

Magdalena Howorus-Czajka
University of Gdansk (Poland)
m.howorus-czajka@ug.edu.pl

“True fiction” – the memory and the postmemory of traumatic war events in a picturebook

Summary

The World War II has left an emotional wound, and its direct victims as well as new generations have to cope with it. The main subject of my presentation will be an analysis of methods for presenting World War II history in against the background of a theory of memory and postmemory of war's trauma through the example of picturebooks which were published in Poland during the first two decades of the XXI century. I would like to discuss the main trends in presenting the issues pertaining to the war. The transcription of the Second World War memory into picturebooks is especially interesting for me as a historian of art. I analyse the artistic styles adapted by the artists to express difficult topics, such as the holocaust, the horror of concentrations camps, hunger, fear, loss of family, death. Composition, artistic techniques, colour, vocabulary, typography – these are the tools in the hands of artists through which they can not only tell the story, but also stir up emotions and shape the personality. The picturebook, like other types of art, operates through the language of fiction to tell the truth. Art is one of the languages of historical narration.

Key words: memory, postmemory, Polish picturebook, Polish contemporary art

Słowa kluczowe: pamięć, postpamięć, polska książka obrazkowa, polska sztuka współczesna

World War II has left a wound that has to be faced, not only by its direct victims, but also by succeeding generations. My dissertation will constitute an analysis of ways of rendering stories happening during World War II in confrontation with the theory of memory and postmemory of traumatic war events, using examples of picturebooks available in Poland in the first decades of the 21st century. Therefore, it will be composed of two parts: a theoretical introduction will be followed by examples of specific artistic undertakings.

The term postmemory, which is of key importance for further deliberations, was coined by Marianne Hirsch (1997) and refers to inherited memories.¹ It was conceived

¹ “I use the term postmemory to describe the relationship of the children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they “remember” only as the stories and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right. The term is meant to convey its temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory, its secondary or second-generation memory quality, its basis in displacement, its belatedness. Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection, but through projection, investment, and creation. That is not to say that survivor

for the purposes of discussing the aftermath of the Holocaust, that is the impact genocidal trauma had on the descendants of the victims. We are dealing here literally with inherited memories, that is memories belonging to the following generation. In her deliberations, Hirsch focused on victims of the Holocaust, thus building the area of research. And a photograph became the medium for carrying memories. Of course, Hirsch further argues that the certainty of direct representation is not ultimate. Therefore, her basic task is to show ways in which the actual life of a family clashes with the idealisation of its own image and to demonstrate that dynamic changes in this image may reveal or hide the “unaware optics” of individuals and the family group.² Therefore, a question should be asked about the significance of the visual medium in determining postmemory. In this section, I would like to analyse similarities and differences between a photograph, which for Hirsch served as the stimulant for analysing the postmemory phenomenon, and an illustration in a book, which is a medium of key significance for me.

There have been numerous theoretical publications devoted to photography (e.g. Walden ed. 2008; Benjamin 1996; Barthes 1995; Flusser 1984; Rouillé 2007). One of the most famous and significant books is “On photography” by Susan Sontag in which she pays attention to the role of this medium in teaching us a new visual code – a grammar and an ethics of seeing (Sontag, 1986: 7). Susan Sontag was a renowned and respected American intellectual. Her writings were appreciated by many academics and became highly popular around the world. In my opinion, her essays reveal the unique ability of the author to highlight, or rather pick up, the non-obvious aspects of the obvious. This is illustrated distinctly by the following quote:

Photographs really are experience captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood. To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed (Sontag 1986: 8).

The mental processes indicated here refer indirectly to the question of postmemory – by using imagination, not only are we offered a bit of time travel, but also our fondness for inquiring, learning history, not always realised, is being satisfied. Sontag gives readers another key to understanding photography. It is not a classic methodological set of tools (composition, light, subject), but an understanding of this art through analysis of attitudes towards photography.

Since Hirsch combines discussions about photography with deliberations about the traumatic events of the Holocaust, it induced me to analyse ways in which the Holocaust was rendered in photographs. This topic has been widely presented in academic literature, including publications related to the history of art. One of such texts, on the one hand

memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterises the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that they can neither understand nor re-create” (Hirsch 1999: 8).

