Memoirs of an Ottoman Captive in Malta
Macuncuzade Mustafa, 1597

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There was a strict hierarchy within the Ottoman class of ilmiyye, or scholars of Islamic jurisprudence. The qadis or judges were also a part of this ladder, whose ranks were indicated by the daily wages allocated for them. While, usually, the prestigious judgeships were occupied by the members of important scholarly families, or those close to political authority, 600 or more smaller judgeships across the empire were filled by the graduates of medreses in the early seventeenth century. Ordinarily a judge would be appointed to a new post every two years. The reason for not keeping the judges in small localities for longer periods of time was the relatively high authority they possessed in the rural areas, which could, and did, lead to abuse of power. They were officials of the judiciary and the civil administration; as the representatives of the sharia, or the Holy Law, and the Ottoman state, the responsibilities and job descriptions were more than just implementing the law: qadis acted as judges, mayors, financial trustees, arbiters of any dispute, and more.

Little is known about Macuncuzade Mustafa, who was travelling to take up his new post of judgeship on the Island of Cyprus when the ship was intercepted by Maltese ships. Taking captives and ransoming them back to their families was a well-organized and lucrative market in the early modern era. Capturing a high-ranking prisoner could bring a handsome price, and a judge was clearly a potentially valuable prisoner of war. It was in the interest of the captors to keep the captives alive—if with only the barest necessities made available to them. The captives were urged to seek ransom money from their hometowns, and if more than one member of a family was taken captive, one of them would be allowed to return home to arrange for payment. All in all, it was a robust business model in the Mediterranean. 500 gold coins were set as ransom amount for Macuncuzade Mustafa, which could have equaled the price of a valuable residential property in late sixteenth-century Istanbul.

Travel from Istanbul to Cyprus, April 1597

By divine decree and heavenly predestination, I was appointed from Constantinople, the residence of the sultans and the city I was born in and hail from, to the judgeship of Baf [Paphos] on the island of Cyprus at the rank of 130 aqçe [per day] on the 30th day of the venerable month of Receeb in the year of 1005 [18 March 1597] during the tenure of the Chief Military-judge Damad Efendi. Thereupon I bid farewell to my old friends and close intimates, and said the hemistich:

The following phrase gave the date of my appointment: “the judge of Baf”\(^1\)

I was getting ready to depart when I suffered an inflammation of the eyes. I had to rest until the last day of the month of Şaban [April 18, 1597]. By then I had somewhat recovered, but the eye doctors did not allow me to travel by land under any circumstances. There was no other option but to travel by sea. Thus I boarded the small galley of Mehmed Reis of Alanya, who lived in Galata [Istanbul]. We set out in the late afternoon on Tuesday, the fifth day of the holy month of Ramadan [April 21, 1597].

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\(^1\) “Qâdi-i Baf,” the numerical value of the Arabic letters adds up to 1005 (1597).
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Maltese ships intercept the Ottoman ship, May 1597
On the 27th of Ramadan [May 13, 1597], the day after the Night of Power, a Wednesday morning, we had long passed the spot called Cape Arnaoutis and were about 70 miles out of Baf when we encountered a gang of the wicked on four Maltese ships—may God destroy them. They rammed us and a great battle took place until late morning. More than 30 of us muslims were martyred—may God have mercy on them—and more than 80 of the cursed devils died—God’s curse is on them, and more than hundred were wounded.

In short, two of our companions, Huseyn and Osman, died—may God have mercy on both of them. This humble one was taken captive together with my slave Ridvan. One of the judges, Bekir Efendi from Sivas, the judge of Pendaye [Cyprus], and a substitute professor, his brother, and his steward were also martyred—may God have mercy on them. However, Abdurrahman Efendi of Antakya, the judge of Irbid and Ajlun [today in Jordan], and Sinan Efendi, the judge of Gügercînlik [Muğla?] were captured along with us.

