Each Generation and Its Own Memoirs? The Jewish “Conscious Self” in Three Ashkenazi Ego Documents

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Dear Ruth, daughters and members of the Hundert family, and esteemed colleagues:

Three memoirs have been published in Hebrew in the past few years in Jerusalem —two by men and one by a woman, two written originally in Hebrew and one in Yiddish. They cover more than 300 years in the history of Ashkenazi Jewry, crossing geopolitical borders that, until the Holocaust, stretched from Germany and Alsace in the western part of the continent to the Austrian and Russian empires in the east.

The memoirs of Glikl bas Leyb of Hammel, a pious businesswoman who was graced with writing talent, were published by Chava Turniansky in 2006. The chapters of this memoir, written in Alt Yiddish between 1691 and 1721 [and including copious material about the history of the author’s family in earlier decades], were published long after they were originally written. Family memoirs were not considered a genre worthy of publication at the time this work was written.

In 2023, two more memoirs, these from the eighteenth century, were edited and annotated by our late colleague Gershon David Hundert, and published in Hebrew. The first of these, and the second of our ego documents under discussion today, was penned by wine merchant Dov Birkental of Bolechow, Western Ukraine, who provided an account of his life and commercial and public activity toward the end of the century in which he lived. However, it took until the early twentieth century for parts of it to start appearing in print.

The third autobiographical work, written in the twentieth century by the Odessa businessman, writer, and linguist Isaac Spivakoff in his ninth decade, enjoyed a better fate. The Hebrew manuscript of his memoir *My Boat on the Ocean Waves* was preserved by members of the family for some fifty years until the author’s granddaughter presented it to the rabbi of the city of Mendoza, Argentina, who published a Spanish translation of it. The Hebrew original was published in Jerusalem a little more than two years ago, including an introduction written by me.

Anyone reading these three works in sequence will find the multifaceted historical-cultural world of Ashkenazi Jewry unfurled before them. It was to this world that Professor Gershon Hundert devoted his influential scholarly and educational lifework—an enterprise of investigation, understanding, and teaching. The remarks to follow are dedicated to the blessed memory of Gershon—a close personal friend, a beloved colleague, and a loyal supporter of the Israeli academic community, with whom we were privileged to work for many years.

The historian Natalie Zemon David [who passed away in autumn 2023] positioned Glikl bas Leyb Hammel, a woman who left behind an ego document, a rarity in her time and place, within a comparative study of three creative and highly accomplished women: a Catholic nun, a Jewish merchant, and a Protestant painter and naturalist—three women of different religious backgrounds who lived and acted in the decidedly male world of Early Modern Europe. By deciding to place the Jewish businesswoman, whose economic activity spanned the expanses of Central and Western Europe, alongside two Christian women, also quite active in their fields, Davis blurred the boundaries between inward-facing Jewish history and the wider European history. It was within the “external” cultural and economic contexts of the latter that Jewish men and women operated in the European sphere. Her parallel investigation of the life stories of the three women yielded superb and insightful case studies for comparing early modern Jewish societies with Europe’s Protestant and Catholic societies. In contrast, in my remarks, I will suggest different key themes and a different chronological and cultural perspective for comparing Glikl’s life story with Birkental’s and Spivakoff’s autobiographical accounts. The concise comparison that I will present spans autobiographies that link three centuries and that cross the line historians have drawn between the Early Modern Era and the Modern Era. It also traverses the theoretical boundaries between the two branches of the Ashkenazi Diaspora: the Westjuden and the Ostjuden.

First, I would like to address the previous publication dates of these three autobiographical works, the circumstances of their exposure to a readership beyond the family circle, and the languages in which they were published. Turniansky aptly defined the incarnations from pen to print of Glikl’s memoirs—incarnations that stretched from the late seventeenth century to our very day—as “a chapter in cultural history.” Indeed, the dates, circumstances, and manner of their publication teach quite a bit about the transformations in the status of the memoir genre that unfolded in the eyes of the writers and their readers.