² Postmemory theory by Hirsch was presented in an interesting manner by Dąbrowski (2011: 427–429).

touching upon memory, and on the other its artistic representation, is a paper by Patrycja Cembrzyńska *Dogasajęca świeca. Shoah i pamięć konsumenta* [A Candle Burning Out. Shoah and Consumer Memory] (2014). It was based on publications by Janina Struk (2007) and Judith Keilbach (2009) highly important for the discussed topic.

Photography in the theory of cognition and the epistemological role of a photographic image were the subject of a recent publication by Aleksandra Łukaszewicz Alcazar (2014). The author draws attention to realism in photography, a thread well-represented in the literature, that prevailed since the day it was born and influenced beliefs in the 20th century. Does the view about the realistic formula of a photographic image however, apply also today?

Hirsch and her postmemory theory appear to go beyond this manner of thinking about photography, as postmemory is experienced by individuals who were growing up (or have grown up) in a world dominated by the narrative referring to the times before their birth. The very narrative, going towards attempted retrospection and interpretation, builds up the social and historical context and thus provides interpretation going beyond realism. For Hirsch argues that postmemory is in a sense false memory, as it pertains to events not directly experienced. This however, does not undermine the fact that events generating inherited memories, as this is how one may briefly describe the process of creating postmemory, grow into the awareness of subsequent generations, so that they are sensed by their representatives as their own.

The term “postmemory” primarily refers to the experiences of descendants of Holocaust victims. At times, it has been used in relation to societies touched by a group trauma at some historic moment. Therefore, inspired by the deliberations of Marianne Hirsch, and encouraged by Berger’s thought that “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak” (Berger 1997: 7), I would like to analyse picturebooks presenting stories about World War II in relation to postmemory.

The question underlying and becoming the thesis of these deliberations is the following: can we search for postmemory processes still further away from the memory-generating source, that is describing and depicting somebody else’s memories in stories? According to Hirsch’s theory, postmemory develops concentrically – the generation of witnesses of traumatic events is the source, whereas their descendants become subsequent spheres of impact. Therefore, there is a need of ponderable restrictions: there must exist family bonds and family keepsakes, such as e.g. photographs or any other items, which serve as the medium for transferring memories to the next generations, but at the same time they become the source of new memories for the new generation. By the means of the examples below I shall discuss how we will be dealing with a picturebook construed as a paperback publication in which written content is as important as the illustrative component, or even more broadly, with the visual one.

Further in the paper, I shall present books that to a various extent meet the demands of the *picturebook* genre. The range of dependencies between text and illustration will be quite extensive (for some scholars, perhaps too arbitrary), however my goal is not to

provide an analysis by type, but a thematic analysis, and my priority is to track ways of evoking various forms of postmemory.

Since a picturebook may be read by both adults and children, the impact of the book and its incorporated images on the young is a thing that should be considered. Researchers have drawn attention to the educational value of book illustrations and their impact on a child's emotions. Many years ago, Irena Słońska, an educator, noticed the fact that:

The emotional aspect is fundamental for attractiveness of the book and its illustrations. A child as if ‘immerses oneself in the picture’ and has a very personal approach to its content. It becomes the centre around which all representations and feelings revolve. Reality blends with imagination, past experiences come to the fore (Słońska 1977: 167).

These beliefs are confirmed by a literary scholar, Elżbieta Kruszyńska:

In books for the youngest readers, illustrations very often put the world presented by the words in some order, they build a “little world of a child”; pictures substantiate words present in the book (Kruszyńska 2012: 185).

According to modern opinions about the role of illustrations in a picturebook, they appear to become more and more autonomous, by directing the attention towards a symbiotic relationship between an illustration and the text. Such a view is shared by a literary scholar, Iwona Puchalska, who claims that nowadays, an illustration

establishes [...] the relationship between the text and the image in a different manner, not as a dependence or correspondence, but as a dialogue, nearly a separation and sometimes even dominance or discord, competition, polemics, provocation; it emphasises its role as a partner, but also its liberated role in the correspondence between the literary and fine art layer (Puchalska 2007: 198).

