

Story 1123 (1966 Tape 6) Narrator: Bozkurt Güvenç, retired military officer, now Secretary of Hacettepe University

Location: Ankara

Date: Summer 1966

The Governor of Baghdad and the Tartar¹ Ağa²

Back in the days of the Ottoman Empire, mail carriers between distant points were often Tatars. One day a Tatar ağa brought a message from İstanbul to the Governor of Baghdad.³ After receiving the message, the governor inquired about the courier's health. After learning that the Tatar was very well, the governor asked, "And how is everything in İstanbul?"

¹ Tatars (sometimes mistakenly called Tartars) were a very large tribe of Turkic-speaking people. At one time they controlled much of Central Asia and eastern Europe. They remained nomadic long after most other Turkish tribes had become sedentary, and as nomads, they retained their great skill in horsemanship. They could be depended on to get through the most rugged terrain and the most hostile areas with the messages that they were commissioned to carry. Sultans usually sent out their firmans (imperial decrees) via Tatar couriers.

² An ağa (English, agha) is a rural landowner, sometimes wealthy, often powerful. The word does not indicate an official title but describes an economic status. They are often the principal employers of farm workers, and they are often viewed by their employees as harsh, driving, and abusive. The term ağa is also used in a complimentary way, as an honorific, for a distinguished or just an older person than the one using the term. Thus an older brother is called ağa bey by his younger siblings. Ağa bey may be used as a deferential term to one older or more prestigious than the speaker. A taxi driver may refer to his passenger as ağa bey; a salesman speaking to a male customer may call him ağa bey.

³ Baghdad was, like most of the Arab Middle East, part of the Ottoman Empire.

Story 1123

The Tatar ağa knew very well that the governor was unhappy at being posted in Baghdad. (It was so far away from the capital that being assigned to Baghdad was like being sent into exile. The Tatar, thinking to please the governor, said, "Well, it is rumored that there are to be some changes in the government. It is said that when these changes are made, you may be appointed Grand Vizier."

The Governor responded, "I know, Tatar ağa, that you are telling a lie, but that is all right. Go ahead--continue--because it makes me feel very happy!"