

# Between *Stamm* and *Volk*: On German Cross-Border Cultural Cooperation in Interwar Silesia

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## Abstract:

*The paper analyses history of an informal group of German intellectuals, dedicated to cultural events and publishing activities in Silesia between 1925–1939. The article focuses on relation between regionalism, ethnic nationalism and state loyalty in connection to changing political and economic situation, mainly in reaction on rise of Nazism. The topic is seen in the context of German understanding of Silesian identity and its role in German nation. Another goal of the research is to map the ties of the activists to cultural and educational institutions. The paper is based on primary archival sources and journalism of the examined period.*

## Keywords:

**Silesia, Nationalism, Nazism, Identity, Germany**

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After the Great War, Silesia belonged to regions significantly affected by border changes and conflicts during 1919–1921). German communities lived in Czechoslovak, German and Polish parts of the historical territory (Kamiński 2001, Wilson 2010). In both Czechoslovakia and Poland, German population suddenly lost traditional political, cultural and economic dominance and searched new methods of pursuing own aims and keeping ties to Germany.

This paper focuses on a specific example of noninstitutionalised cultural cooperation of German-speaking population of Silesia with regard to situation in Czechoslovakia and Germany. It attempts to describe and analyse the background and motivation of organisers and their relation to state authorities and “professional” educational and cultural institutions. The paper is based mainly on primary interwar archival sources and press. It is important to point

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out, that both German wartime narrative, as well as post-war Czech and Polish narratives sometimes tended to overestimate the alleged continuity of German-Silesian cultural activities and interpreted it simply as an effort to unify Silesia under German (and therefore Nazi) rule (Birke, 1938, Gierach, 1938, Popiołek 1964, Gawrecká 2006, Hahnová 2008). Significant differences between nationalist and autonomist viewpoints, role of religion and many local and regional particularities were often neglected by some authors.

In general, during the interwar period, Silesian intellectuals on both sides of the border could rely on network of both personal and institutional contacts and partnerships. Many artists – painters and sculptors – often worked for customers from Czechoslovakia, as well as Germany. Lot of young men and women studied on the foreign side of the border, mainly in church seminaries (e.g. in Vidnava) or in specialised agricultural and economic schools (e.g. in Svobodné Heřmanice or Opava). Lots of intellectuals in Czech Silesia were born in Germany or Austria, many studied in Vienna or Berlin (Pelc – Šopák – Šústková, 2011, Kirsch 2014). Tourist associations in mountainous areas often included members from both countries. Moreover, the borders of church administration did not match the state borders, so many Christians in Czechoslovak part of Silesia subjected to archiepiscopate in Breslau, while part of German Upper Silesia was subordinated to archbishops of Olomouc. The archdiocese of Breslau also belonged to influential land owners and employers in Czech Silesia (Smith 2014). Existence of such economic, cultural and personal ties helped to create and maintain conditions for cross-border cooperation, despite political changes after 1918.

To understand the background of Silesian cultural festivities, it was important to briefly describe, how Silesian identity was understood in German-speaking communities. Technically, we can speak about two concepts of “Silesia-ness”, a nationalist and an autonomist one. While German nationalists saw Silesians as one of “the eight old German tribes”<sup>2</sup>, which was “fulfilling its mission on German East” (Gawrecká 2006), the autonomists described Silesians as a significant and individual ethnic and cultural entity. In their viewpoint, German and Slavic influences in Silesia were mixed on such level, that it was impossible to simply merge with Germans, Czechs or Poles. The autonomists recognized catholic faith and labour as the most important values, while the question of ethnicity was secondary (Hitze 2002, Karch 2018, Weger 2017, Wilson 2010). Many autonomists in Upper Silesia felt that the importance of local industry and (mostly Catholic) working class was not enough appreciated by (mostly Lutheran) authorities in Berlin.

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2 In German context, the term „tribe“ (*Stamm*) serves to describe an ethnic group or a distinctive part of the whole nation (*Volk*).