The opinion that picturebooks play a very important role in the development of children and young people appears to be very common indeed. An increasing trend of investigating the impact of a picturebook on adult readers is also a source of satisfaction. Those scholars will surely agree with John Berger that “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak” (Berger 1997: 7).

Coming back however, to the major thesis formulated as a question: can we find postmemory in a picturebook? Before I attempt to provide an answer, I would like to analyse the research material, that is picturebooks addressing issues related to World War II which have been released in Poland in recent years.

The human tragedies that took place during World War II are by all means a serious topic not easily handled by a child. Although I do not write these words as a teacher, I strongly believe that such a topic should be dealt with in an extremely sensitive and thoughtful manner. A child too violently presented with the problem may react very rapidly, and this may be harmful to its further development. Therefore, considering this risk,

should we eliminate these issues from history or wait until the reader grows into an adult? These dilemmas are solved by some outstanding publications representing the picturebook genre that, despite addressing difficult issues, get through to children, enriching their understanding of the world and determining their moral stance. I would like to discuss major trends in presenting war in this category of books. As an art historian, I am interested in the formal aspect of transcribing memory of the World War II in a picturebook.

Outstanding examples of books introducing the difficult issue of concentration camps, undoubtedly include *Dym* [Smoke] by Antón Fortes with illustrations by Joanna Concejo (Fortes, Concejo 2011). A unique combination of images and text provides a highly powerful and emotional message. The unusual talent and outstanding intellect of Concejo help us “imagine the unimaginable”,³ as “in order to know something, one needs to imagine it” (Didi-Huberman 2008: 9). The artist amazes the reader with the simplicity of the applied technique – freehand drawings (used scarcely as they have been ousted by computer software). Sometimes she uses colour. The reader immerses himself/herself in the artist’s visions – subtle, allusive, and piercingly accurate, which makes the reader reach the depth of “the unimaginable”.

Another prominent book is the publication by Muzeum Okręgowe [District Museum] in Tarnów entitled *Mietek na wojnie* [Mietek at War] (Gancarz, Karpowicz 2013). Diana Karpowicz and Natalia Gancarz presented the story of a Gypsy boy who together with twenty-three thousand Romanies was transported to KL Auschwitz-Birkenau. The story is told by Mietek. The reader gets to know the story which is getting darker and darker with every subsequent page. The text is accompanied by very telling black-and-white illustrations produced using stencils, drip painting technique or drawn. Colour, which symbolises freedom, appears in the first and last page of the book.

In order to familiarise children with the horrors of war, Joanna Chmielewska used a perverse, yet not obvious procedure. In her book *Pamiętnik Blumki* [Blumka’s Diary] (Chmielewska 2011), with illustrations made as collages, she presents the world as seen by a little girl – one of Janusz Korczak’s wards; the author tells the story of a house at Krochmalna street in pre-war Warsaw. When war breaks out, her voice meaningfully fades away. We learn nothing about her moving to the ghetto and the horrific living conditions. Chmielewska ends this dark story with a page rendering a freight wagon explicitly remembering the day of 6 August 1942 when children from the orphanage together with their guardian were transported to Treblinka death camp. On an empty page, the reader’s attention is riveted by a fountain pen transformed into a yad – a Jewish ritual pointer used to follow Torah text, thus offering an unequivocal interpretation of this illustration through Shoah. The last page is an excerpt from a closed diary, with a suggestion that “a diary is there in order not to forget” and tiny wildflowers called forget-me-nots. This message tells us that it is our duty to remember.

The heroic attitude of Janusz Korczak and similar people in the ghetto served as a source of inspiration for Adam Jaromir (text) and Gabriela Cichowska (illustration) to write the book entitled *Ostatnie przedstawienie panny Esterki* [The Last Show of Miss Esterka] (fig. 1) (Jaromir, Cichowska 2014).

³ Here, I paraphrase the significant polemics of Gérard Wajcman and Georges Didi-Huberman.



Fig. 1. *Ostatnie przedstawienie panny Esterki* [The Last Show of Miss Esterka] by G. Cichowska (2014). Poznań, Media Rodzina

The main character, Estera Winogronówna, is a class tutor who helps children staying in the orphanage at Sienna street discover the amazing world of theatre in the final weeks of their lives, thus making them cherish happy moments which may be their last. Collage-based illustrations (a drawing and attached elements, frottage) recall the air of old photographs. The text, as if typewritten, imitates a document. This operation combines imagination with real historic events. The line between imagined events and their documentation is blurred. By entering this world, the reader is offered real fiction, and gets in touch with postmemory.

