

# Postmemory, Post-dependence, Post-trauma: Negotiating Jewish Identity in Post-Communist Poland<sup>9</sup>

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In studies concerning identity practices in contemporary, post-communist Poland, three issues seem to be crucial: the memory strategies they involve, the previous state of dependency towards which they define themselves, and their relationship with the historical traumas they have to overcome. These are labeled by three catchy terms: postmemory, post-dependence, and post-trauma; these perspectives – similar to other “posts”, e.g. postmodernism or postsecularism – are characterized by several common features: specific belatedness, temporal shift, the practice of quoting and mediation, defining the present always in relation to a troubling past, oscillating between continuity and rupture. Secondly, all of them are a sort of loan-notion from Western memory, trauma and Holocaust studies, hastily adapted to Polish realities. Even post-dependence discourse – which is to be understood as a set of signifying and identity practices that have been undertaken after the situation of dependence came to an end – was introduced to the vocabulary of Polish humanities as a specific remedy and substitute for the postcolonial perspective, which turned out to be quite resistant to being convincingly applied to the Polish cultural situation.

As I will try to show, adapting categories from the Western theoretical vocabulary or creating new ones in order to examine Polish culture and identity strategies may be fully legitimate only if we discern the basic differences this local perspective engages, and recognize the entanglement of several factors it always results in. To prove my point, I will examine a phenomenon in which these three perspectives – postmemory, post-trauma and post-dependence – creatively intertwine: the identity strategies of representatives of the second generation of Holocaust survivors; that is, Polish writers who started rendering their Jewish

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identity problematic in their works after 1989. I will start, however, with a brief theoretical reconnaissance.

Postmemory, a term coined by Marianne Hirsch that is crucial for my analysis, was a manifestation of a broader trend in the relatively young field of Holocaust studies, which tried to capture the phenomenon of memory of the so-called second generation of Holocaust survivors, or the generation of those who come “after,” haunted by the war memories of their parents (cf Berger 1997; Sicher 1998; McGlothlin 2006; Grimwood 2007). For postmemory is the experience of those who grew up in the shadow of stories taking place before their birth, shaped by traumatic events that could not be fully understood or reconstructed by them. This inheritance of memories, supposedly proven by a great number of autobiographical books in American literature written by the children of survivors, from the very beginning had a rather uncertain status. This was expressed by the language of researchers concerned with this kind of memory: “absent,” “late,” “inherited,” “prosthetic,” “ash memory,” “painful inheritance,”<sup>10</sup> mixed with a pinch of the uncanny: after all, how can memory, a structure which is a priori intentional (in the phenomenological sense) be a medium of experiences that have not been experienced? For the first time, Hirsch used the notion of postmemory to describe her own personal experience as a child of Holocaust survivors, in order to express primarily the *quality* of the relationship with one’s parents’ stories, from which one has been excluded (ibid: 4). Right after its very first formulation, the concept started to live its own life, being applied to all forms of memory – both individual and collective – much beyond family relations, achieving the status of a form of cultural memory. Hirsch herself made some clarifications and redefinitions in her most recent book, in which she describes postmemory as “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images and behaviors among which they grew up.” (ibid: 5). Therefore, postmemory is clearly different from the memory of actual witnesses or participants of certain events, and its relationship with the past is mediated not by means of remembering, but by the input of imagination, projection and creation. What is especially significant is that postmemory has a powerful potential of an identity strategy: its artistic incarnations (both in literature and visual arts) are, in the works of the second generation, always related to the search for identity and working through mourning, to which they are often denied the right.

Furthermore, it is worth underlining that postmemory, construed both as a form of memory and as cultural formation, is always connected to trauma: “it is a

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<sup>10</sup> Terms by Fine E, Lury C, Landsberg A, Fresco N, Schwab G; quoted in Hirsch (2012: 3).

*consequence* of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove” (ibid: 6). As I will show later, the posttraumatic condition in the case of Jews who spent their childhood in communist Poland is doubly charged: the trauma of the Holocaust in the shadow of which they grew up (very often concealed by their parents and recognized by them only thanks to accidental allusions) is intensified by their personal trauma caused by living in concealment and facing acts of anti-Semitism.

