

# **LETTERS FROM TURKEY**

**KELEMEN MIKES  
CHAMBERLAIN OF  
THE LAST PRINCE OF TRANSYLVANIA**

**Translated from the Hungarian and edited by**

**BERNARD ADAMS**



**KEGAN PAUL INTERNATIONAL**  
**London and New York**

## LETTERS FROM TURKEY

### II

Gallipoli, 21. Octobris 1717<sup>1</sup>.

My dear Aunt, I have still not received any letter from you, which does not much please me, but what does please me is that the gout, seeing that it was not held in high regard, has left the Prince, who today paid a visit to the Tatar Khan on the horse that he had presented. He received him with very warm friendship. At first I thought that we were about to be enslaved, and I only looked to see which would bind us. But they are very kindly people and would have talked to us most freely, but in so short a time we could not become Tatars. When the Prince had taken leave of the Khan, and we too had expressed our gratitude for His Tatarship's goodwill by bows alone, we walked to our lodging and a fine steed was left with our lord.

I think that tomorrow we shall leave this desolate, picturesque, gloomy abode, as the Sultan's red coach has come that has been sent for our lord. I call it red, because it is covered on the outside with red cloth, but it does not merit the name of coach, for it is only a carriage. It is, however, pulled, or drawn, by four white horses, and they are not burdened by being made to canter; since they have long forgotten how, so old are they—the four together must be eighty. I cannot forbear to speak of the coachman. You would think that the four-in-hand were driven by some mayor—the near-wheeler makes his venerable white beard wave most gently, in his one hand he holds the reins, but from ancient habit, ancient habit, I say; for his horses know their lesson without the reins, and in his other hand he holds his pipe, and he smoked as he fumigated his old horses so that they should not catch cold.

This is all good, my dear Aunt, but the Turks have been defeated at Belgrade<sup>2</sup>. Here the people are fleeing into Asia. One would think that the German was already at Adrianople, rather than a hundred and fifty *mérföld* thence. We say often enough that we have come to fight on their side, but they simply run, one way, another. Oh! dear Aunt, how can one conduct a war with such people? Suffice it that to-morrow we set out for Adrianople, there to behold the mighty, many-wived Sultan and the resplendent, glittering Porte. But, dear Aunt, you must drive away idleness, lay aside the needle, take into those tiny hands the pen and write to me often, seven letters each week at the least. But you must take great care of your health, and love me; for who would love my dear Aunt better than I?

## III

Adrianople, 29. Octobris 1717.

It was high time, dear Aunt, that I should receive your letter, which was delivered to me here. Now you deserve that I should write about how we reached this imperial city. We left Gallipoli on the 22nd. Nothing worthy of mention occurred on the way, we came along as best we might, some on good horses, some on poor. In the town of Uzunköprü, however, in the courtyard of the house where our lord was lodged we saw a vine as big as a plum-tree—I tell no lie when I say that the grapes on it were the size of large plums. But the amazing thing was that on some branches there were ripe grapes, on others simply unripe ones, while on yet others the flowers were only just opening. One could see the three seasons on the vine all at the same time.

On the 28th, however, when we were a *méröld* and a half from Adrianople, the steward of the Kaymakam, that is the captain of the court, came to meet our lord with some two hundred officers, to greet him in the name of the Sultan and of his master. But better still, half a *méröld* from the city he entertained us in tents on behalf of his master. But who would think that the Turks had such good food? The fact is that we were all hungry, but it is also true that I rose from the table unsatisfied, although I had partaken of at least eighty dishes. You would not believe it, if you did not know the custom—an accursed custom! a swinish custom!—Dear Aunt! no sooner had we touched a dish than it was taken from us, likewise the second, the third, in a word seventy or eighty dishes flew past us in this way. Some were taken before we had even touched them—it appeared that the intention was to entertain only our noses, and thus we rose famished from the rich meal. We were like Tantalus with the vat of water from which he could not drink. I then resolved, furious in my starving condition, that I would never go hungry into Turkish company. And there was no sign of anything to drink. Indeed, the amount we ate caused no thirst.