In many ways, the autonomist movement was technically pro-German. Although they refused ethnic nationalism, most of the autonomists preferred German culture and respected German traditions. In general, autonomists saw Silesia as specific, but integral part of Germany. As well as Josef Koždoň's Silesian People's Party in Czechoslovakia after the Great War, the Upper Silesian autonomists stood against Polish territorial claims (Gawrecki 2017). Due to continuous secularisation of public life, the autonomist opposition against Prussian "state Lutheranism" became less important after the Great War. A pragmatic alliance of "traditional" liberal nationalists, autonomists and even moderate socialists can be witnessed during the era of border conflicts in 1918–1921 (Karch 2018, Kolářová – Kolář 2022, Wilson 2010).

The need to cultivate the cultural cooperation was underlined by border changes after 1918, when Germany lost Hlučín territory, gained by Czechoslovakia, and part of Upper Silesia, which became part of Poland (Kamiński 2001, Plaček 2007). However, the feeling of "Slavic threat" and the nostalgia for lost territories was not the only impulse. Another reason for Silesian cultural festivities was the endeavour to face extensive changes of whole society. Such activities reacted on modernity, urbanisation, disappearance of traditional landscapes and preindustrial lifestyle. People involved attempted, on one hand, to preserve regional traditions, but also, on the other hand, to bring modern trends in culture and economy to Silesia.

Another important reason for stressing the Silesian-German identity deserves to be mentioned – pure pragmatism. For German-speaking population of Czechoslovakia or Poland, discontent with situation after 1918, it was easier to publicly present their activities as manifestation of regionalism and provincial patriotism, rather than nationalism to avoid – or at least minimize – possible conflicts with Czechoslovak or Polish authorities (Kolář 2018).

The natural centre of coordinated cultural activities on the Czechoslovak side of the border appeared in Opava in mid-1920s. The nominal capital of Czechoslovak Silesia was surrounded by Czech villages, but the population of the city itself was predominantly German with traditionally strong positions of liberal nationalists in local administration (Müller – Žáček 2006). Existence of cultural institutions such as respected municipal theatre and Silesian Provincial Museum helped to create a wide network of contacts with intellectuals and artists in Germany and Austria (Šopák 2016). Therefore it was not surprising Opava played significant role in creating traditions of Weeks of Silesian Culture (*Schlesische Kulturwoche*), annual meetings of German-Silesian artists, researchers and other figures involved in culture and education.

The festivals were based on German tradition of *Stammestagungen* (“Tribal Days”). The purpose of such actions can be described by German word *Aufklärung* (literally *Explanation*, in Czech word *Osvěta* is used), which has no proper English equivalent. *Aufklärung* means a noninstitutionalised form of education and raising of public awareness, aimed on wide public, mainly through lectures and exhibitions, or educative journals. A characteristic trait of *Aufklärung* is popularisation of important topics of the time (Šopák 2018).

The origin of the idea of Week of Silesian Culture is uncertain. One of “fathers” of the concept was without doubt Opavian teacher with Austrian roots Richard Patscheider, who participated in organising of most of the seasons of the festival (Kotisová 2003). Another significant, but quite mysterious figure, was Bernard Schenk (or Schenck), school administrator from Breslau. Unlike well documented career of Patscheider, very little is known about Schenk. The two men later played crucial role in maintaining and fostering the *Aufklärung* activities, together with inhomogeneous group of co-operators and supporters, including artists, teachers, researchers and politicians from Czechoslovakia and Germany.

The first season of the festival took place in Liberec (Reichenberg) in North Bohemia in 1925. Except the second season in Opava, the Weeks of Silesian Culture repeatedly went on in North Bohemia during following years. Choice of the location might seem as quite surprising, however it probably had a clear purpose. The organisers intended to manifest Silesian traditions in wider context of German culture. Although representative of Silesian autonomists from both Germany and Silesia were invited, the concept of the festivals was obviously based on the nationalist view on “Silesia-ness” (State District Archive in Liberec, coll. of the City of Liberec, box no. 689, sign. 166, inv. no. 1431).

Therefore, the proposed recipients were not just Silesians themselves, but primarily German-speaking Catholic population on peripheries of Silesia, mainly North Bohemian Germans and population of Lusatia. Setting the first season to Liberec, unofficial capital of Czechoslovak Germans, in proximity of both Lusatia and Prague, had a potential to address all target groups. In 1926, Liberec was symbolically followed by Opava as capital of Czech Silesia. The narrative of this concept intended to put both cities on the same level, despite the actual decline of importance of Opava, which led to the loss of status of provincial capital two years later (Kolář 2018, Peřich 1945).

