

Permission for Settlement: A tezkere for a woman from the occupied Kingdom of Hungary*

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Context

This *tezkere*¹ is found in Hungary, in the Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County Archives, among the “letters from *Mezőtúr*”² issued by the Ottomans in the 17th century (dated 1683, April). The collection comprises a total of 155 folios, including 13 documents written in Hungarian and issued by the Ottomans, while the remaining texts are in Ottoman Turkish.³ The miscellany addresses a wide range of topics, including land ownership, taxation, customs regulations, the renovation of the local Calvinist church, and legal matters such as inheritance and death cases. By analyzing this diverse corpus, it is possible to reconstruct aspects of everyday life on the periphery of the Ottoman Empire—distant from Istanbul, within the occupied territories of the Kingdom of Hungary, outside of Buda, in the vast expanse of the Hungarian Great Plain.

According to the *tezkere*, a woman named *Örzsike*⁴ intends to settle down in *Karcagújszállás*,⁵ a settlement within the Szolnok Sanjak. To obtain a residence permit, she accepts the obligation of paying the sultanic *jizya* tax. Through this *tezkere*, the Ottomans formally grant her the permit.

¹ Diplomatically, *tezkere* refers to documents facilitating communication between officials or individuals within the same administrative unit. These documents were composed in a straightforward manner, ensuring the purpose was conveyed clearly and completely, while avoiding unnecessary details. Various types of *tezkere*s existed, classified according to the specific purpose of their issuance. M.S. Kütükoğlu, *Osmanlı Belgelerinin Dili (Diplomatik)* (İstanbul: Kubbealti, 1994), 245.

² Today *Mezőtúr* is a town, which is located in the centre of the Great Hungarian Plain, Southeast of Budapest. The town was established in the Middle Ages. It lay along an important trade route, which was the shortest road between Buda and Transylvania, therefore the town prospered, and it became a market town (*oppidum*) in the 14th century. The settlement came under Ottoman rule in 1552 and remained so until its liberation in 1692. Z. Bodoki Fodor, *Mezőtúr város története honfoglalástól a felszabadulásig (896-1944)* (Mezőtúr, 1978), 13. In historical sources, it was referred to as *Túr*—in Latin as *Thwr oppidum* and later, in Ottoman records, predominantly as *واروش طور* (*vārōš-i Tūr*), meaning “the town of *Túr*.”

The present collection of historical documents, known as the “letters of *Mezőtúr*,” constitutes the surviving remnants following the destruction caused by the wars of reconquest and the devastation of the Second World War.

³ The archival reference of the letter bundle is HU-MNL-JNSZML-V.301.

⁴ This is a female Christian name, *Erzsébet/Örzsébet*, with a *+kA°* diminutive suffix.

⁵ *Karcagújszállás* (first mentioned in the sources in 1506, known today as *Karcag*) also lay on the Great Hungarian Plain, at the westernmost end of the Eurasian steppe route, and this was one of the central places where the Cumans settled down in the 13th century. Gy. Györffy, *A magyarság keleti elemei* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1990), 311.

To fully understand the essence of this permission, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the administrative divisions during the period of Ottoman rule in the Kingdom of Hungary.

After the Ottoman crescent was raised over Buda Castle in 1541, the following quarter-century saw the Ottoman Empire occupy approximately 40% of the kingdom's territory, which was subsequently expanded through a series of smaller and larger conquests. Their control extended over the southern regions, a significant portion of the Great Hungarian Plain, and the southern and eastern parts of Transdanubia.⁶

At the heart of this newly occupied territory, Szolnok Castle fell into Ottoman hands following the 1552 campaign. That same year, the city of Szolnok was designated as the seat of the Szolnok Sanjak, as part of the Vilayet of Buda Vilayet (Province of Buda), and the surrounding countryside was swiftly brought under Ottoman administration. The Szolnok Sanjak remained under the jurisdiction of the Buda Vilayet until 1596, when it was subordinated to the newly established Vilayet of Eger.⁷

The *tezkere* states that Örsike was from the *kurūş tā'ifesi* (in Hungarian 'kuruc'), which, in this context, indicates that she hailed from the northern part of the country. The etymology of the term *kurūş* remains uncertain to this day. Initially, it may have denoted a "wanderer, roamer, or fugitive" and its meaning later evolved, particularly in connection with Count Imre Thököly's anti-Habsburg struggles, to refer to soldiers fighting against the Habsburgs. Those who sympathized with this movement were also sometimes referred to by this term.⁸ Moreover, sources suggest that it was a common practice for the Ottomans to use this designation for people from the northern regions, as Thököly's activities were closely associated with Upper Hungary, where he recruited

⁶ After the establishment of the *vilayet* of Buda (1541) and Temesvár (1552), 6 new *vilayets* were established in the region up to 1663. G. Pálffy, *A tizenhatodik század története*, (Budapest: Pannonica, 2000), 13.