This dry lunch coming to an end, we mounted our horses lightly. Our lord rode through the city on the Sultan's horse to his lodging, and the Kaymakam sent us a good supper in the evening, which was better than lunch; for it was not Turks that waited at table but our servants, and they removed the dishes when we bade them. This Kaymakam is very highly regarded by the Sultan; how should he not be, when he lies with his

## LETTERS FROM TURKEY

daughter? Now that the Vizier is on campaign he assumes his office entirely. His name is Ibrahim. He is most well disposed towards our lord. He was one that recommended to the Sultan that he should send to France for him. I have not yet seen His Kaymakamship, but even if I never do, I love you. Do you love me?

### IV

Adrianople, 7. Novembris 1717

I love it so, my dear Aunt, that you drive out that accursed laziness and write to me. I received your kind letter just when I had to mount up. Shall I tell you where we went? To call on that temporally fortunate and happy Kaymakam that lies with the Sultan's daughter when he can; but I am not so very envious of his good fortune, because they say that she is not beautiful. You can believe that I have not seen her, and that I do not wish to see her as those men do, castrated as they are like capons. Dear Aunt, it is a great honour but not much pleasure to be married to the Sultan's daughter. With what bitterness must that Kaymakam have parted from his delightful, beautiful wife, when the hand of the Sultan's daughter was bestowed upon him? Heartfelt love is greater than riches; a good marriage is not only to be found in a wealthy household.

Dear Aunt, I know that you will deride me and say that I speak of marriage as a blind man does of light, who knows that it exists but cannot conceive of its nature; but though your tiny mouth may laugh at that, my lungs, my kidneys and my liver altogether maintain that a dear, poor wife must not be abandoned for a wife that is rich but unloved—am I not right? So I will not speak of marriage; in any case, here I am two hundred *mérfold* from it.

I must write to you that the Kaymakam received us good-heartedly and with great ceremony, talked for almost two hours with our lord and made him a present of a fine horse; and when he would take his leave his wife sent some handkerchiefs. These expressions of friendship are most welcome; for if we were as near to Zágon as he is to the Viziership, we would be at the edge of the town. We have as yet no news of the purpose for which we have come. But I fear that our campaign will be for naught; for the Turk makes peace with pleasure when he is beaten.

My dear Aunt, we can go no further, but must consign ourselves to the will of God. He has brought us here, let Him guide our affairs. But do

you think that I shall have difficulty in becoming accustomed to this country? Truly, the Turks like us, we have nothing to complain of, none does us harm, but it is hard for a foreigner here; for he can make no acquaintances or friends. This nation does not hate the Christian, but despises him. We cannot expect anyone to invite us to his house. Certainly I have no great wish that they should, why should I? They give one a pipe of tobacco, a cup of coffee, then a couple of words followed by a long silence; then when they bring out the incense-burner that means that it is time to decamp. One might be able to ask the master of the house: how are your children? but I would recommend to none the enquiry: how is your wife?, for one would be driven from the house with cudgels. Here one must not even mention the lady of the house, it is as if there were not a woman in the world. For what pleasure, then, can one wish for the friendship of the Turk, unless it confer some benefit?

It is true that ignorance of the language may cause awkwardness toward us; for we cannot fail to be uncomfortable in the company of those with whom we cannot speak: or to whom we cannot express our thoughts. Until the present, dear Aunt, I know very little Turkish; I do not know how it will be later, but it seems to me that even then I shall perhaps acquire no more than the two or three words that I have now; for not being in companionship with Turks, and even less with Turkish women, I see no way of advancing in the language. Judge for yourself whether it requires a brain to learn and retain three words. However, here we are very recent arrivals, but when I know matters better, and the city, then I will write more. And I beg you, love this recent arrival. You must put aside laziness and not spare the paper.

## V

Adrianople, 29. Novembris 1717.