The book entitled *Po drugiej stronie okna. Opowieść o Januszu Korczaku* [The Other Side of the Window. The Janusz Korczak Story] (fig. 2) (Czerwińska-Rydel, Łoskot-Cichocka Poważne Studio, 2012) on the other hand, cannot be categorised as a classic picturebook, however owing to the addressed topic and the fact that it impacts the reader also visually, I decided to include it in the discussed collection.

Postmemory feeding on documentation and relativity is approximated by the colourisation of black-and-white photographs (e.g. of Janusz Korczak among other housemasters on a summer camp), or the combination of a drawing presenting the arrangement of rooms in the orphanage and an embedded photograph of beds filling in the rooms. The text, although traditionally arranged across two pages, is enriched with imitated children's notes, e.g. using arrows pointing to footnotes explaining difficult terms such as incendiary bombs. The visual layer is therefore highly significant here.

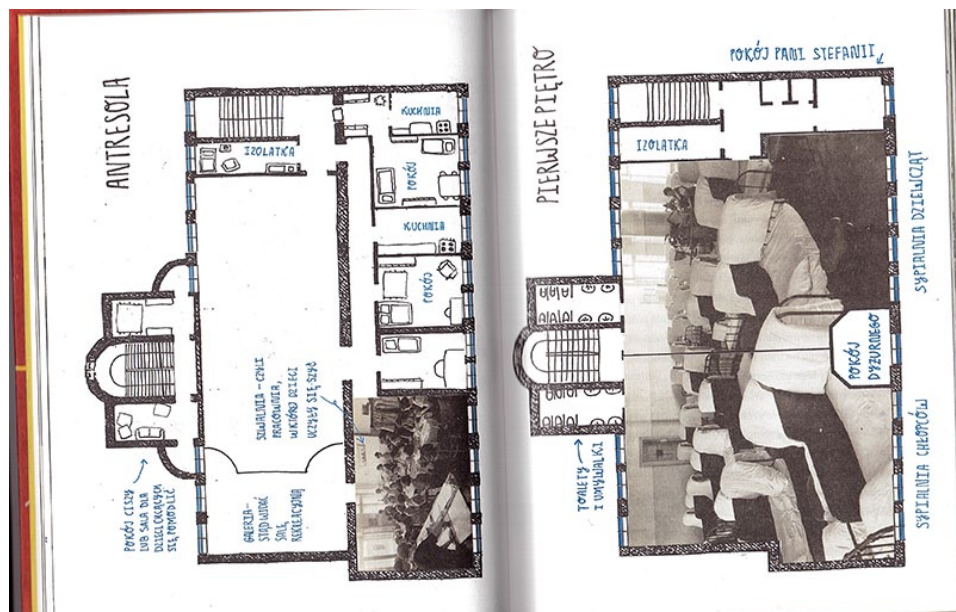


Fig. 2. Po drugiej stronie okna. *Opowieść o Januszu Korczaku* [The Other Side of the Window. The Janusz Korczak Story] by Poważne Studio, D. Łoskot-Cichočka (2012). Warszawa, Muchomor

Jest taka historia. Opowieść o Januszu Korczaku [There is a Story. The Janusz Korczak Story] (Richter-Magnuszewska, Ostrowicka 2012) is another book devoted to this outstanding educator. Perhaps the large number of publications devoted to his name resulted from the resolution adopted by the Sejm [House of Commons] of the Republic of Poland announcing the year 2012 as The Year of Janusz Korczak. The visual layer (although not sparkling with originality owing to references to Chmielewska's style) is based on drawings made using crayons, with added colourful paints and collages.

