

## Letters of an Insecure Scholar, 1553

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Zaifi, d. after 1557

TRANSLATED BY A. TUNÇ ŞEN

In the spring and fall of 1553, a scholar named Pir Muhammed bin Evrenos—better-known by his penname Zaifi ('The Frail One,' d. after 1557)—sent two petitions to grand vizier Rüstem Pasha (d. 1561). In these petitions, Zaifi asks for Rüstem Pasha's help securing an appointment to a higher paying teaching position, one commensurate with his career and age. The case of Zaifi, and of his candid descriptions of his professional grievances in particular, present us with an invaluable glimpse at the life and troubles of low- to midranking scholars in the strict hierarchy of the Ottoman scholarly establishment.

Zaifi was born ca. 1494, the son of a local learned man in Kratovo (in modern-day northern Macedonia). He traveled to Istanbul, likely in the early 1520s, after studying for several years in provincial towns. In his autobiographical account, which was completed in 1543, Zaifi relates his ill-fated career as a young aspirant to the scholarly life. In Istanbul, he enrolled in the *medrese* of the Eight Courtyards (Sahn-i Seman), which stood in Zaifi's time as the top institute of higher education. According to his account, Zaifi became the favorite student of the grand mufti, but the years of apprenticeship with a small stipend were too much of a financial strain. He became a private tutor to a wealthy bureaucrat's son, but the salary he received after a long delay was much less than he had expected. He began to doubt the financial prospects of private service and decided to return to his former career track in the scholarly establishment.

Strict regulations dictated the career paths of individuals within the scholarly hierarchy, from fresh graduates to the top offices of the grand mufti and the military judges. Medreses in the core lands of the empire were classified and ranked based on the daily wages of instructors. While a starting job in a low-tiered medrese would pay twenty akçe per day, the amount might gradually increase to as much as fifty akçe per day as the instructor climbed the ladder in the teaching track. (For reference, in the late 1520s, twenty akçe could buy around thirty-four

kilograms of rice or eleven kilograms of mutton or five kilograms of olive oil. The daily salary of unskilled labor was around five akçe).

Zaifi's term of candidacy began in the mid-1520s, but the death in 1526 of his advisor added several years to Zaifi's waiting period before his initial appointment. Thanks to the support of a new patron, Zaifi obtained his first teaching job at a small medrese in Giannitsa (in modern-day Greece), receiving a salary of twenty-five akçe per day. His career did not advance straightforwardly over the next decade: Zaifi lingered at thirty-akçe paying medreses in less desirable locations and attended military campaigns with the hope of getting closer to men in charge of appointments in the scholarly establishment. Irrked by the psychological and physical burdens of striving for a career in the hierarchy of learned men, he eventually decided to withdraw from the academic rat race and undertook a new venture merchandizing textiles. But after his house was robbed and he lost all his assets, he had to return, unwillingly, to professorial life.

In the second half of the 1540s, Zaifi's fortunes seem to have improved as he received his first jobs in a forty- and then a fifty-akçe medrese. Around the year 1549, however, he was dismissed from his fifty-akçe paying position for no apparent reason. In another work he openly accuses Rüstem Pasha for this dismissal. All his attempts in the next couple of years to obtain a position commensurate with his rank in the teaching track were to no avail. During this time, he stayed in Istanbul with his family under trying living conditions that he describes in the petitions below, as well as in his other compositions at the time. Zaifi never enjoyed an appointment to one of the Sahn colleges. Nevertheless, after Rüstem Pasha was reappointed to the office of grand vizier in September 1555, he granted Zaifi a handsome fifty-akçe pension, which must have provided relief in the final years of his life.

LANGUAGE: Turkish. Written in a mixture of elaborate formal and casual personal language—the latter arguably creating more of an emotional effect.

SOURCE: Manuscript: *Münşeât-ı Zaifi*. Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi, Istanbul, Revan 822. Letter 1: fols. 192a–193a. Letter 2: fols. 194a–b. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, supplément turc 572. Letter 1: fols. 327b–328b. Letter 2: fols. 329a–b.