We roamed the sea for 26 days, suffering all sorts of oppression, such that it is impossible to describe. It would be too much to count and enumerate all the pain and hardship that we suffered. All in all, they destroyed twelve sailing ships [during this time].

Prisoners taken to Malta, June 1597
Towards the end of the month of Şevval [early June 1597] the cursed French captain by the name of Saint Aubin transported us, along with 283 prisoners, to Malta. They call the filthy residence which is the disgraceful abode of their overlords [i.e., the Knights Hospitaller] a ‘palas’ or ‘palace.’ There they gathered us all together and displayed us to their overlords. Then they counted us and led us to the dungeon.

There was another judge, Haşim el-Haşimi, an old acquaintance of ours, in the dungeon. Just like me, he had been appointed the judge of Khyrsokhou [Khyrsokhou] in Cyprus, and while he was traveling by land out of fear of the enemy he was captured at Aq liman [White Harbor] when he passed Silifke. He had been a prisoner there for seven years, since mid-Şaban of the year 999 [early June, 1591]. He greeted me in Arabic: “How are you doing?” I responded with the following verse in Persian: “This was my destiny, it should not surprise | Slavery and being in foreign lands is extraordinary trouble.” His old pain was refreshed, and the two of us suffering from the same pain cried and moaned together.

Conditions in the dungeon
Discomposed as such, we waited in the courtyard of the dungeon from before noon until the evening. At that point the door of the dungeon opened and a bad-natured executioner with an ugly face—he was hideous and his voice even moreso—called out “Come in!” to the group of prisoners in his infidel language. Upon entering they gave us three pieces of brown bread and a bowl of soup. The bowls resembled earthen bowls for dogs and their soup was food which choketh (the partaker), and a painful doom [in hell] (Q 73:13). I entered the dungeon and noticed the noxious air and murky water.

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2 Six years according to the dates.
Across from the door was a toilet and two uncovered stone basins in the shape of a trough. The water was stagnant and filthy. It was actually rain water, but before reaching the reservoir it had been polluted by washing away dogs’ and pigs’ feces from the markets and the rubbish and waste from the roofs. There was no flowing water on that [island], and the place was so crowded with masses of prisoners that it resembled the deepest pits of hell, demonstrating the meaning of [the Koranic verse] and agony is heaped on agony [in death] (Q 75:29). […] You couldn’t even see your hands in front of your face [in the dungeon]. With a thousand difficulties I located the aforementioned Haşim Efendi’s cell and spent four nights there. When during our conversation he said metaphorically “We are like corpses in the hands of the washers of the dead,” this sad heart of mine could not help but wholeheartedly ask God to take my soul. For one year I persevered in this prayer. Wishing to die is obviously against the holy law—however, hemistich: “Death is much better than this violence and torment.” But since I was obviously not destined to die it did not happen. I was not able to give an answer to those prisoners who asked me what would become of us, I was lost and confused in a sea of thoughts, had no strength left, remained silent and thunderstruck. […] Adjusting to the circumstances When I figured out that my being clueless about the situation was the real reason for [my] captivity, I consoled my sad heart to some extent. […] The next day, [I met] in the courtyard of the dungeon another prisoner by the name of Seyyid Mehmed Çelebi […] and his brother-in-law İbrahim Çelebi […] who brought me to their special cell for families. Mehmed Çelebi’s revered mother, and, indeed, all of them—although they were prisoners themselves—took good care of me and treated me with utmost generosity—may their kindness be eternal as they deserve. Until the end of the month of Şevval [June 16, 1597], I enjoyed their favors during the day, and slept in Judge Haşim’s cell at night. This humble one also needed to be present in the cell, for an infidel by the name Antoine known as the ‘Foul-mouthed Ragusan’ would count the prisoners cell by cell to check if we were all there.

Whenever we were counted when I was a prisoner in the hands of the infidels | Grief was never ever missing from my heart.