During the festival in Opava in 1926, the organisers proposed to periodically publish an almanac called *Schlesisches Jahrbuch*, which would be analysed later.

For Czechoslovak authorities, presentation of Silesian culture was quite suitable, at least until the end of 1920s. The original concept of Weeks of Silesian Culture was highly appreciated by Czech nationwide press (*Lidové noviny*, 1925, no. 374, p. 5). Organisers met no administrative obstacles, although they had to face occasional medial insults from Czech conservative nationalists. The festivals were attended by significant autonomists, including Josef Koždoň, or moderate German politicians, standing for Czech-German cooperation. In Liberec, organisers appreciated Czechoslovak President T. G. Masaryk in opening speeches. Despite nationalist tendencies, the festival was originally opened for a dialog with autonomists, as well as Czechoslovak authorities. The festivals were, at least formally, presented as inclusive for all inhabitants of Silesia and surrounding territories.

In general, the first seasons of the festival were characterised by emphasising ethnography and fine arts. Pieces of work and compositions of German artists with no relation to Silesia were presented as well. This fact can be understood as an effort to present the “mainstream” German culture to Silesians and North Bohemian Germans. However, the cultural exchange worked both ways, because the festivals also included exhibitions of Czech painters from North Bohemia. For example in 1927, visitors could see paintings by North-Bohemian Czech Rudolf Karásek, together with artworks of German painter from Opava Raimund Mosler (State District Archive in Liberec, coll. of the City of Liberec, box no. 689, sign. 166, inv. no. 1431).

Since 1929, the concept of Weeks of Silesian Culture started to change. Lectures of German experts in history and economy outbalanced ethnographic and artistic aspects. The festivals therefore became more scientific, but also more nationalist. Adjectives like “Nordic” or “Sudeten-German” started to appear in titles of lectures and exhibitions. For example in 1930 in Jablonec nad Nisou (Gablonz) historian Josef Strzygowski spoke about “Nordic art”, while member of Czechoslovak Parliament Franz Jesser held a lecture about “cultural tasks of Sudeten Germans”. The specifics of Silesia were replaced by “shared” German topics. Apart from culture, history and ethnography, more attention was put on present problems of economy and crafts. Czech conservative press pointed out, that the lectures were aimed to create a simplified narrative of unity and shared aims of German-speaking Silesians, which can undermine the authority of Czechoslovak state (*Národní listy*, 1929, no. 168, p. 2).

The concept of *Aufklärung* was partly abandoned. Lectures of scholars such as Strzygowski could be hardly understandable to wide public. Presumably the organisers attempted to address local German teachers, officials and other

intellectuals, who were expected to present the topics to “common people” through classic means of *Aufklärung*.

The new concept coincided with turbulent political and social development of late 1920s. The Great Depression led to social and national radicalisation. Deepening political crisis in Germany enabled the rise of Nazism, accompanied by strengthening pan-German rhetoric. In Czechoslovakia, traditional regional identities of German communities, such as Silesians, Egerlanders etc., were gradually replaced by “Sudeten-German” identity, which comprised all Germans in the republic. Fragile consensus of Czech and German political representation in Czechoslovakia collapsed after the fall of ruling liberal-right coalition in 1929.

The changing of concept of Silesian festival was also accompanied by change of place, which was probably decided during a meeting in Breslau in 1930, organised by Patscheider. (State District Archive in Liberec, coll. of the City of Liberec, box no. 689, sign. 166, inv. no. 1431). Since 1931, the festivals moved from North Bohemia to Silesia and North Moravia. Several reasons for such decision can be recognized. Patscheider, Schenk and other leading personalities were settled in Silesia and can rely on support of local influential personalities and institutions. Contrary, some of moderate German politicians in North Bohemia led by Liberec Mayor Karl Kostka tried to oppose the rise of nationalism after the start of Great Depression. While for Kostka and his supporters – and also for state authorities – the festivals started to be too radical, for traditional German nationalist parties and movements the actions were not radical enough. Stressing the uniqueness of Silesia did not match the pan-German vision of die-hard nationalists (Hahnová 2014, Weger 2017). After several seasons in North Bohemia, the Weeks of Silesian Culture might also face the decrease of interest of locals. The shift back to Silesia was probably also motivated by the effort to “awake” and mobilise German-speaking Silesians after the dissolution of Silesian provincial administration in 1928 and to face the threat of disappearance of Silesian distinctiveness in newly created “Moravian-Silesian Province” (Kolář 2018).