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## ZAFİ'İ'S FIRST LETTER TO RÜSTEM PASHA

ca. Spring of 1553

This is a copy of Zaifi's letter of supplication submitted to the illustrious grand vizier Rüstem Pasha around the time that the son-in-law of the king of the universe set out for the Persian Campaign. *[God] is the Merciful and the Sustainer.*

The petition of the insignificant, poor, and wretched shred of a man to the most honorable among the compassionate, the supporter of scholars, the source of beneficence, the mine of munificence, the protector of the poor, the benefactor of commanders, the crown on the heads of the viziers, is as follows:

The torments of poverty and trouble have overwhelmed and left me bereft of all my belongings. I have no assets to buy a house, nor do I have a mansion in which to live with my dependents in peace. My limbs and heart are in poor health; my children and dependents are abased like me. During summertime, they use rocks as pillows and the soil as a mattress. In wintertime, if they are lucky enough to find a blanket to cover themselves, they cannot find a mattress; when there is a mattress, there is no blanket. Their once splendid clothes have become sackcloth; their brocade coats have become coarse cloaks. Nor do I have a beast left to ride to visit your gate every day. Of my servants not even two remain so that I could leave one at home while taking the other with me when I visit your threshold. My feet are swollen from walking on foot. Whenever I see acquaintances mounted on Arabian horses while this humble servant walks on feet defiled by soil, I cannot help but suffer from spiritual pain. I had previously scrimped and purchased with my professorial income a modest robe [for each member of my family] to cover our disgrace. Lest people think we are impoverished, they put them on during religious festivals and similar special days, when they are exposed to other people's gaze. [The members of my household] are afraid that these robes will soon wear out if they don them all day long, as they know that I will not be able to replace them with new ones. What they wear every day at home are shabby robes and cloaks that are completely tattered. In accordance with the word of God, the Almighty, most worthy of praise—*The ignorant man supposes them to be rich because of their abstinence, but you will know them by their mark: they do not beg importunately from the people* (Qur'an 2:273)—we scrupulously avoid revealing our poverty and indigence to others out of dignity. We keep praying day and night to the Creator of the night and day, being fully resigned to Him in line with the [Qur'anic verse]: *Those who put their trust in God, He will suffice them* (Qur'an 65:3).

Nonetheless, as the saying goes, "a spear cannot be concealed in a sack," and some of the venerable and generous among the wealthy have become aware of and engaged with the conditions of these paupers. They have showed some attention, from time to time, by divine inspiration, and bestowed on us their benefaction, albeit at the level of meeting bare necessities. Praise be to God, Lord of the Universe, we have not yet been left hungry and dispossessed to date. In particular, the donation of your excellency, the mighty grand vizier pasha, in this month of Şaban, helped us replenish our stocks. However, that which is being spent will surely not last forever. If there is no [stable] income, the money in hand cannot meet expenses. Plants flourish by the blessings of clouds and the poor become gratified by the alms of the generous. People of rank fall from grace when they are dismissed [from office]; they have no bright day, only dark nights. For almost three years, the blade of dismissal has sickened my body and the cord of trouble and hardship has hobbled the feet of my mind. For that reason, I have become a desperate man with a thin, diseased body, despised by my fellows. I have not committed a sin so grave as to deserve this sort of reprimand; nor have I committed a crime so serious that I should earn such rebuke. Some that are only at the level of my students occupy high positions. Those who were previously under my guidance enjoy comfort and ease. This destitute one lives in a mansion as dark and narrow as the heart of a

miser. When the weather is humid our courtyard becomes tar-like due to the clay. Our dependents can only walk around barefoot, as it is not possible to walk there with shoes. My current state is similar to that of a sick person, who ardently hopes for a remedy from the physician, but when he is close [to death] his friends and loved ones come and tell him, “while there is life, there is still hope.”

It has become clear to me that you are the only one who can decisively solve this problem, but since you are soon embarking on a campaign toward distant countries there is no hope for my disease to be cured. There is nothing I can do but express my best wishes for your well-being. Judgment belongs to God. Would not it be more proper to implement a sort of action similar to that of the surgeon, who makes punctures with his scalpel and lets the body bleed [only] as much as he wants? He then puts salt on the wound and bandages it tightly. I could talk more about my current condition, but I shall not, lest people call me a grumbler. But in accordance with the saying, “Cautery is the end of medicine,” you would deserve to be utterly admired by the public, should you treat my pained bosom with the mark of your favor and grace, and consider this slave—that is, me—as one of your marked and branded Indian (?) slaves. It is required to protect the honor and virtue of glorious sultans. When I was appointed to the Süleyman Pasha medrese in İznik, I did not take the appointment because it was not much distinguished in your view. Then, the professorship at the medrese of [Sultan] Orhan [in İznik], the grand ancestor of his excellency, our padishah—*may God glorify his helpers*—was assigned to me but I was dismissed before two years were up. Since then, for the last three years, I have not received an appointment. It is clearly an infringement of the virtue of the sultanate that [a dismissed scholar] remains so long desperate and deprived of means.