Dear Aunt, what a fortunate lady you are that we are not close together; for I would at once embrace you and as finely and well as lies within me thank you for graciously receiving my letter and reading it with pleasure. I will write you so many letters, and such long ones, that you will clasp your hands together and so beseech me to write less; for I have no greater delight than when I write to you—oh! I lie, dear Aunt; for the reading of your letters is even greater pleasure to me, none can write such splendid letters to another as you, it seems that the ability is denied to others.



Therefore, dear Aunt, let us give one another no peace but correspond ceaselessly. Time has torn us apart so; therefore, inasmuch as we are able, let us take vengeance upon it and, if no other means be to hand, converse by writing—perhaps it will eventually tire, and place us side by side. But as that will never happen as soon as I would wish, until then let us write and write, and write again.

And what I must tell you is that the mighty Vizier has today returned from the wars and entered the city with much ceremony. The Kaymakam and the great lords here went to meet him, each with his retinue. I must say, dear Aunt, that the Viziers are gods come down to earth; for in other countries even kings are not received with such pomp and circumstance as this Vizier was. But oh! are not their glory and brilliance like those of kings on the stage? The play lasts two or three hours, the kingship goes no further: this Vizier came in today with great pomp, tomorrow perhaps he will be placed on a cart and six men will take him out of the city. This can very easily happen, perhaps he himself is aware of it; because, the Kaymakam being son-in-law to the Sultan, his wife would beyond doubt rather be wife of a Vizier than of a Kaymakam. This I believe as if I had heard it from her own mouth.

Until, however, that unfortunate day dawns I can write to you about the Vizier that even though I saw him at a distance he is a fine-looking man. And one should not wonder at his being strong and muscular; because in his father's house he had to wrestle with oxen, and a butcher's son must needs be strong. From this you may conclude that he is of butchering stock, that his father was such before him, and he himself followed that calling for a while. How could the affairs of this empire prosper when they are put into the hands of a butcher?

But it seems to me that it befits rather a butcher to become a man of war, since in either case he will spill blood every day, than it did a woodman, at whom I laugh whenever he comes to mind. There was in the Sultan's court a woodman, in Turkish *baldaji*. The Sultan was impressed by this man, how well he cut up the wood—he made him an officer of the court, then promoted him on and on until he became Vizier. But to his misfortune the Sultan made him Vizier at a time when he should have entrusted the campaign against the Muscovite Tsar to one better endowed with wits. Suffice it to say that the *baldaji* was made Vizier and sent against the Muscovite Tsar, who had been so trapped with his army beside the Pruth that he would have had to surrender with all his men if the *baldaji* had been clever. The Tsar saw that he must fall into captivity and it occurred to his wife that perhaps, if a gift were made to the Vizier,

he might be bribed: next day they sent a great gift, made peace with him and so the Muscovite Tsar and all his army escaped being captured<sup>3</sup>.

Thereupon the King of Sweden came to the Vizier and said to him: look, the Tsar is in your hands, tomorrow you can take him prisoner if you wish; to which the Vizier replied: yes, but if I do, who will govern the country? Imagine with what fury the King of Sweden heard this answer. But I ask you, was that not the reply that one would expect from a woodman? But I think that our butcher is cleverer than the *baldaji*. We shall see, as he continues with our affair. And I wish that the matter of your health should continue well. Dear Aunt, if you knew how I love you, you would write me a long letter.

## VI

Adrianople, 10. Decembris 1717.

Dear Aunt, we are still here, here we shall remain, but we still do not know what we are doing here. We are not yet completely dispirited, but very nearly; for we did not come here to spend a long time merely hunting on the flat fields of Adrianople, but to seek the end of our exile. But hope is beginning very much to cool within us. The fact is that great cold has set in, and we are living in cold houses. But even so the warmth within us would prevent hope freezing, if we had to do with any other nation; but what in the world could be colder than dealing with the Turks? True, they speak words of assurance, but there is no prospect of the accomplishment of anything. In this lies the dread procrastination—tomorrow—tomorrow—and that tomorrow is delayed for six tomorrows, and until then one cannot drag six words out of them, one must simply wait and hope.

