not have been the only Assyrian whispering "infinite suggestions" to the powers that be in the attempt to bend the deaf ear of a self-serving imperial power towards doing what is right and honorable for its "Smallest Ally," but she was the most widely recognized and admired for her integrity and intelligence, at least amongst her British and American contemporaries. If she was unable to alter a fait accompli at the League of Nations in Geneva, or raise half a million in America, she at least succeeded in making Assyrian voices for self-determination heard and understood on an unprecedented scale. Canon Mason's consolation to her that if she "couldn't remove mountains, nobody could" reverberates with Assyrians across the globe a century on.

<sup>26</sup> Lowrie, 15.