You submit [your recommendation] to the sultan that such and such scholar is a righteous person and learned in every science, which is then also written on our certificates of appointments. How strange it is that you reverse your opinion when that righteous and learned scholar reaches fifty or sixty years of age, after holding offices in many medreses! Yet, if you intend [to show your beneficence] again, it will doubtlessly happen. As for compassion, there has never been a vizier at the Ottoman court as benevolent as yourself. Your hand of support could lift a particle from the earth to the Pleiades, and the alchemy of your kindness could make soil like gold.

My felicitous lord! For God’s sake, do not bother yourself with examining my dismissal or oppression by poverty and indigence. Since you are the lord of grace, show your utmost generosity, eminent grace, and benevolence for the destitute, and bestow on me, your servant, one of the medreses at the Eight [Courtyards]. Thereby I will be one of your special servants who will always wish the best for you. Since the day I was dismissed, I have not appealed to anyone else’s gate. When Hudhud (the hoopoe) was missing [from the bird assembly], Prophet Solomon—*may God’s blessings be upon him*—said, “*I shall punish it severely*” (Qur’an 27:21). The Qur’an commentators have interpreted this as Hudhud’s peers being promoted to higher positions, and Hudhud being degraded. This humble one has been greatly suffering [like Hudhud]. Judgment belongs to God, yet we have not given up hope for reward. It is

not uncommon that a master first reprimands his servant and then shows his benevolence to help him receive a reward. Your servant is not yet entirely without hope. If you decline my request, I will be a rejected servant; if you accept me, then I will be the one admired by people. The rest is upon God, Creator of all existing things and Provider for mankind and jinn.  
[Signed:] The weakest of all servants, Zaifi, the humble one.

## ZAIFI'S SECOND LETTER TO RÜSTEM PASHA

ca. Fall of 1553

This is the petition of the feeble servant and weak slave of the most eminent of the honorable viziers, the most glorious of the respected commanders, the protection of poor scholars of the world, the confidant of the sultan of Arab and Persian lands, the cloud of generosity, beneficence, and grace, the rain pouring from the sky of prosperity onto the people, the exalted grand vizier, the mighty pasha:

As you embarked on the campaign toward an area as far as my farthest ambitions, this despicable one remained hopeless about a [teaching] position, like a diseased person despairing of remedy.

The spiritual efforts of the men of the unseen world, who are able even to uproot mountains, brought your far-flung imperial campaign closer and made certain that you return soon to your felicitous palace. This reanimated this sick one who had given up hope and made me realize that my request of attaining a position would, God the Compassionate willing, be soon fulfilled; *With [all] the hardship there is some ease* (Qur'an 94:6). It is hoped that with the abundance of your benefaction, these afflictions will come to an end and the requests this servant has made will be attained with ease. Amen! O God who responds to those who pray! Before you gloriously departed for the campaign, you had ordered those staying in the city to appoint me to a medrese. Although they had to observe the honor of my gracious and munificent lord and the dignity of the Ottoman sultans, they did not offer me a position appropriate to my rank, but one that would cause me to die from sorrow a thousand times over every day. While other scholars are [ordinarily] promoted from a medrese of forty akçe per day to one of fifty, or from a fifty-akçe medrese to a medrese at the Eight [Courtyards], or even higher positions, they offered this servant, who had previously enjoyed a fifty-akçe medrese, a shameful retreat to a medrese of forty akçe per day, saying, "We were only able to persuade the pasha of this level."

I said [to them], "The pasha is a generous person, famed for lifting his protégés from the ground to the sky." When I was offered the Davud Pasha medrese [in Istanbul], the professor whom I replaced there had previously held the judgeship of Egypt. The professor who was appointed there after me has [meanwhile] attained [a position in a medrese] in Üsküdar at the rank of [Eight] Courtyards. My distraught status, however, for the last three years has not been addressed with mercy and compassion at all.

Seeing that I was not being offered a teaching position according to my wish, I said, "I wish the pasha had not left for the campaign!" They said, "Hang on till he returns." I said,