His Imperial Majesty, learning that our lord wears a French robe, has had a dressing-gown made secretly and today sent it here. The lining is worth more than the gown; but here I must point out that one should not consider the gift, but him that has sent it. The truth is, dear Aunt, that there are many that give gifts, but few that know the way to give, and who would know how to give correctly; for when all is said and done, is a flower, a cup or a pitcher a proper gift for a Vizier to send to a Prince? Such gifts are commonplace in this country, here such is the custom: but is it right? is it fitting?

Let us say no more about gifts. But, my dear Aunt, if I had anything to write about I would not yet end my letter; for I assure your little heart

that it is my greatest delight to be able to converse with you, and today I have a keen desire so to do. So I will write on, even if it be merely trifles, rather than end my letter so soon. But of what shall I write? Of flogging? that is not a very suitable gift; but what a great honour it is when the Sultan flogs a man. Suffice it to say that the Sultan has flogged his son-in-law. Presumably he has fallen out of favour with his wife. At all events we do not know the cause of this painful distinction; for such things are decided in the harem, that is, the women's quarters, and there a whole man may not enter.

But we learnt of the flogging from an acquaintance whose wife serves the Kaymakam's wife in the capacity of washerwoman. Her husband is a Hungarian, and a slave of the Kaymakam, and bears the office of woodman in his court. It is good to have well-wishers everywhere. He sees it as his patriotic duty to visit us often, and entertains us with news of events in such secret places. You will say, dear Aunt, that I have nothing better to do than to write such trivia; in fact lying idle is our chief occupation, but even if there were something better I would neglect it for the sake of writing to you; for, my dear Aunt, who loves you more than I? But I would increase that amount by a further two pounds of love if I knew that you were taking good care of your health. And do you love me?

## VII

Adrianople, 17. Decembris 1717.

Today, dear Aunt, the Vizier sent word to our lord that he would be delighted to see him if he would call. But as we are all infantrymen, and only our lord has three horses, horses were brought to go under each of us and we went to call on the Vizier with great Turkish ceremony. But imagine, how alarmed I was; for as we were walking into the Vizier's house all the people began to shout out at the tops of their voices: Thief! I just looked to see which would seize us. But alarm did not last long, for the Vizier received our lord kindly and sat him at his side. I asked later what the shouting had been about. I was told that it was the custom to shout out, when the Vizier gave an audience to a foreign lord: Long live Mahomet! Long live the invincible Sultan! Long live the mighty Vizier! Dear Aunt, you see, when one does not know the custom! Another time I shall not take fright. Suffice it to say that our lord spent two hours with



the butcher. It is said of him that he has more brains than any butcher and can handle not only a meat-cleaver but also the affairs of state. We can only believe it, when so wise a man as our lord says it, who returned on the Vizier's horse, which he had presented to him—this is a custom. I know that when we go to see the Sultan, then too we shall acquire a horse.

I have already said that these Viziers are gods descended to earth. Their splendour, wealth and great retinues are fit for a king. But as their splendour consists in part of having numerous servants standing before them, when they discuss matters of state the servants cannot be present: therefore they keep dumb servants, and these understand signs as if they were spoken words, and these are in the house when the Vizier speaks of secret matters. Is this not a good practice? Perhaps it would be good among us also, then there would be less prattle in the house.

What was I thinking of? If our old women were dumb the young women would not care; I care, however, that our affairs are proceeding very, very dumbly, and I see no progress. But I fear that it will go backwards and we shall become ensconced here. Dear Aunt, the pot must conform to the will of the potter<sup>4</sup>, and cannot say to him: why have you sent me to Adrianople? I would rather have been a cabbage pot in Transylvania than any coffee cup of the Sultan's. Is it not a wise saying of the Turks, that God has placed stores of bread hither and thither for men, and one must go here and another there, and remain as long as there is bread? Our store of bread is placed here, therefore let us eat of it as long as it remains without complaint, and let us not say that it would be better to eat maize porridge in Transylvania than wheat-bread here.