⁷ V. Tomkó "Török közigazgatás Magyarországon: a szolnoki szandzsákbégek története I." *Zounok* (Szolnok: A Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok Megyei Levéltár Évkönyve 19, 2004), 10.

⁸ Nagy László, "Kurucok és Labancok a Magyar Történelemben". *Hadtörténeti Közlemények* 26/2 (Budapest: 1979), 250-274.

his followers. Consequently, the Ottomans occasionally referred to the population of the northern regions as the “people of the *ḵurūṣ*.”

Thus, she intended to move from the northern regions to Karcagújszállás, which, according to the conditions of the time, was considered a populous settlement.⁹ Moreover, due to the Thököly Uprising, the Upper Hungarian territories often failed to provide security for their inhabitants. Her relocation from the less secure region to a more stable and populated southern settlement demonstrates the impact of political and military conflicts on individual lives.

This short permit also raises the issue of taxation eligibility, as in occupied Hungary of the mid-16th century, the *jizya* - mostly referred to as *haraç*- was originally intended to be paid by adult non-Muslim men. The following groups were exempt from paying the *jizya* tax: women, children, elderly and disabled people, monks (especially those living in monasteries) and the very poor who were unable to afford the tax. However, the obligation to pay *jizya* was sometimes linked to land ownership: individuals who held land, known as *baştina*, were required to pay the tax regardless of whether they were Muslim or non-Muslim. In order to safeguard *jizya* revenues, the state treasury regarded landowner status as the main criterion. Women were generally exempt from paying the *jizya* tax in the Ottoman Empire because *jizya* was primarily a tax in exchange for military protection, and women were not considered liable for military service.

However, there were exceptions when women were required to pay *jizya*. Firstly, widows who inherited land from their deceased husbands were liable to pay the tax as landowners. Secondly, women who lived independently and managed their own households might have been included in the *jizya* registers and taxed similarly to men. In some cases, local tax collectors might have mistakenly or deliberately taxed wealthy women. Additionally, women who voluntarily wished to become Ottoman subjects sometimes accepted the obligation to pay *jizya* as part of their new status. In summary, although women were mostly exempt from *jizya*, widows, landowning women,

⁹ Selmeczi László, *Őseink nyomában. A magyarországi kunok Olas nemzetsége és Kolbászéke 1243/46–1685* (Kisújszállás: 2013), 48.

independent women, or those in special circumstances could be required to pay, usually at a lower rate than adult men. Örszike could be in this category, but there is no further record to prove that.

The Ottoman administration had already gained enough experience through the subjugation of various peoples to recognize the advantage of adapting taxation laws to the legal customs of the conquered countries. Thus, in Hungary, the most important state tax, the *jizya* tax, was also levied in this manner.¹⁰

By the 17th century, due to the state of war and financial issues, sources indicate that this type of tax could also be collected from women, and it gradually evolved into a more general form of taxation. This transformation within the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary remains a relatively understudied subject.

In conclusion, this *tezker*e serves as an interesting microhistorical source that sheds light on demographic shifts, legal adaptations, and everyday life under Ottoman rule in Hungary. The administrative flexibility exhibited by the Ottoman authorities reflects their ability to adapt fiscal policies to local conditions. Further research into similar documents could provide a deeper understanding of how the empire managed its frontier regions and adjusted its taxation and administrative systems to local realities.

¹⁰ Káldy-Nagy Gyula, *Harács-szedők és ráják. Török világ a XVI. Századi Magyarországon*. (Budapest: Akadémia Kiadó, 1970), 72. "Cizye " Accessed June 20, 2025.
<https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/cizye>

Transcription

Hüve/Huva

Vech-i tahrîr-i ħurûf oldur ki ħurûş tâ'ifesinden Örijik nâm 'avret re 'âyâ olub ve cizye-i pâdişâhî üzerine der- 'uhde eyleyüb yine Ķarşâğuy Şâlaş nâm ħaryede sâkin olmaĶ-içün icâzet tezkeresine tâlib olmağın tarafımızdan işbu memhür tezkere virüldi. Kimesne rencide eylemeye. Tahrîren fî evâĦir-i rebî 'ül-âĦır sene 1094.