Copies of Glikl’s memoir were handed down by her descendants from generation to generation. They were preserved as family documents for nearly 150 years before being exposed to scholars’ prying eyes and wide circulation. Even the German translation published in Vienna in 1910 by Berta Pappenheim, an offspring of the family and a well-known feminist in her time, was, in the words of Turniansky, “a private project meant to disseminate among family members, in a language all of them could understand, memoirs that were completed some 200 years previously.” The original Yiddish text had been published earlier in 1896, and even then it was not accessible to the public at large because it appeared in Alt Yiddish, a language no longer widely understood among the Jews of Germany. Only in the twentieth century, when this unique text began to be considered a valuable historical source, a work rich in educational values, a literary classic of an importance that transcends the boundaries of time and place, and a constitutive document in the history of Ashkenazi Jewish culture, did translations of the work into various languages appear.

The fate of Dov Ber Birkental’s autobiographical manuscripts—*Divrey Binah* and *Memoires* (the original title of the latter work is missing to this day)—was not much different. The public took little interest in them, to put it mildly, in the days preceding the Jewish cultural renaissance that swept the lands of Eastern Europe in the “long nineteenth century.” Several generations passed between the writing of these texts and their publication. Unlike Glikl, however, the *Galitsianer* wine merchant, blessed with a well-developed historical consciousness, was keenly eager to publish his writings. This is evident at least in the case of *Divrey Binah,* which describes in minute detail the memoirist’s role in the Jewish struggle against the Frankist heresy. This we adduce from two letters from the early nineteenth century, in one of which a leader of the Lwów community attests to the author’s mission: “To record all of these events in written letters and etch [them] in an iron pen and lead, so that it may be a keepsake for generations to come.”

 Birkental’s writings ultimately landed in the library of the Maskil Joseph Perl, where the historian and geographer Abraham Jacob Brawer discovered them in the early twentieth century. Brawer, a future memoirist himself, recognized the immense value of the writings and published parts of them in the journal *Ha-Shilo’ach* between 1917 and 1921. The manuscripts of the memoirs made their way to a library in London; one of them was first brought to the knowledge of the scholarly community in 1913 and was published in Hebrew and in English and Yiddish translations in 1922. Since then, the two texts have occupied a central place in the historiography of East European Jewry.

The memoirs of Isaac Spivakoff, as I noted above, waited only fifty years until they were redeemed from oblivion. They were published in Spanish between 2015 and 2018 and in their original language, Hebrew, in 2022.

Why did a wealthy businesswoman decide to begin writing her memoirs in 1691, when she was forty-five years old, and for whom did she commit her life story to writing? What kind of readers did an elderly wine merchant envision when he labored over his autobiographical works in the early days of Austrian rule in Galicia in the 18th century? What inspired a former Odessa industrialist to write an autobiography in 1962, upon reaching the age of eighty-five? What do these three autobiographical works created in three different time periods within the Ashkenazi cultural sphere, a sphere that transcended national borders?

Glikl, addressing herself and her descendants, described the very experience of writing as a kind of therapy. She explicitly acknowledged her awareness of the therapeutic value of writing a work of a subjective-personal nature intended solely for the eyes of the small family circle. The writing experience, apart from being part of her religious world, helped her to cope with a socioeconomic crisis in which the stability of her business, undermined by the death of her husband, was identified with the male authority who had passed on. Turniansky also proposes that the memoir be viewed as a genealogy of sorts. Thus Glikl writes in a direct appeal to her family’s posterity: “My dear children, I write this to you lest today or tomorrow your children or grandchildren come and not know their family. Therefore, I present you with these matters briefly so that you [in the plural] will know from which people you have come.” Although Glikl clearly declares that she does not intend to leave her offspring with a *musser bukh*, the chapters of her memoir contain short and long ethical passages.

The contents, form, and style of the work reveal the influence of a range of textual models. They reveal the deep social and cultural involvement of the author, an offspring of the wealthiest merchant class in the Ashkenazi lands, who came into close contact with court Jews, as well as with the practical life, worldview, and customs of the social group to which she belonged. In the memoir, one may detect stylistic, formal, and thematic echoes of various types of writing in Alt Yiddish and other languages, including community records, personal chronicles, urban merchants’ account books, and genealogies. Although Glikl does not proclaim it explicitly, her unique persona, that of a Jewish woman of the Early Modern Period, emerges clearly from the text.