It also deserved to be mentioned that the role of Opava-based German intellectuals increased already in late 1920s. While during the first seasons, scientists and artists from Lusatia (eg. historian Richard Jecht) and other regions were present, during the 1929 and 1930 festivals the “real” Silesians became more dominant in organising committee. Except Patscheider, Opavian journalist Bruno Wittek belonged to the most enthusiastic organisers.

More pragmatic and prosaic reason for setting the season of 1931 to North Moravian-Silesian borderland was the forthcoming anniversary of death of poet Josef von Eichendorff, to whom seasons in Nový Jičín (Neutitschein) and

Ratibor in 1931 and 1932 were dedicated (State district Archive in Nový Jičín, coll. of the District Administration in Nový Jičín, box no. 34, inv. no. 283, Oberschlesien im Bild, no. 28, 1932, p. 3). The cult of Eichendorff, highly respected figure of German romanticism closely tied to both Czechoslovak and German part of Silesia, perfectly suited to the aim of organisers to manifest the unity of Silesia and its affiliation to Germany. While the festivals in 1931 and 1932 were undoubtedly arranged by nationalists, strongly supported by Nový Jičín Mayor Ernst Schollich and Opavian nationalist activist Otto Wezelides, honorary guests included leader of Upper Silesian autonomists Carl Ulitzka and Friedrich Stolberg, Christian-socialist politician and also supporter of Czechoslovak agrarian movement (Pelc 2005). However, the shift to pan-German nationalism was clearly expressed by parade of irredentist association Reichsverband Heimatliebender Hultschiner (organisation demanding the annexation of Hlučín territory in Czechoslovakia by Germany) during the Ratibor season (Kolářová 2017, Sommer 1992).

Despite moving the festivals from North Bohemia, the organisers did not resign on their effort to promote the action in wider community of Czechoslovak Germans. For example in 1932, the organising committee asked the city of Cheb (Eger) – and probably other towns and cities – for support. Local administration in Cheb refused to participate and pointed out the city was already preparing different cultural festival (State District Archive in Liberec, coll. of the City of Liberec, box no. 689, sign. 166, inv. no. 1431). In this case, competing Silesian and West Bohemian regionalisms prevailed over pan-German nationalism.

The last Week of Silesian Culture took place in Krnov (Jägenrndorf), important industrial centre of Czechoslovak Western Silesia, in proximity of Opava. Programme of the final season is poorly documented, presumably the participation of guests from Germany and Austria was restricted by Czechoslovak authorities. Due to numerous frictions in the borderland after Hitler's rise to power in early 1933, the festival in Krnov was under police surveillance. Later in the same year, Moravian-Silesian Provincial Government in Brno decided not to allow any more seasons to take place (State district Archive in Nový Jičín, coll. of the District Administration in Nový Jičín, box no. 34, inv. no. 283).

Although the tradition of organised cultural festivals could not continue, many of the former organisers still closely cooperated as co-authors of *Schlesisches Jahrbuch*, which was edited by Schenk and printed by W. G. Korn publishing house in Breslau. The concept of *Schlesisches Jahrbuch* underwent very similar development as the festival.

Full name of the almanac was *Schlesisches Jahrbuch für deutsche Kulturarbeit im gesamtschlesischen Raume* (Silesian Yearbook for Cultural Work

in Pan-Silesian Space). The word *gesamtschlesische* (pan-Silesian) became crucial. The “pan-Silesian space” included territories in Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland. Unlike the Weeks of Silesian Culture, *Schlesisches Jahrbuch* focused not only on agitation amongst German-speaking Silesians in Czechoslovakia, but also in Poland (Birke 1938)<sup>3</sup>. In introductions of volumes, authors often described themselves as *Arbeiter* (workers), working for *Stammeskultur* (culture of [Silesian] tribe). Unspecified “political situation in Czechoslovakia” was openly criticised during 1930s.