As a form of cultural memory and posttraumatic identity, postmemory must also be examined as rooted in a specific historical moment and directly related to socio-political changes. This leads me to the last element of this “post” triad: post-dependence. This category, often conceived as a remedy for inefficiency of postcolonial discourse applied to the political, social and cultural situation of Poland, both after the partitions of 1795–1918 and after the times of communism (Chmielewska 2013: 559–574), was coined to dub meaningful cultural practices emerging after the ceasing of dependency but still showing its signs (Nycz 2011: 8). As such, the situation of post-dependency might be interpreted as strongly connected to working through trauma and coming to terms with an often troubling and emotionally charged past. At the same time, it opens various possibilities for identity and emancipatory practices, especially for minority groups who have only now regained the right to speak for themselves, but in constant negotiation with the dominant politics of memory and practices of self-identification, that are often rooted in the dialectic of victimhood.

In Polish literature, the political transformation of 1989 also brought out an archive fever and a memory turn. However, as I will try to show, an analysis of material seemingly analogous to that known from Western studies – recently published autobiographical narratives of Polish writers of Jewish origin, battling with the trauma that marked their childhood – brings up a number of issues, which significantly distinguish this local Jewish-Polish postmemory from that described originally by Hirsch. For the children of the survivors living on the western side of the Iron Curtain, the year 1989 opened the territorial borders and for the first time allowed them to see the mythical places from their parents’ narratives about pre-war times. However, for the descendants of Jews who lived as children in the People’s Republic of Poland it had a slightly different, post-dependent dimension. The historic breakthrough was the very precondition for such narratives to be created at all. As an example, let me quote Michał Głowiński’s description of his situation at the time he published *Black Seasons* (1998): “I came out from the cellar. I ceased to fear. I can finally talk about myself publicly” (*Polskie gadanie*” 2005).

The year 1989 brought to the public issues that had been hitherto deliberately omitted. First of all, the anti-Semitism promoted by the communist authorities, and the fact that after the Second World War “the Jewish question” was an indispensable element of the politics of the party and anti-Semitism, was a useful

tool in political and ideological debates – the most evident example was the events of March 1968. Secondly, resulting from this situation, the forced emigration of the overwhelming majority of people of Jewish origin, who after the war returned to Poland or found themselves on its territory as a result of the changes introduced at the Yalta Conference, and the problematic question of the attitude of Poles towards Jews during the Second World War and in the early post-war period (cf. Gross 2006). Finally, the Polonization of the experience of the Holocaust, epitomized by acts of memory politics at the memorial site of the former Auschwitz death camp (Kucia 2005; Zubrzicki 2006) as well as the expulsion from the canon of Polish testimonial literature of the works of authors writing in Yiddish and Hebrew<sup>11</sup>. An emblematic event for this tendency was the debate, a prelude to the events of March '68, on the "Nazi concentration camps" entry in the Great Universal Encyclopedia edited by the State Scientific Publishers. Formerly, the entry was divided into two sections – "concentration camps" and "death camps" – and in the case of the latter the fact that Jewish victims constituted the majority was underlined. As a result of anti-Semitic bashing the entry was changed (and an addendum sent to subscribers) and the division deleted.

After 1989, the articulation of these issues could for the first time be freed of Aesopian speech and allusions. Literature responded in a lively way to the political change: besides new works of writers for whom the Holocaust was an important topic even before 1989 (Henryk Grynberg), books began to appear by authors who had not previously been working in this context – both those with no autobiographical background (Marek Bińczyk, Jarosław M. Rymkiewicz) and those by Jewish writers who had survived the Holocaust as children the (so-called generation 1.5: Michał Głowinski, Wilhelm Dichter<sup>12</sup>). Finally, the "generation of postmemory" emerged; four of its representatives: Ewa Kuryluk, Agata Tuszyńska, Bożena Keff and Magdalena Tulli<sup>13</sup> – although each in a slightly different role – will be the protagonists of this article.