The nexus of commercial ledgers and autobiographical writing and the presence of the memoirist’s “conscious self” also surfaces in Birkental’s writings. Here, however, unlike in Glikl’s text, it is stated overtly and clearly. Hundert hypothesized that the Galician wine dealer’s memoirs originated in a commercial ledger of some kind, in which the author inserted stories and accounts of events in his life and developments in his era: “He may have written his book to prepare his offspring for the wine business, since almost half of the book in our possession is devoted to his activities in this trade.” However, alongside commercial guidance for his children and commemoration of the family history, Birkental intended to produce two history books in these works. These were to combine his personal story, the story of his success in business, in the community, and in the religious domain, in which he reports having played an active and influential role. He skillfully made good use of his exceptional linguistic knowledge he had acquired informally for the purposes of diplomacy, establishing commercial relations, and engaging in written and oral religious debate and apologetics. In a certain sense, by taking the Jewish side in religious polemics and defending Judaism, Birkental uses the writings of Christians to present Jewish readers with an alternative, or counter-history to the history of the Christian world [!]. However, his very exposure to Christian writings and, not least,his publication of translations of them, albeit in a “censored” and “edited” form, were, as Hundert discerned well, acts of subversion against the religious-linguistic-corporate world in which he had been raised, educated, and operated. He did not flinch from admitting, more than once, that he also found good and correct things in the writings of gentile authors here and there, and it is evident that he had internalized something of the common political discourse in pre-partition Poland.

While Glikl, an opinionated and prodigiously active woman, places the men in her family at the center of her personal biography and her economic endeavors, the “conscious self” developed by Birkental, a man of action and initiative, affirms his business skill, linguistic capabilities, and commercial successes time and time again. Just the same, his memoirs repeatedly point to the influential role of Jewish merchants’ wives in running the businesses of their husbands, fathers, and brothers, and in making family decisions. Sometimes he accuses the wives of making misguided decisions or of fanning conflicts and disputes. He repeats this approach in the context of women’s Torah education. For example, he does not hide his amazement in his account of a woman steeped in Talmud who helped him learn a difficult *sugya.*

Common to the writings of Glikl and Birkental, both composed in the style of a merchant’s personal notebook, is their detailed attention to the financial worth of assets, income and outgo, proceeds of loans, and profit-and-loss. This reflects the bourgeoisie spirit that intertwined wealth, family lineage, social status, and community activity in the portrayal of an individual personality.

Unlike Glikl and Birkental, Spivakoff composed his autobiography at a time when the bookshelf of Jewish memoirs was creaking under hundreds of ego documents in Gentile and Jewish languages. From this standpoint, his writings, considering these other works, are most valuable for the historian as a serial rather than an individual record. At the time Spivakoff wrote, the memoir genre was flourishing and attracting widespread public interest. The author was acutely aware of its modern nature and was sensitive to the influence of European literary conventions on the form and content of his writing. Spivakoff addressed this directly, presenting two exemplary autobiographies in European literature that centered on the conscious shaping of the individual’s image: “The most complete and handsome autobiographies are of Rousseau and of Goethe, so the famous writers say. I think that every cultured man […] has important moments that deserve to be revealed and publicized.” Even though Spivakoff, like his two predecessors, paints tableaus in the life of a Jewish businessman, it is hard to discern any formal or thematic influence of commercial notebooks in his writing. He constructs the first part of his autobiography as a coming-of-age novel (a *Bildungsroman*), whereas the second part reads like a “tale of migration.”

Three centuries of the lives of three different individuals in three different

milieus that hosted three different manifestations of Ashkenazi Jewish culture find expression in the memoirs. Glikl and her family live in several urban communities in the Western Ashkenazi Diaspora, Birkental inhabits a shtetl in Western Ukraine and sojourns in the big city, Lwów, on business; Spivakoff is born in the great commercial city Odessa, site of the second-largest Jewish community in the Russian Empire, and lives there until after the Bolshevik Revolution. Israel Halperin (1910–1971), the scholar of premodern Ashkenazi Jewry, notes three sociocultural elements shared by the two branches of Ashkenaz:

**language:** Yiddish, which served not only as the vernacular but also as a written language within a bilingual framework alongside *loshn hakoydesh,* the Holy Tongue;

**religious custom**: *minhag Ashkenaz-Poyln,* the German-Polish custom, which spread from Central Europe to the eastern reaches of the continent; and

**community organization:** the semi-autonomous kahal, which was structured, functioned, and related with the authorities according to a Central European corporate-feudal model.

