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**Surma D'Mar Shimun
(1883-1975)**

A Graceful Lady - Dedicated to Her People

CULTURAL — EDUCATIONAL — SOCIAL

SURMA D'MAR SHIMUN (1883-1975)

by *Solomon (Sawa) Solomon*

Better known to her people as Surma Khanim, this First Lady of the Patriarchal family of Mar Shimun played an important role in the affairs of the Assyrian nation during the crucial years 1918-1933. She was born to deacon Eshai Benyamin, a half brother of Patriarch Mar Rowil, and Asiat Kamar of Iyel. She was the oldest of eight children. Among them were the Patriarchs Mar Benyamin and Mar Polus, Rab Khaila (commander-in-chief) David, three other brothers and one sister.

In Qudchanis, Hakkiari, Surma was educated by a missionary of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Mission by the name of W. H. Browne. He was to die in an accident in 1910. In 1896 Surma took a religious vow which included celibacy, and thereafter devoted her life to her family and people. She was a recognized authority in all the rites and services of the Assyrian Church. During the dark days of the Great War she was always at the side of her brother, Mar Benyamin, inspiring confidence, lending advice, and after his murder she exercised leadership where it was wanted. At Baquba Camp she again exercised much influence over her nephew Patriarch Mar Eshai who was only 12 years old.

After the war, Surma Khanim became known in the West as the spokesperson for the Assyrian cause. She worked hard in those days to improve the conditions of her people. The story of those fateful years, 1920-1933, is well known and told in detail elsewhere, so we find Lady Surma and the Patriarchal family in Cyprus in 1933. Later on, many of the family members moved to London, England. In 1964 she came to San Francisco, CA. Her last days were spent in Turlock where she passed away in 1975 at the age of 92. She was laid to rest at Turlock Memorial Park. Surma Khanim is the author of the book "Assyrian Church Custom," a must reading for every Assyrian.

Editor's Notes: The other three brothers were: Zia D'Mar Shimun, Eshaya D'Mar Shimun and Hormuz D'Mar Shimun. Hormuz, a young man of twenty-three, had been in Constantinople for his education when Turkey entered the war. He was arrested and placed in confinement and then sent to Mosul. Haidar Bey, the Vali of that city, sent a message to Patriarch Mar Benyamin stating that "Your brother is in my hands, and unless you surrender, he dies." The brothers had great affection for each other. The House of Mar Shimun was subjected to a poignant trial: love of nation or sacrifice a son of the Patriarchal family. Mar Benyamin Shimun responded by saying, "My people are in my charge, and they are many. How can I betray them for the sake of one,



though that one be my brother?" On receipt of this answer, Hormuz was put to death.

The other sister was Romie D'Mar Shimun.

Mar Benyamin Shimun, along with many of his escorts, were treacherously murdered by Simco, the Kurdish chief, who had orders from the Persian Governor of Tabriz to do away with Mar Shimun. Mar Shimun had gone to the village of Koni Shehr for a goodwill meeting and alliance with Simco. When departing they were riddled with bullets.

At one time when the Assyrian army received ammunition from the Russian arsenals, Lady Surma was installed in charge of the depot. For months she lived in a house crammed with high explosives. She was amused to overhear a couple of Assyrians lamenting her pitiable "nervousness," because she had sternly prohibited their smoking when they came to get powder from the magazine.

In September 1919, Lady Surma departed for London to put the claims and position of her Assyrian people before the British authorities and with a view of addressing the Peace Conference in Versailles. She met with Lord Curzon and other high ranking British officials, but was not able to go to Versailles.

When the special commission of the League of Nations granted all of Hakkari to Turkey, many Assyrians remained unsettled and were forced to come into the Mosul region. This created economic hardships. A sum of money was raised by the Assyrian and Iraq Christian Committee. In 1926 Lady Surma travelled throughout the United States to raise more funds. A write-up in the San Francisco Examiner dated Saturday, May 29, 1926 announces the arrival of Lady Surma in San Francisco the following Friday, and "brings with her the plea of her country — small ally in the World War — which lost everything in the conflict. From a three million population it has dwindled to half a million men and women who are homeless in the Irak mountains. Half a million dollars, it is said, would purchase territory from the Kurds of that region sufficient to give the nation a home once more, and establish schools and churches.

"Bishop Edward Lambe, Parson of the Episcopal diocese, will introduce the Princess at a reception to be given in her honor during her visit."

Lady Surma's first trip to the United States was in 1920. A group of Assyrians from New Jersey accompanied her from New York to Worcester, Mass.



Lady Surma d'Mar Shimun with her two brothers, Zia (on the left), and Rab Khaila David (on the right) who at this time was the Commander in Chief of the Assyrian forces in upper Mesopotamia.



Worcester Assyrians Welcome Lady Surma with Honor.