Based on these writers' narratives, I will examine how in the Polish context there is a specific belatedness in the practices of working through the inherited memory of the children of Holocaust survivors, and how the formation of their Jewish identity was made impossible by anti-Semitism, epitomized by the events of March 1968, that played a role in their generational trauma<sup>14</sup>. (Joanna

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<sup>11</sup> E.g. Icchak Kacnelson, Emanuel Ringelblum, Chaim Kaplan. Cf. A. Ubertowska, op. cit., p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Hirsch (2012: 15). Przemysław Czapliński (2010: 359) calls these books "literature of belated confession".

<sup>13</sup> Kuryluk *Goldi* (2004) – hereafter "G" and page number; Kuryluk *Frascati. Apoteoza topografii* (2009) – hereafter "F" and page number; Tuszyńska, *Rodzinna historia lęku* (2005); Keff, *Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie* (2008); Tulli, *Włoskie szpilki* [Italian Stiletto] (2011).

<sup>14</sup> In this manner, March '68 is also described by Polish Jews born after the war who are interviewed by Joanna Wiszniewicz (2009).

Wiszniewicz Czarne 2009) As a result of the anti-Semitic riots that broke out in March 1968, which were stirred up by communist authorities in order to put down the student protests as well as to remove undesirable members from the Party, 15,000 Polish citizens of Jewish origin were forced to emigrate from the country. The children of those who decided to stay, having regained their voice after the fall of communism, are now trying to deal with inherited trauma, reinforced by their own experience of permanent denial and exclusion from the national-patriotic community. My four protagonists have several features in common: all of them were born to Holocaust survivors in the first decades after the war and spent their childhood in communist Poland; for each of them their autobiographical book is a kind of declaration; for each a source of traumatic knowledge is the relationship with their mother; finally, for each a key moment for identification was coming into contact with Polish anti-Semitism. Ewa Kuryluk, in her autobiographical books *Goldi* (2004) and *Frascati* (2009), for the first time (except earlier casual remarks) openly addresses her Jewish origin and reconstructs the way to solving the mystery of her mother's war-time past. The role of a Jewish woman's identity (struggling) manifesto is played by *The Piece on the Mother and Motherland* (2008) written by Bożena Keff. *Italian Stiletos* (2011) by Magdalena Tulli is her first prose work which so strongly embraces autobiographical themes, describing her coping with the inherited burden (the "cursed casket," "a collation" as she puts it; Tulli: 64, 76) of Jewish origin. Finally, Agata Tuszyńska's autobiographical saga, *The Family History of Fear* (2005), is a record of the author's path from the discovery and a denial of Jewish identity imposed by her mother's confession to a happy ending in the form of acceptance of being a Jewess and making this fact an element of self-identification.

These four cases of postmemory narratives, with their openly affirmative character, might be considered strong identity declarations, variants of this "coming out of the cellar," as Michał Głowiński put it, that was possible after 1989. The Jewish "coming out" would, therefore, be a public disclosure statement, a performative act of revealing – or constructing – identity. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, considering variants of "coming out," stresses that the case of Jewish identity – in contrast to the situation of, for example, homosexual people – involves to a large extent self-awareness of what being a Jew actually means, and is solidly established in the private history of family experiences and tradition (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990: 75 in Stratton 2000: 14). Disputing this claim, Jon Stratton indicates that this type of definition of Jewish identity is inseparably linked to the modernist division into the private and the public, and a vision of society in which being a Jew remains a sphere behind closed doors, when in the public space Jews become citizens, eliminating any uniqueness. As Stratton tries to show, Jewish identity also needs to be seen as constructed and ditching any simple essentialist classifications. However, no matter how we define this transition, coming out always has the potential of a positive statement; it is a

performative act, which establishes a new status quo, a new subject position within the network of identification links. This also corresponds to the aforementioned formative and emancipatory potential of postmemory as an identity practice. But, as it turns out, coming out in the Polish context is complicated due to at least three issues.