On the first of the month of Zülqade [June 15, 1597] I fell ill and I stayed in the hospital of San Giovanni for two months. With their abundant favors and great generosity, my aforementioned benefactors brought to life the meaning of [Pe.] Friends are useful (when) in the dungeon, and through God’s grace they became the final cause for my recovery.

August 1597—May 1598
On the first day of the blessed month of Muharrem of the year 1006 [August 13, 1597] I left the hospital. During that month, I paced the dungeon courtyard unrestrainedly during the day and it calmed me. İbrahim Çelebi found my divan, i.e., collection of poems, with
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one of the prisoners. I took the opportunity to make a copy of it and made a rough draft in his cell. Because the evil infidels had taken all my belongings on the ship, I was left naked, apart from borrowed clothes, and in tears. [...] 

The days passed in this manner as we unwound at [Mehmed Çelebi’s] family cell. Even the pesky enemies stopped barking and howling [at us] like hungry dogs. But then, some malicious intriguers and envious abominable men kindled the fire of incitement—commensurate with their malicious nature—because they didn’t want anyone to be comfortable. They incited the Big (Elder?) Ragusan, the one-eyed dungeon keeper Marian the Rat, with the words: “This judge meets [with the others] for ‘gonsel’ (‘conseil’), i.e., to consult with each other at the cell of the çelebis,” whereupon I was put in iron shackles and was incarcerated on the first of the month of Safar [September 12, 1597]. With God’s help I came out of the dungeon on the 21st [October 2, 1597] and continued to live in my old way in the same place. [...] I spent the days at [Mehmed Çelebi’s family cell], and during the night, [went back to] the dungeon sweeper Hacı Hasan’s cell, which was the first one on the northern side when you entered the dungeon. If one swore by God that it was a part of hell, it would be an appropriate attestation. [...] 

On the 17th day of Receb [February 22, 1598]—through God’s grace—Hacı Hasan was set free. [...] I wrote an ode with a request for salvation and sent it with Hacı Hasan to the dust at the feet of Her Majesty Safiye Sultan [the imperial mother]. I hope that with God’s grace, out of her general sympathy and her comprehensive generosity for scholars, captives, and deprived people she will not refrain from delivering this poor distressed one from the misfortune of captivity. [...] Hacı Hasan left on the 7th of Receb [February 22, 1598]. I sent the ode and a refrain poem along with him and acted according to the meaning of the [Koranic verse]: And whosoever putteth his trust in Allah, He will suffice him (Q 65:3). I kept praying humbly and wishing for help from the throne of the divine grace. I implored God during the obligatory prayers: “With one of your two mercies [the sultan or his mother?], rescue this wretched prisoner from the hands of the infidels!” [...] 

Prisoners at hard labor

When the holy month of Ramadan arrived, I lead the supererogatory night prayers in the aforementioned prayer room. On a Monday, the morning of the Night of Power [4 May 1598], [the infidels] lead us to a ditch, gave us wooden pestles, and accompanied by all sorts of rebukes and insults, forced us to hollow out the places where the cannon balls were to be placed. [...] The Maltese boys cursed our religion in their language, called the holy messenger indecent names, and said offensive nonsense [about him] that was absolutely inappropriate to describe his personality and qualities. They spit in our faces and hurt us with their sharp tongues, or stoned us with their hard cruelty. 

On the day of the Ramadan festival [7 May, 1598]. the keeper of the dungeon, whose filthy nature was far from gracious, showed his kinder side and left us alone. We wished each other a blessed festival at the family cell of the aforementioned [gracious friends]. [...] [Then,] unintentionally I started to cry. I was confused and didn’t know what do say or to do. Thereupon [Mehmed Çelebi’s mother Sakine] took a sigh and started to relate: “A while back, my son-in-law Baqi Çelebi graduated from the madrasa and was
appointed the judge of the hajj caravan at the rank of 40 agçe. [While travelling], he was killed on the ship. I said the following verse at once:

What is happening to me is my troubled lot
The Infidel took [you], all of us turned to You: oh God!