The position of publishers and their co-operators was formalised by foundation of *Arbeitskreis für gesamtschlesische Stammeskultur* (Working Group for pan-Silesian tribal culture), led by Schenk. Unfortunately, no records about structure and internal affairs of the association were preserved, however presumably the group involved mainly organisers of Weeks of Silesian Culture, many of whom also co-authored the almanac. It is important to note, that nor *Arbeitskreis*, neither the term *gesamtschlesische*, is mentioned in relation to the Weeks of Silesian Culture. For the festival, the organisers obviously preferred to use more moderate and less politicised terminology.

The content of the almanac consisted predominantly of texts about history and ethnography by experts from universities in Breslau and Berlin, less frequently from Munich or Prague. Short notices about cultural events appeared as well, including occasional texts about festival or exhibitions in Liberec and other ethnically German cities of Czechoslovakia. Obviously ties to North Bohemia did not cease during 1930s. Sometimes German intellectuals from Czechoslovakia contributed, usually regional personalities such as teacher Schneider from North-Bohemian Vrchlábí (Hohenelbe), who authored short paper about old maps of Giant Mountains (Schneider 1938).

Surprisingly, experts from German university in Prague participated at the project very rarely, despite the contacts of editors with notable Prague historian with Silesian roots Josef Pfitzner, who held lecture during Week of Silesian Culture in 1931, but contributed only by one single article for *Schlesisches Jahrbuch* in 1933 (Pfitzner 1933). Another Prague-based supporter of the *Arbeitskreis* was university scholar Erich Gierach, who took part in organising Weeks of Silesian Culture. However, Pfitzner and Gierach obviously preferred to publish in more prestigious

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3 Polish ministry of foreign affairs protested against Birke’s interpretation and criticised the *Arbeitskreis* in May 1939. See online: <https://docplayer.pl/42380975-Ministerstwo-spraw-zagranicznych-departament-wydzial-w-sprawie-nr-w-odpowiedzi-na-nr-z-dn-zalacznikow-polityczny-prasowy-p-v1-n-49-84-anibasada-r.html> (Accessed on August 1 2021).



journals. For many academics, the almanac, based on the idea of *Aufklärung*, might seem as unprofessional and therefore unattractive. Moreover, unlike their colleagues in Germany or Austria, German-speaking academics in Czechoslovakia were probably afraid of possible conflicts with authorities, if openly supporting the *Arbeitskreis*. Probably for the same reasons, Silesian Provincial Museum in Opava mostly ignored the activities of Patscheider and his co-workers (Šopák 2008, 2016).

Director of the museum and notable art historian Edmund Wilhelm Braun belonged to guests of the festival in Opava in 1926, however, there are no records about his direct active participation on any activities of the *Arbeitskreis*. According to Braun's biographer Pavel Šopák such cooperation would be very improbable. Another guest of the Opava festival was Adolf Zdravila, one of best appreciated interwar painters in Czech Silesia. Although one of his paintings appeared on the frontispiece of the first issue of *Schlesische Jahrbuch* in 1928, Zdravila, as well as his long-term supporter Braun, way never directly involved in *Arbeitskreis* activities. The distanced approach of Braun, Zdravila and other personalities might be explained partly by underestimation of the concept of *Aufklärung*, partly by generation gap between Braun (born 1870) and Zdravila (1868) on one side and younger generation strongly influenced by experience of the Great War, represented by Patscheider (1883), Wittek (1895) or Pfitzner (1901), on the other side. Moreover, people like Braun and Zdravila might see the project of *Arbeitskreis* as a competition to their own activities, closely related to traditional *Vereinigung bildender Künstler Schlesiens* (Association of Silesian Artists), which was apolitical and aiming mainly on educated middle-class public (Šopák 2008).