These three characteristics attained their greatest influence in Ashkenazi society and culture toward the middle of the eighteenth century and began to weaken, or to change, as the economic, political, and cultural transformations of the modern era intensified. What do these three elements of the Ashkenazi Diaspora, noted by Israel Halperin, have to do with memoir-writing, an art that centers on the life story of an individual and recalls the experience of their interactions with family and community? The traditional bilingualism of vernacular and *loshn hakoydesh*—in which the two languages intermingled spontaneously as they served in agreed-upon gender, class, and genre functions; the **religious custom**(as a socio-cultural reflection of the total presence of the halakha and the mystical teachings in quotidian life); and **the community order,**which rested on family lineage, economic class, and **Torah authority** (*Yikhs, gelt, un toyre*). In the early Early Modern Era, these were the three integrated channels along which the strength of the organic bond between the Jewish individual and the urban public in a corporative feudal world acted or was acted upon.

Glikl rarely addresses the corporative communal backdrop

into which her life story with her two husbands is intertwined. However, it does exist and constantly exerts an influence in the background. Belief in the sanctified status of the community did not deter Glikl from describing controversies, disputes, antipathies, and competition for wealth and influence among members and women of the Metz community. All of this is clearly reflected in Glikl’s descriptions of family life, which she inserts into her reports on her two husbands’ risky economic activity within the community framework of the cities in which they lived. For example, she describes her second husband’s economic failure and reports that the King of France sent a letter intended for the community of Metz and instructed her “to have them summon you before the kahal. […] If these Jews wish to remain in Lorraine, their Rock and Redeemer should preserve in the Pinkasim of the kahal that they will no longer have burger rights in Metz; in brief, they [the Balebatim / “householder” class [הוספתי] ] were very badly off.” All of this she wrote in Yiddish. However, when she later comes to the sad death of her unfortunate husband following this affair, she expresses her profound religious faith in the connection between the kahal’s activity and Divine providence—using Yiddish mixed *loshn hakoydesh.*

Birkental, immersed in the affairs of the Bolechow community, describes in

his memoirs, written in Ashkenazi Hebrew, a similar relationship among members of the community, leaders of the kahal, offices of the royal authorities, and the Polish nobility. He boasts of his personal success in deceiving the Council of the Four Lands and the Polish Royal Exchequer in order to spare the Jews of Bolechow from a financial loss. He describes all this, and much more, uninhibitedly. All this is on the economic and *realpolitik* levels. Concurrently, at the level of intellect and creed where the consciousness of a member of an ancient ethnic-religious community is revealed, Birkental embellishes the Jewish autonomy, likens it to the self-rule that the Jews enjoyed in Babylonia in the Talmudic era, and damns the royal government for having dissolved the Council of the Four Lands in 1764.

He believes, and knows in practice, that the semi-autonomous councils in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth enjoyed a status equal to that of the parliaments of the Polish nobility—representing the nation and being considered a nation (*narod* in Polish). [Incidentally, in Latin documents from the eighteenth century, the Council of the Four Lands was called the *Natio* or *Universitas Judaeorum.*] His “conscious self” inextricably meshes with the corporate body that preserves, by God’s will, the separate existence of the Jewish nation. In his later years, this activist, multi-talented, and accomplished community member witnessed the subjugation of the Jewish corporative body to centralized Austrian rule and, afterward, to its formal eradication. Although he writes favorably about the Enlightened Absolutist regime, between the lines, the reader senses his displeasure over the dissipation of the old feudal corporative order in which the personal story of this successful and influential ego is woven.

Spivakoff, born ninety years after the dissolution of the Council of the Four

Lands, was already born into a post-corporative sociocultural reality. The kahal had been officially disbanded in Russia in 1844, thirty years before his birth. The allegiance of the Jewish entrepreneurs to Russia’s imperial rule, which his ancestors had shared, was put to the test by the Tsarist regime’s anti-Jewish policies. The personal episodes that he committed to writing in faraway Argentina in new Odessa Hebrew [and indeed, not in *loshn hakoydesh*!] reveal experiences from an era in which the old corporate complexion of the premodern nation swiftly lost its hard edge in all its manifestations—religious, socioeconomic, and linguistic. Spivakoff is aware of the magnitude of the change, which he experiences as a product of the big city, and he is an intellectual participant and Zionist political activist in the processes that crystallize an alternative imperial collective national-cultural identity.