This involuntary crying and confusion that is happening to you right now happened to us too. But I have found no other remedy than beautiful patience.” Her words comforted this humble one, and with a sign from the lady, I turned her verse into a poem. […]

On the second day of the holy Ramadan festival, we thought we would start our previous work in the ditch again. Instead, they ordered us to carry rocks and soil to the architects. […] All of us suffered this pain and torment and irredeemable misfortune for many days. My companions fell sick and could not recover. After a couple of weeks of exhausting work, this humble one fell increasingly helpless and weak. I started feeling like the walking dead. ‘No one will mourn me in this foreign land, let me mourn myself at least’, I thought to myself. Self-reproach and yearning for salvation required dressing in black. My white turban cloth had turned pitch black from my tears, wounds, and heavy sighs [in any case] […]. Finally, I pretended to be sick and laid in a corner of the dungeon for a few days like a dead man.

The ransom amount for prisoners is set
Some time later, the superiors of the cursed infidels—[Ar.] may God curse them until the end of the days—gathered me before them in a place called Qond to set my ransom amount. They asked: “How much ransom can you pay?” I showed myself as poor and said: “I can give 300 gold coins.” Yet, they demanded 1000 coins from me. I said I couldn’t afford that. “Enough!” they declared, called the Judge Abdurrahman and asked him [the same question]. He answered: “I can give 400 florin.” They gave him the same answer and [sent us back to] the ditches! On top of having stood in front of them bareheaded and ashamed, we came back to the dungeon hopeless and in despair. They set a price of 500 florin for the Judge Haşim.

We continued on for a while with [the following] prayer on our tongues: [Ar.] We seek refuge in God from the evils of the infidels, when, early morning on the day of the Feast of the Sacrifice [13 July 1598], they said that they were taking us to that notorious place. They lined us up in front of the dungeon door, like a slave trader does at the gates of the market hall. Then they took us [to the Qond]. After having waited until late morning, we were taken back to the dungeon, as none of the cursed ones had come. […] We were taken [to the Qond] and came back a few more times in the described manner. There was no kind of remedy for this pain. […] Finally, after thousands of agonies, on the fourth day of the month of Safer in 1007, a Saturday [5 September 1598], the price for Judge Haşim, who had been a prisoner for eight years, was set at 500 florin. The cursed ones also set my price at 500 florin coins—[Ar.] May God destroy their stock. […]
It was before I dispatched the letter in which I communicated my ransom amount to Istanbul. There was no news from Hacı Hasan, and I was feeling confused and broken-down. At that time İbrahim Çelebi received a letter from his father Abdulvahhab Çavuş, in which he wrote that Mehmed Beg, the felicitous governor of the Morea, who was the son of her ladyship [the Ottoman princess] Gevher Han Sultan—[Ar.] may her life be long—had pledged to freeing this humble one, too. […] 

On the last day of Cemaziyelevvel of 1007 [29 December 1598], Marco, who apparently was the mediator for İbrahim Çelebi, son of Abdurrahman Çavuş, turned up. [He also bore] letters for the captives. I received a letter from the aforementioned Hacı Hasan, written and sent from Istanbul in Şevval of 1006, [that is some eight months ago]. Another letter was from good friends of mine: Hakkı and Avni Efendis, Muhsin Ağa, Helvacızade Mehmed Çelebi and others. They [first] thought that I had been killed, and even had a complete Koran reading dedicated to my soul—[Ar.] My God protect and forgive them. The joyful message in the letter was that his excellency the sultan, the refuge of the world, had shown the greatest kindness and protection by ordering the Imperial Chancellor Musa Çelebi issue a decree that a Christian captive be freed in return for my freedom. May God make his blessed self prosperous and joyful in both worlds. This good news tremendously delighted my wretched heart. […]