A crucial task of future research would be to describe and analyse the approach of Nazi authorities towards the intellectuals, grouped around *Schlesisches Jahrbuch*. The almanac became quite pro-Nazi during 1930s, nevertheless, its regionalism might be seen as undesirable alternative to pan-German nationalism by some NSDAP functionaries. However, in general the approach of Nazi leaders to Silesians was similarly pragmatic as in cases of Sudeten Germans or Austrians – the regional patriotism combined with ethnic German nationalism was understood as a first stage for full integration in future. Simultaneously, supporting the traditional Silesian culture should serve as means to demonstrate the allegedly “German” character of the traditions. Overall, this concept was based on older narratives and methods of German nationalism, dating back to the 19th Century (César – Černý 1960, Gawrecká 2002, Karch 2018). However, the efforts of *Arbeitskreis* were never openly supported by leading (and pro-Nazi) scientists from Osteuropa Institut (East European Institute) in Breslau, who did not participate in activities of the association (Grobelný 1975).

Technically, the activities of *Arbeitskreis* were organised mainly on voluntary and quite informal base. Although most of members and co-workers probably joined of NSDAP or Czechoslovak pro-Nazi parties, there are no sources suggesting direct involvement of party organs.

On the other hand, Czechoslovak authorities stood openly against the actions of the *Arbeitskreis*. In 1933, Richard Patscheider was arrested for high-treason (Kotisová 2003). After being released, he settled in Munich and in 1938, he wrote a balancing text for *Schlesisches Jahrbuch* about the *Aufklärung* activities in Silesia (Patscheider 1938). As well as summarising paper *Schlesische Stammeskulturarbeit* (Silesian Tribal Culture Work) by Erich Gierach, published in the same year, Patscheider described the deeds of *Arbeitskreis* and its predecessors as a linear effort to unite all Germans in one state. This purpose-built simplified narrative was later partly adopted by post-war Czech and Polish historiography. It should be noted Gierach, like Patscheider, relocated to Munich in 1930s and became member of paramilitary *Sudetendeutsche Freikorps* in 1938. His case thus illustrates the radicalisation of *Arbeitskreis* during 1930s.

In February 1939, *Kulturwoche des gesamtschlesischen Raumes* (Week of Culture of Pan-Silesian Space) was celebrated in Görlitz. It can be presumed the action, obviously inspired by the Weeks of Silesian Culture, was seen as victory and topping of long-continuing efforts of the *Arbeitskreis* and its supporters. Czech Silesia was annexed by Germany few months ago and Polish part of Silesia was soon to follow. However, by irony, successes of Nazi vision of pan-Germanism caused the “tribal” or regionalist efforts were no longer needed or supported. The last issue of *Schlesisches Jahrbuch* appeared in 1942. In following years, the needs of total war left no space or funds for such publishing activities.

When analysing the activities of Patscheider, Schenk and their associates, several inferences can be stated. The whole project was originally based on the concept of *Aufklärung*. Although it later partly professionalised, it gained only limited support of leading scientists and artists, many of whom saw the project as amateur and possibly also as competitive to their own initiatives. A significant distinction could be seen in forms of public presentation of the festival and the almanac, when more moderate and apolitical rhetoric was used in the first case.

Despite undisputable radicalisation in 1930s, it would be misleading to describe the whole initiative of Patscheider, Schenk and others just as a symptom of pan-German nationalism. The first seasons of Weeks of Silesian Culture were more eclectic and opened to presentation of “competing” narratives and identities (North Bohemian or Lusatian). Rather than “Silesia-ness”, the festivals propagated wider identity of “Catholic Germans on the East”, but presented also artworks of

Czech artists and showed formal respect to Czechoslovak authorities. Nevertheless, until late 1920s this concept, based on the idea of *Aufklärung*, was replaced by more scientific, but also more nationalist form. Although some of significant autonomists and supporters of Czech-German cooperation still participated on the project, their role was marginalised. Contrary, long-term and determined nationalists like Schollich or Wenzelides became involved in early 1930s.

Absence of ego-documents made it impossible to state, whether Patscheider and Schenk, as the leading figures of the initiative, continually held the nationalist and pan-German positions, or whether they radicalised during the examined period. Nevertheless, their willingness to cooperate with autonomists, moderate German politicians and Czechoslovak authorities obviously decreased during the time.

Regrettably, very little is known about recipients. While the reception of Weeks of Silesian Culture can be partly described by the press, it is not possible to reconstruct the network of readers of *Schlesische Jahrbuch*. Therefore, the question, how successful was the effort of *Arbeitskreis*, can not be answered properly.

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