In the first place, therefore, we should look at this state of secrecy preceding entering the public sphere. The Polish literary critic Artur Sandauer (1982), creating a portrait of Polish writers of Jewish origin in the twentieth century, described their condition as marranism, referring to the situation of *marranos* – Jews who, in order to avoid deportation from Spain after 1492, converted to Christianity, while still remaining faithful to their own traditions, however concealed. In the case of Polish writers the condition of marranos concerns those who prefer not to “share” the truth of their origin, using mimicry to adapt to the mainstream. Marranism, which was a driving force of modern assimilation, after the Second World War took on a new connotation. Now fear becomes an impulse not to share their identity, echoing the attitudes of Poles toward Jews during the war, as well as immediately after it. For instance, the mother in *Italian Stiletos* gives birth to a child “for the sake of conspiracy” (26); the bleach-blonde mother in *Goldi and Frascati* is also constantly hiding; the mother hides her origin from Tuszyńska until she is 19 years old. Paradoxically, as historians show, the dominant variant of Polish anti-Semitism after the Second World War was precisely the one against the assimilated Jews, who only “pretended” that they were Poles (Kersten 1992: 147). The communist government’s policies played a decisive role here: recruiting citizens of Jewish origin into the Party, at the same time they suggested changing their names to Polish-sounding ones. “Dyed foxes – says a Polish girl in one of Tulli’s stories – wretched, disguised” (132). Therefore, here coming out does not so much mean disclosure – for society seems to know who they are beforehand.

This state of secrecy is strictly correlated to the exclusion from family history and the stubborn silence of parents (namely mothers) about their past. Ewa Kuryluk’s mother, Maria Grabowska (originally Miriam Kohany), who survived hiding from the Gestapo in Lviv thanks to her future husband’s help, until very late does not talk about her origins and war story. Moreover, she asks her daughter for two things: “not to spread our history nor to seek traces” (F237). These two imperatives shape the posttraumatic identity of the daughter: they stigmatize her with a hidden “secret,” which if revealed might revoke her right to be a member of consolidated society, and deprives her of her own history and temporal and spatial roots. The mother’s obsession with being recognized, along with the simultaneous, continuous denial of her own past and taking a lie as a foundation for her identity, affects her children (Ewa and her younger brother, Piotr), who feel endangered even in the space they know best – home at Frascati Street. In the postwar years, and especially during “this dreadful spring” (F 113), the mother is more scared

than during the Nazi occupation, and compares Poles, who may discover who the disguised Miriam Kohany really is, to the Gestapo (F114). “You will not recognize ‘szmalcownik’<sup>15</sup> by his pajamas [...], but he will recognize you” (F196) – she says after her stay at the mental hospital. This feeling of being beset continues after the fall of communism: “What is the percentage of wrecks who didn’t take reparations out of fear?” (F 302) – the mother asks rhetorically. A similar situation characterizes the life of Usia – the autobiographical protagonist of a narrative poem by Bożena Keff. Usia describes herself as a captive of trauma, summoned to be a mute witness to her mother’s misfortune. The mother, “a tyrant of emptiness” (10), escaped from Lviv during the war and left her family. After half a century she finds out that her relatives were shot in suburban woods. Keff depicts the experience of a survivor’s child in terms of disease and corporeality. History, documented in archives and film, in individual experience shows itself in the disguise of physiology: “I burp with a cadaver and then again with emptiness” (9) – says the narrator. At the same time the access to this experience is forbidden to her: “You have Nothing to do with Nothing” (42) – says the mother; Usia concludes: “there are no words with her [the mother], there are no words to her, nothing reaches her / and this is what the daughter blames her for all the time” (10). Contemporary marranos abide in constant hiding with no chance to integrate the history that they could identify with, and their traumatic postmemory is woven from gaps and concealments.

Secondly, the identity that is the subject of this coming out does not have a positive definition. In his analysis, Sandauer notes that after the war, in an ethnically cleansed society, being a Jew starts to mean the same as being a stranger, other, and anti-Semitism now manifests itself in placing cryptonyms and pseudonyms on these who are not Polish. “The word ‘Jewish’ in the People’s Republic of Poland disappeared altogether,” says Michał Głowiński in the previously cited interview (“*Polskie gadanie*” 2005). – “[...] When someone wanted to say of someone else that he is a Jew, they would use alternative words: ‘of obvious origin,’ ‘you know who.’” Two major Polish literary magazines (*Współczesność*, 1963, no. 15, *Poezja*, 1969, no. 8) summarized or reprinted a hostile towards the writers of Jewish origin pamphlet by the prominent Polish poet Tadeusz Gajcy from the period of the war called *We do not need anymore*, and the lack of object in this sentence is crucial: it is more than easy to decrypt it.