Dear Aunt, perhaps I am not without cause in fearing that if the good Lord maintains me in this transient body I shall perhaps have to eat a hayrick of bread in this country; for if the Turk is defeated, if he possibly can he will butter it with peace. Our butcher may be a good Vizier, but he is a poor military man; and even if he were a good soldier, the Sultan does not like him as much as the Kaymakam, who is very clever, but who likes campaigning as much as I do the legal profession, and knows as much about it—but it is a known fact that he will grasp the opportunity to become Vizier; as he is the Sultan's son-in-law he can attain that rank; and when he does it is certain that he will make peace, and when there is peace we shall merely have to sit by our store of bread; for we shall not stir hence until we have eaten it up. And I, as long as my store of bread lasts, will love you from my heart. And will you love me? Take good care of your health; nothing is more precious than that.

## VIII

Adrianople, 4. Januarii 1718.

I desire from God that you begin and end this New Year prosperously. I wish you at least two pounds more of health, and I beseech you, increase your love toward me by at least two hundred drams. Dear Aunt, although every pocket, fold, drawer of my heart is full of love for you, none the less I am like a piece of ice; is that then to prevent my writing to you?

The truth is that I deserve your generous thanks for enjoying writing when I am so cold, and I would have you know that today we were in the brilliant Porte of the invincible Sultan, whither the Prince was taken with great pomp. The Prince was received in the Divan-chamber by the Vizier, and then a little round table was set before him, and a great silver bowl was set on it and food was brought, but only one dish at a time was served. Neither knife nor fork nor tablecloth nor napkin was on the table to bother one; the Vizier and the Kaymakam each had his own table before him, and the same food was served to each at the same time. At the end of the meal, an hour later, the Prince was taken to the Sultan. None of us accompanied him. And while he was before the Sultan a caftan trimmed with pine-marten was put on him. While the Prince was with the Sultan each of us was given a caftan for our backs. When the Prince came out from the Sultan he mounted the Sultan's horse, we too all mounted and at least thirty kings escorted him back to his lodging. My dear Aunt, do not laugh; for if you could have seen us in our caftans—it was as if so many Egyptian kings were escorting the Prince—except that we are not so swarthy. Dear Aunt, do not be surprised if Their Majesties the kings felt very cold; for today the weather has been very harsh; and know too that Their Mightinesses returned from the visit hungry. The horse on which the Prince rode back was presented to him by the Sultan with all its furniture, and there were a mace and a sword on the saddle. You love me, if you are looking to your health; and I shall love you if you are healthy.

Adrianople, 15. Februarii 1718.

Dear Aunt, I take kindly, indeed, I laughed at your complaint that you could write no more often, there being no opportunity for sending letters. You are so good at excusing yourself, you complain so graciously, that it is worth ten letters. Perhaps you know that there is no post between here and Constantinople? Do you know the reason for this? The reason is that previously, when the Sultan was in residence here, the lords used to send by post to Constantinople on every least occasion. Among others, a certain pasha arrived here and had left a favourite pipe-stem in Constantinople, and so he sent for it by post. The Sultan learned of this and ordained that henceforth there should be no post between these two capital cities. You see, what harm a pipe-stem has done me! Here we miss no opportunity to further our cause. The Reis Efendi (the Chancellor) often visits us, and we too often go incognito to the Kaymakam. God grant a good outcome! But I fear that we shall fare as did the mountains that came together to give birth to a mouse<sup>5</sup>, for, as I have written before, and shall write a hundred times, the Sultan's son-in-law (who is often flogged, according to the woodman, but who has pretensions to the Viziership) is as suited to the military life as I am to the law. Perhaps I do know more about it; for surely, is not that the office of a lawyer, that he should seek his own advantage? That he should expect a gift from all, and serve none?