And what about the languages in which the three texts were written? Glikl, educated mainly in Yiddish, was not fluent in *loshn hakoydesh* but was able to access materials from religious literature through the medium of Yiddish literature. Although she had not received a Torah education, which was reserved for men only in premodern Ashkenazi society, her knowledge apparently did not exceed that of other upper-class women in Ashkenaz communities. Her memoir does attest that she was able to acquire considerable Torah knowledge from the corpus available on the Yiddish bookshelf. Her decision to write in Yiddish was only natural under the conditions of the bilingual system in which she had been raised and educated.

Birkental was born and raised in a similar bilingual milieu, but unlike Glikl, as a man, he was privileged to receive a Torah education of the kind imparted to sons of wealthy householder-class families in the communities of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The elderly wine merchant chose to write his works in an Ashkenazi Hebrew replete with terms and concepts drawn from a panoply of languages including East European Yiddish. The influence of the East European Yiddish vernacular on his Hebrew is highly evident. The decisions Glikl and Birkental made about in which language to write reflected the place and roles of the two languages in the Ashkenazi corporate culture. In neither case were their decisions ideological or political; they represented the socio-linguistic norm in the corporatist society of the Early Modern Era. That Spivakoff, an exile from the Russian Empire, chose Modern Hebrew and not Yiddish—a language of which he disapproved intellectually—or Russian, the language of his high school studies in Odessa, was emphatically political and ideological. It represented what had survived—and had been born—from the premodern Ashkenazi bilingual culture, against which he had consciously rebelled by the time he reached adolescence.

As we have noted, these three memoirs were written by urban Jewish businesspeople, successful entrepreneurs in the fields of finance, commerce, and manufacturing, who lived and operated during various stages of the development of the capitalist economy in different parts of Europe. The three authors devote considerable space to their education and the sources of knowledge that prepared them for the challenges of life as members of a religious minority in diverse ethno-religious environments. Within these milieus they were destined, in accordance with their education and family background, to pursue risky business careers. Common to all three of them is the inclusion of their economic activity in their accounts of personal and family life, their mobility across the expanses of the continent, and the impact of years of business experience on their worldviews and writing styles. Glikl, like others of her generation and class, measures material affairs and spiritual values in financial terms. For example, she likens the recording of the performance and violation of Jewish commandments to debit and credit entries in a balance sheet. She rarely describes objects, pictures, furniture, or even the houses where she had lived. Is this absence of material reality in her memoirs a form of “alienation” between object and person, the kind attributed to the transition from a feudal economy to a capitalist one? Or does it represent a literary convention of her time, a zeitgeist of her era, and perhaps a conscious decision by the author, as Turniansky hypothesizes?

Birkental, who enjoyed entrée to the homes of nobles and merchants, also measured the world in terms of monetary values. In contrast to Glikl, he provides abundant descriptions of objects, including works of art, and sets their prices in a personal and emotional context. For example, he describes in minute detail and with undisguised pride a ritual object that he had ordered from goldsmiths in Lwów and notes the price of each of its components. This kind of personal relation to the works of artists and crafters suited the urban corporate culture that still prevailed in the Kingdom of Poland on the eve of the country’s partitioning.

Spivakoff was schooled and raised in an explosive Odessan milieu that churned with keen business competition, aggressive capitalism, a dense cauldron of ethnic cultures, and age-old religious traditions that could not be integrated. However, the memoirist, a successful dye manufacturer and supplier of oils on a pan-imperial scale, did not devote his autobiography to a description of his business achievements and failures. This entrepreneur, who had grown rich and led a way of life at home that typified the Jewish bourgeoisie in the large cities of Tsarist Russia on the eve of World War I, admits to his readers: “Indeed, I devoted myself to trade and industry for a living. They did not give my will and my life total fulfillment, but I made a living from these businesses, did I not?” In the spirit of the modern autobiographies that many of his contemporaries (especially those drawn to socialist ideas) wrote, he frowns on total devotion to business and exudes an anti-capitalist spirit with romantic undertones. He attests that he does not identify with any political party or movement advocating a platform of social radicalism, and his grudge against these currents grows in the aftermath of what he experienced in his hometown, Odessa, under Bolshevik rule. However, the memoir is dominated by an ambivalence that, on the one hand, sanctifies the objects of home in a *balebatish* [householder-class] [הוספתי] spirit and smiles on economic success, and, on the other hand, frowns on the influence of wealth and property on relations between men and women, parents, and children. It also downplays the role of money in creating a poem, literature, painting, and music.