In Ewa Kuryluk’s work, this is expressed by a mysterious “word starting with the letter J,” where J stands for Jew, which is used by a tutor at a nursery school to separate Ewa from the other children (F 28), or by three dots: “I asked: Mum, are

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<sup>15</sup> “Szmalcownik” is a Polish slang term used during World War II that denoted a person blackmailing Jews who were hiding, or blackmailing Poles who protected Jews during the Nazi occupation.

you...?;" "Emigration?" – asks the narrator in *Goldi* – "we, sir, are not affected. We are not... I use ellipsis, we do not use invectives in Frascati" (G 100, 67). Tulli does likewise: "All decent people should say they are..." (132). Being a Jew is an empty word, a blank space, a halted sentence, an identity devoid of properties, defined only negatively: as a stranger, not-Pole, other.<sup>16</sup> This dotted-out word works as an emblem of Jewish identity, stigmatizes the children of the Jews who survived, imitating as an echo the band with the yellow star. Yet recognition always comes from the outside, the word starting with the letter J indicates the fact, but means nothing, does not give any basis for identification, nor does it permit one to form any kind of relation based on similarity. The paradox of post-war marranism is that the hidden Jewish identity loses any substantial properties; it is defined only by stigmatization from outside. This stigmatization, referred to by means of words such as "foreign," "other," "this," and since 11 March 1968 with the vague term "Zionist," is based on pure negativity, without offering a foundation for the creation of any image of oneself except that of a painful sense of unexplainable otherness. In one of Tulli's short stories, a tutor asks the class to explain this "something antisocial that was in this girl" (118), and soon it turns out that this is an impossible task: the strangeness dwelling in this child is so acutely obvious and natural that it becomes completely unexplainable. A post-war marrano, she does not know that she is one, and does not know that she is hiding something – although everybody around her knows this. "It was anti-Semitism and the Holocaust that imposed Jewishness upon my mother" – says Kuryluk in an interview.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the Jewish identity of the daughter is shaped by the exclusion from family history – she must unravel the secret of her own mother's origin on her own, even ignoring her prohibitions. This is accompanied by attempts to find identification "outside" home, corrupted by untold trauma, and to engage in the national-patriotic community. This, however, proves a failure when, during a Solidarity movement demonstration in New York, Ewa is "recognized" and excluded from the group of protesters. Similarly to the heroine of Bożena Keff's narrative poem, besides the intergenerational relationship with her mother, the confrontation with the specifically Polish scenery is a crucial identity-forming factor. Usia "is committed, as much as she can" (31) to the Solidarity movement; however, she is quickly spotted and isolated, because "there is no entry to this

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<sup>16</sup> Surprisingly, this way of defining Jewish identity might also be recognized in the contemporary radio drama *Families which are not here anymore: Anonymous Polish Jews* (Polish Radio Program 1, 02.02.2013, by W. Klemm and M. Pabian): protagonists who meet at a psychoanalyst's office describe their situation: "For twelve years I have been... I mean, I will be since I plan to deal with it this year" (my emphasis).

<sup>17</sup> Ewa Kuryluk. *Jestem Australijką*: <http://www.jewish.org.pl/index.php/pl/opinie-komentarze-mainmenu-62/3963-jestem-australijk.html> (accessed: May 2013).

history, for dogs and Jews” (34). The protagonist is left at the border between the private and the public, “she cannot leave home, nor can she stay there” (33) and her gestures are interpreted perversely in the language that the anti-Semitic society forbids her to use: “Once she started crying on the street, she didn’t make it to the gate to hide / people are thinking: *poor woman, surely communists detained her husband*” (33). Polish anti-Semitism, however, becomes in Keff’s work a trigger for a reconciliation between mother and daughter, who find a negative, yet tangible level of identification. After spending an evening in front of the television and watching news reporting on the new statue of Roman Dmowski, the 1930s right-wing politician famous for his anti-Semitism, the mother for the first time recognizes the similarity between her own situation and that of her daughter. Despite the unconvincing happy ending of this inter-generational struggle for memory, Keff’s work aptly illustrates the difficult process of the formation of posttraumatic identity, with no possible reference to either private or collective narratives. Even if an attempt at coming to terms with the past and the present can finally be made, it leaves a bitter taste of the repetitive nature of history.