Oh! dear Aunt, how near he is to the Viziership: if I were as near to marriage, perhaps the bridal dance would have struck up by this time. Nevertheless we receive assurance, and that is all. If the Turk is defeated he simply weeps and makes peace. What is more, God alone knows the reason, but in France the Germans are in favour, and here the French are working for peace with the Germans, and if that comes about we shall turn not our flank but our backs on Transylvania. I have no news to write; for it is so cold, that the news too is frozen. I can write no more, for an old Jew is waiting for my letter—I am frozen to my soul. If only I knew to what tribe he belonged! From his beard he seems to be of that of Zabulon<sup>6</sup>. My dear Aunt, do not catch a cold. Do you love me? There is no need to ask whether I love you.



LETTERS FROM TURKEY

X

Adrianople, 15. Mart 1718

Dear Aunt, this very day, if I reckon correctly, a month has passed since I wrote to you. But I will swear by my beard (when I have one) that when the weather becomes milder I will write more often; because your heart would be a block of marble were you not to pity my condition, or rather how we are quartered. My abode consists of four stone walls, with one shuttered window, through all the length and breadth of which the wind enters; and if I cover it with paper the mice and the rats dispose of it for their dinner. My furniture is one small wooden chair, my bed is spread on the ground, and the room is warmed by a little coal in a earthenware dish. But do not think that even so I am the most deserving of pity; for ten have not even a wooden chair, nor a bed as good as mine, nor even a shutter at their window. The snow swirls in onto their beds—if you can call a rug laid on the floor a bed. Such are the palaces in which we live! But hope being most needful to men, and as necessary as food; living now in bad quarters we hope that we shall yet live in good ones. Shall we ever see the day?—But what we have seen is the arrival here of the Spanish Ambassador, whom the king has sent to the Prince with very many promises to help us in every way. This morning he met our lord, who received him standing, and talked with him about half an hour. You know that I love you, and you know that you must be careful for your health, and you also know that in cold rooms one cannot write much.

XI

Adrianople, 22. Apr. 1718

I do not know whether I am writing this letter from Noah's Ark or from Adrianople; for everywhere here are such great floods that the whole city is in the water. The only good thing is that the weather is fine, otherwise one would think that another Flood was imminent. One supposes that the snow on the mountains has swollen the rivers here; for the river that runs past our house has so overflowed that people are going about the streets in boats. But here something has happened that could only happen during a flood; for food had to be brought from the kitchen on horseback. Did you ever hear of Roman Emperors sending to the kitchen with such



## LETTERS FROM TURKEY

magnificence? It would have taken Habakuk<sup>8</sup> to bring food dry-shod. This splendid food-carrying lasted about two days. Do not think that it could not have been brought on foot, for the water only came half-way up the legs, but the servants preferred to go to the kitchen on horseback. Indeed, we had no need of that giant of whom the Jews maintain that when, during the Flood, the water reached the highest mountain; it only reached his waist, and he walked everywhere beside the Ark, like a footman beside a carriage. After this I shall be able to send news; for both my room is warmer and the news has thawed. The flood will not wash away my love; do you love me? Are you looking after your health?

## XII

Adrianople, 27. Apr. 1718

Dear Aunt, you still do not know me very well; for if you did you would not say that you write to me as seldom as I to you. Do you not fear my terrible vengeance? Do you know that I have no greater delight than in taking revenge on one that loves me? If I dislike someone I will forgive them, as far as I am able, but if I love someone I will take revenge—this is called sweet revenge; to take revenge on someone whom we dislike is bitter revenge. Many do not believe this, but we two do, and we do not regret it. So let us take revenge on one another and write often. Do you wish to hear some news? I cannot satisfy your desire. The French Ambassador here, Bonac, is working not to prolong the campaign but to bring it to as speedy a conclusion as may be. The German desires that, and the Turk has by now no stomach for fighting. So what shall we do, caught between the two? As they play, so must we dance. We were called here to war, but have come to peace. Can we wish for aught else but what pleases God? and we must walk in His ways, and not walk, but run; for God likes us to run according to His wishes, not only with good heart, but with pleasure. So let us not be downcast if affairs do not run as would please us—He who directs the future knows how they are to be. But I would be downcast if you did not love me; but you may rejoice, for I love you greatly. And is your health good? Are you taking care of it? Good night, dear Aunt.