El-hâķir

Mustafâ mîr-alay ŞonloĶ

Temmet

Translation

He! (God)

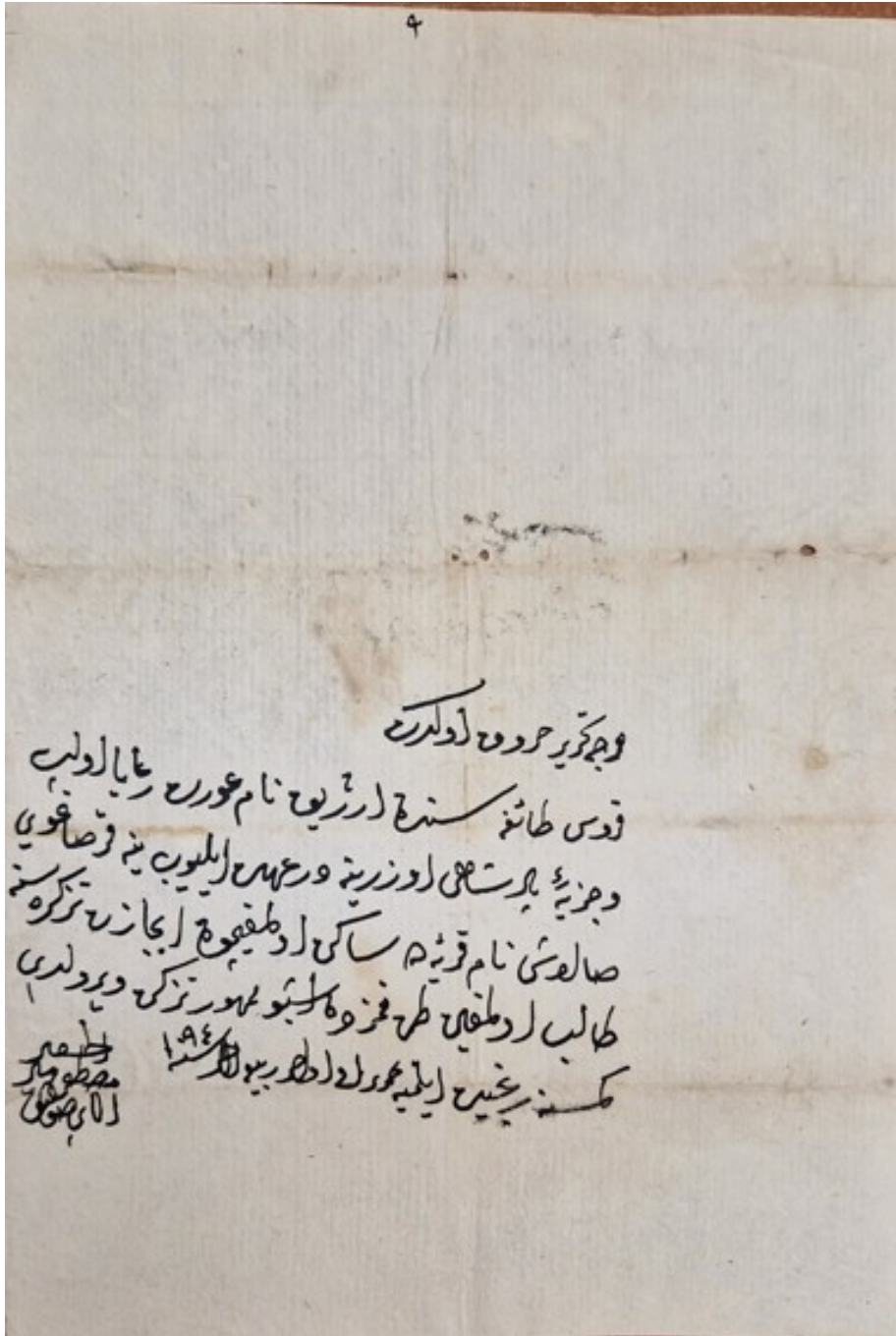
The reason for the issuance of this document is that a woman named Örsike, from the Kuruc people, became a reaya and accordingly, she took on the responsibility of paying the imperial *jizya* tax. Likewise, since she requested a permission certificate (*icazet tezkeresi*) to settle down in a village called Karcagújszállás (*Ķarşâğuy Şâlaş*), this sealed permit has been issued on our part. Let no one cause her any harm.

Written in the latter half of the month of Rabi' al-Akhir, year 1094 [14–28 April 1683].

The humble servant Mustafa, *mîr-alay* of the sanjak of Szolnok

The end.

Facsimile



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