In Glikl’s family, women and men did acquire foreign languages and adopted leisure pursuits that were prominent among the upper classes of non-Jewish urban society. However, mastering European languages, like studying poetry or a musical instrument, was considered— at least in Glikl’s eyes—legitimate due to their usefulness in securing economic needs. A relative who had learned French and keyboard music is remembered fondly by Glikl because the young woman sang and played the clavichord for upper-class Christian guests who had come to redeem a pledge. Not only did she entertain them during their visit, but she also thwarted a robbery in her father’s house because she understood the language spoken by the robbers. Glikl says nary a word about the cultural importance of knowing a foreign language or studying poetry and musical performance apart from quoting something one of the robbers said: “[Her father] did something very useful and invested his money well when he made sure that his daughter would learn French.”

In contrast, playing the piano in a bourgeois Jewish home in Odessa in the days leading up to the Bolshevik Revolution, was both a conscious and externalized manifestation of acculturation and a concrete material expression of the bourgeois reality. In one chapter of his memoir, written in exile in Argentina, Spivakoff documents the cultural devastation that the Bolsheviks wrought in the cosmopolitan city on the Black Sea coast. He devotes several impassioned lines to, among other things, the confiscation by the new revolutionary authorities of musical instruments from bourgeois homes and Christian and Jewish houses of prayer in Odessa, including the piano that his daughter played. As he searched for the looted instrument, the owner of the piano reached a government warehouse. There, he says, he saw some fifty pianos that the government thieves had appropriated from other citizens—and not only pianos but also organs from houses of worship and the city’s Great Synagogue. At one of his stops, he was told: “Comrade! You would do better to leave your piano in the Communists’ hands, lest in your ‘arrogance’ you end up missing the head on your shoulders.” Confiscation of the organ, a prominent symbol of the Odessa group’s tendencies to integrate into Western culture, like confiscation of the piano, a musical instrument considered a domestic cornerstone of Central European bourgeois culture (according to the sociologist Max Weber) and the private property of an affluent Odessa Jew, seemed akin to the “destruction of the Temple” in Isaac Spivakoff’s eyes. Indeed, he described the event as “a second Ninth of Av in my home.” He also saw it as the destruction of the urban social order of the bourgeoisie: “Many houses, solid buildings, were razed to their foundations for no reason whatsoever.”

Let us sum up now: a God-fearing businesswoman from Ashkenaz, a wine importer and pillar of the community from Galicia, and an Odessa manufacturer lover of Zion who emigrated to Argentina all bequeathed to us three ego documents that capture some three hundred years of the Ashkenazi Diaspora culture. These documents invite the contemporary historian to track, from a comparative perspective, the sweeping changes in individual, familial, and social life in the Ashkenazi cultural sphere from the Early Modern Era to the aftermath of World War II. This inquiry reveals the persistence of the pre-modern affinity between the consciousness of self-identity of men and women, the nature of family relations among spouses, parents, and children, and formal or voluntary membership in a distinct and separate ethno-religious corporate entity. It points to a change that gradually transformed the nature of relations between Jews and their surroundings. This change, first evidenced among families of the economic elite in the communities of the Western Ashkenazi Diaspora back in the seventeenth century, continued to spread in subsequent centuries in the urban spaces of East European Jewry. It gave rise, as Spivakoff’s memoir so clearly shows, to a wealth of new Jewish identities that simultaneously combined historical and cultural continuity with manifestations of rebellion against the old corporate reality. The memoirs of the refugee from Odessa were neither unique nor exceptional in their generation and place, as were those of Glikl and Birkental. They were one link in a corpus of multilingual writings by his contemporaries who documented the designing of innovative metamorphoses of the “conscious self” —a “self” that consciously repositions itself as part of a collective post-corporate, ethnic-national-cultural Jewish identity.

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