Tuszyńska describes how in March 1968 her mother once again began to be afraid, and her sense of her family’s safety had previously come from the fact that “they were not called Jews. And at least there was no public acquiescence for it” (381). The question of fear and shame is the third key point in defining local Jewish-Polish postmemory. For Tuszyńska, who did not experience the March events, it is vital to find any pattern that she could use to build her suddenly acquired Jewish identity; *The Family History of Fear*, a saga spanning over several generations back, is supposed to be a sort of autobiographical work, creating positive points of reference, and the publication of the book an overcoming of “both fear and shame, and the inability to tell the truth” (407). An ongoing counterpoint to these efforts, however, remains the shadow of the Holocaust, which itself undermines the ability to build a positive narrative. This affective factor of post-dependent form of identity formation may be accurately illustrated by an example from the early years of post-communist Poland. At the beginning of the 1990s, the newly formed weekly for Polish Jews *Midrasz* encouraged Jews to come out of hiding and offered help: “Perhaps you feel shame because of your Jewish origin? Perhaps you’re afraid? Does it happen that you conceal it?” They did not have to face these problem alone – promised the advertisement. For those who were struggling with their Jewish identity there was now a phone line. The ad ended with the words: “We promise discretion” (Shore 2013: 146). At the same time, almost half of the subscribers to the magazine did not wish to get envelopes in their mailboxes with the visible magazine’s logo. One might, at best, admit to being a Jew – as an admission to guilt, and this is a painful and shameful process. Jewish-Polish postmemory is burdened by a fear of recognition and the heritage that is lacking heroism: the “cursed casket,” as Magdalena Tulli put it, of the Holocaust trauma, received from parents, is an inheritance that one wants to

“avoid at all cost” (74); and the only thing which is inherited and shared by the survivors’ children is shame.

Jewish coming out is, then, a deeply ambiguous and difficult process. “The word Jew is tensile,” says Głowiński, and Jewish identity, historically marked by negative connotations, has multiple references. Free from simple identification clichés, it has an unclear status in respect of the private/public category. The most important feature of this local version of postmemory is its formative potential, which may be understood as a way of emancipatory identity formation, although doubly charged: with the exclusion from the family history and the stigmatization in the public space. The postmemory coming-outs in post-dependent Poland are, therefore, highly individual practices that are not based on a strong ideology, critical, in some way tragic, continuously undermining their own status quo; they rather consist in a series of subjectifications that are based on a simple formation of meaning. Hence, this is the particular emancipatory potential of Jewish-Polish postmemory: excluded from the common processes of national identification, these narratives form weak subjectivities that oscillate on the margins of official histories, revealing their distortions and abuse.

Thus, in the case of the Polish second generation, working through the trauma of the Shoah and creating the posttraumatic identity are always contained within the indispensable context of phenomena resulting from political and social changes. Moreover, a distinctive factor of those practices is their specific geographic characterization: working through the trauma takes place on the territory where the events that caused that trauma actually happened. The experience of contemporary Polish Jews lacks something that is typical of the experience of descendants of Jews who emigrated to the West after the Second World War – the spatial distance from both the sites of torment and the places where their parents’ life before the war took place. For the Polish second generation, as Magdalena Tulli persuasively described it, it suffices to move from any point A to any point B, and “various perturbing geographical names always come up to [...] mind in the same gloomy, stubborn, and intrusive fashion,” names invisible for passengers “who are equipped with better histories” (66).

Finally, the case of Jewish-Polish postmemory shows the ambiguous nature of post-dependence which never brings full redemption: being “post” in relation to something does not eliminate its dangers, but rather oscillates between the emancipatory drive to overcome previous constraints and the critical reflection on their remains in present cultural, social and political life.

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