Bezsенność Jutki [Jutka's Insomnia] (fig. 3) (Combrzyńska-Nogala, Rusinek 2012) tells a story of the Litzmannstadt Ghetto, the second largest ghetto in occupied Poland. The main character in the book is a seven-year-old girl, whose childhood is tainted by the austere living conditions in the ghetto. Daily events happening in the ghetto provoke her to ask difficult questions. Although the book is packed up with text, the visual layer is also of high importance indeed. Handmade drawings, occasionally coloured, convey natural harshness, but also clarity of form; they explain the vision of the world forming in the girl's head.

Such form very subtly builds up the mood and highlights emotions. And this extends to the reader. The reader encounters associations hidden by the artist, e.g. The head of the girl's grandpa reading a book includes references to drawings by Bruno Schulz. Apart from drawings rendering events experienced by the girl, there are also photographs documenting human existence in the Litzmannstadt ghetto – collages using montage photography and secondary negative techniques. Thus, some kind of postmemory is generated in the reader.

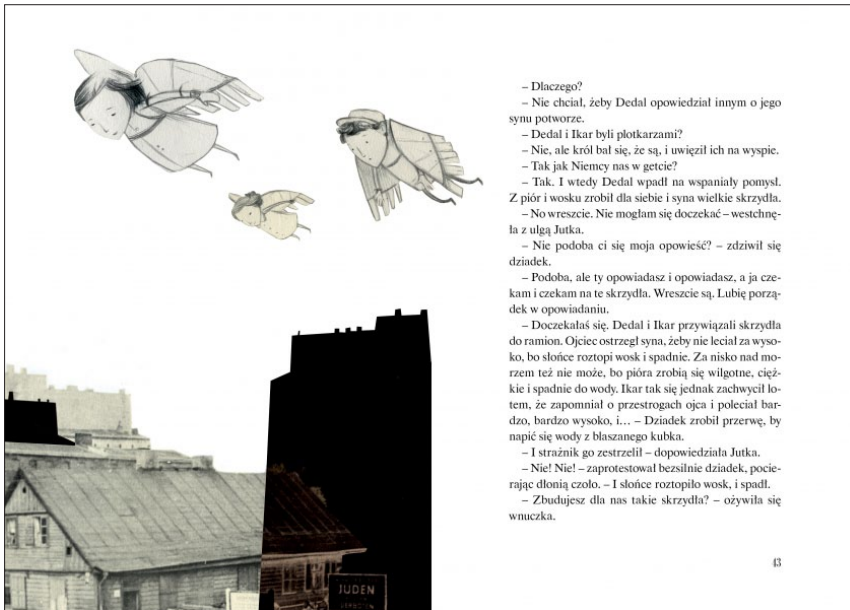


Fig. 3. *Bezsenność Jutki* [Jutka’s Insomnia] by J. Rusinek (2012). Łódź, Literatura

Wojna na pięknym brzegu [War at Joli Bord] (fig. 4) (Grabowski, Rusinek 2014) takes us back to the times when Żoliborz (fr. *joli bord* – a “beautiful river bank”), a district in the city of Warsaw, was under German occupation. It is a family story. The main character in the book is the author’s mother and this confirms the existence of memory bonds. The postmemory element is applied here. The first-person narrative allows readers to learn about the realities of the occupation from the perspective of an adolescent girl: treks for food, raids, hiding Jews, work as a messenger for the Armia Krajowa [Home Army]. An important component providing additional information is the illustrations. Joanna Rusinek trying to convey the atmosphere of Warsaw of that time uses collage combining graphics, drawing, watercolour, and montage photographs. The impact of Chmielewska’s output may be observed in figure 4.

An illustration presenting beautiful flowering trees in the streets of Warsaw set against black smoke from the burning ghetto is particularly meaningful. In this case, the artist’s vision was clear of para-documentary tricks. In other places however, this trend prevails such as e.g. in montages or on a page illustrating the album of family photos.

Books by Joanna Papuzińska and Maciej Szymonowicz, two writers working in tandem, such as *Asiunia* (a diminutive form of the name Joanna) (Papuzińska, Szymanowicz 2011) and *Mój tato szczęściarz* [My Dad the Lucky Chap] (Papuzińska, Szymanowicz 2013) are examples of publications describing the dramatic stories of people living in Nazi-occupied Warsaw. These books will surely surprise the reader with their illustrations – pure vivid colours and no signs of any para-documentary tricks. This discord between



Fig. 4. *Wojna na pięknym brzegu* [War at Joli Bord] by J. Rusinek (2014). Łódź, Literatura

the adopted visual convention and the content is by no means accidental. Szymanowicz decided to use the original and somewhat risky strategy of dispensing with nostalgic sepia colours. While pondering over the reasons for this operation, two explanations come to my mind. The first one is narration from the point of view of a child – a participant and a witness, and the second is narration for a child, a contemporary reader. In the first case, we are dealing with repeatable relations between people who, despite having traumatic memories of the Warsaw Uprising 1944, treat it as the time of great pride as they fought taking up arms against the hateful occupier. When the story is told by a child, the reader should adopt a child's point of view where the world is often illusory and surreal, e.g. an illustration in which a boy uses a slingshot to attack German soldiers running away (*My Dad the Lucky Chap*). *Asiunia*, more visually nostalgic and reflective, presents the inner strength of a child who despite experiencing huge suffering is looking for bright moments in life. Therefore, we see the main character terrified and lonely after her house had been demolished, but soon the same girl has the strength to feel the joy arising from fun.

A similar operation was performed by Szymanowicz while producing the illustrations for *Syberyjskie przygody Chmurki* [Siberian Adventures of the Cloudlet] (Combrzyńska-Nogała, Szymanowicz 2014). This book reveals another painful page of Polish history. On September 17, 1939, that is seventeen days after Poland was invaded by the German army from the west, the Soviet Union attacked the country from the east to take over nearly half of Poland's territory. In February 1940, Soviet authorities began mass deportations of

Poles (mainly the intellectuals, servicemen, and their families) deep into Russia. In this manner, the heroine of this story, Ania, found herself in Siberia. She discovers this hostile land with the eyes of a child and she understands only selected things. Her point of view is conveyed through illustrations. Ania tells her story in no methodological way, failing to consider facts she could not know or understand at that time. The authors favours childish memories over the scientific point of view, incarnating the processes of postmemory which is by no means objective. Szymanowicz as an illustrator is very original and free from any borrowings. The form, most probably built up using IT tools, appears to be inspired by the 3D animations we can encounter in cinemas.

An example of a publication which through mediated narrative meets postmemory requirements is a book *Wojtek spod Monte Cassino* [Wojtek of Monte Cassino] (fig. 5) presenting the story of a bear who was adopted by Polish soldiers from the army of general Władysław Anders, and who accompanied them along the entire combat trail from Persia to Italy (Lasocki, Bajtlik 2012). Wiesław Lasocki collected the stories about this unique animal named Wojtek directly from his brothers-in-arms. Therefore, the feature-like content takes the form of a tale which is enjoyed not only by children, but by their parents as well. Illustrations perfectly complement the substance, and they also evoke highly satisfactory aesthetic impressions. Jan Bajtlik used the stencil-based technique. The book ends with chronicle notes and archive photographs.



Fig. 5. *Wojtek spod Monte Casino* [Wojtek of Monte Cassino] by J. Bajtlik (2012). Warszawa, Muchomor

Summing up the above deliberations, I have come to the conclusion that the key determinant in solving the problem of the existence of postmemory in a picturebook medium is the decision as to whether we shall allow the expansion of the term ‘postmemory’ to include:

- postmemory of group traumas, not only the Holocaust, but also tragedies of other nations during World War II, other traumatic events (e.g. victims of other wars, such as e.g. the civil war in the former Yugoslavia (1991–1995) or terrorist attacks),
- expanding the medium – in this case, the picturebook. Illustration in a book, just as any other works of fine art conveys emotions, intentions, or even the interpretations of the author. Photography does this in a completely different way, with a different scope, and by using other means. Family keepsakes have a completely different significance. It should be noted as well, that the discussed picturebooks describe the experiences of people participating in specific historic events. However they do not constitute documents according to scholars. The stories presented in these books may be referred to as “real fiction”.

Such changes will consequently lead to postmemory transferring the memory of traumatic experiences/memories to subsequent generations, without any limitations of family ties, however with their extension to communities – spiritual descendants, who are highly sensitive and emphatic, and who in preserving the memory see the chance for building a better future, since, as Cicero put it, *Historia vitae magistra est* [History is life’s teacher].

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