

The Importance of Folk Culture for Estonian Refugees¹

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Introduction

Estonian language and folklore is at the heart of Estonian culture. Folk costumes, songs and festivals grew in significance and political importance during the national awakening (1850-1918). Folklore was used also after World War II in Estonian communities in exile to maintain a sense of identity, and even as a political weapon.

Estonian communities in exile established associations, schools and clubs, which have been continuously active since the initial years of their exile until the present day. Some of the cultural events (West Coast Estonian Days since 1953, ESTO since 1972 and other cultural festivals, such as annual scouts' camps around the world) give evidence of active cooperation between the associations. This is undoubtedly related to the consolidation and expression of Estonianism and identity, but it should also be noted that there exist similar traits and parallels with the times when the nation state was first established in Estonia. The common denominator since the first days of the independent state (1918) has been the active participation in social life and hobby activities. Thus Estonianism can be studied through hobby activities.

Context and initial research basis

It is not surprising that Germany was the first destination to collect data, as many refugees from Estonia at the end of World War II had their first place of residence in refugee camps in the Western occupation zones. In Germany most of Estonians lived in refugee camps, staying there for several years. Circumstances were strained but in spite of that Estonians launched a very busy social and educational life, having established Estonian schools, congregations and publishing houses, formed choirs, gymnastic groups and clubs. In 1947 even a song festival

¹ This article reflects the results of the study carried out in the framework of the grant No 7231 of Estonian Science Foundation "The original choreographic text and form of presentation of Estonian folk dances as fixed in audiovisual recordings". The first version of the topic of the study found an output in the international research seminar organised by Tallinn University on 30.4.2008.

was held in Germany.² Therefore it is no wonder that also folk dance groups were formed in refugee camps.

What caused such active emergence of hobby societies, including folk dance groups? What reasons, backgrounds or facilitating factors could such phenomenon have?

There were certainly a variety of reasons, but we can state without doubt that in spite of the initial lack of security (or maybe because of it) the unified national feeling and the need for defining themselves through nationalism became overwhelming. Identity has been defined as continuity between generations: fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers, etc. According to the researcher Kalev Katus, national identity is very unequivocal – Estonianism is something characteristic only of Estonia. And this something differentiates us from other nations (Katus 1997: 71-93). Considering questions of the concept of identity – continuity and the feeling of sameness (Weinreich 1989: 50-73), it is completely understandable. The defining features have been the Estonian language and the culture based on the Estonian language, where through common linguistic space similar understanding, way of thinking, attitude, customs, etc. spread.

Special role in hobby activities was played by the cultural vision brought along from Estonia and the hobby activities embracing everyone in native Estonia. People who had fled from Estonia were mostly at working age and many of them had also been involved in the establishment of the nation state in Estonia (1918). People actively participated in the work of societies and joint activities. In Estonia, folk dance spread very quickly, mainly via schools and sport and temperance societies. Moreover, it was one of the most ancient activities, which had been strongly related to the cultural heritage, creative but at the same time symbolic, referring to the common origin and characteristics. The pursuit of folk dancing received a strong impulse from the First Estonian Games³ held in 1934.

Method

The current article relies on a wider study of folk dance hobby of Estonians in exile, which has found benevolent reception from Estonians in exile (open communication, providing

² (Kool 1999, 779); This has also been confirmed by interviewees who had been in refugee camps.

³ In the great gymnastics and dance festival in Tallinn in 1934 under the guidance of Ernst Idla and Ullo Toomi 250 folk dance couples performed. It has also been considered the first national folk dance festival in Estonia, which by now has developed into a parallel event of Estonia Song Festivals.

access to archives).⁴ The research is aggravated by the time factor, since the process under study commenced more than sixty years ago and many people related to those events have passed away or have reached an advanced age.⁵

The aim of the study was to map the emergence of folk dance groups and to study the role of folk dance in preserving Estonianism among Estonians in exile. Special focus was on the activities of Estonian refugees and processes at that period of the post-World War II in Germany (Zajedova, Rüütel, Arraste, Järvela 2009: 99-123).

Conversations and interviews were carried out with 13 Estonians residing in the Federal Republic of Germany. In November 2006, a conversation with three people in Bocholt (in the home of HK and RK) took place: HK (a woman aged 80), RK (a man aged 83), RZ (a son of HK, a man aged 57). The conversation was conducted in Bonn in the guesthouse of Annaberg (the venue for the traditional events of Latvians and Estonians) an individual interview with LP (a woman aged 85) and a group conversation with 7 people took place: AK (a man aged 80), JK (a man aged 81), MKV (a woman aged 57), KR (a woman aged 48), RL (a man aged 50), LKL (a woman aged 46), SR (a man aged 57). Two interviews were carried out in Hamburg (in the home of VJ) in June 2007: VJ (a woman aged 61) and GB (a woman aged 63).

All these conversations and interviews were videotaped and transcribed and they are kept together with other copies of archival materials in the Institute of Fine Arts of Tallinn University. Some of the written materials and photographs are in private collections of the authors. The analysis of conversations and interviews was based on transcribed texts. It was not always possible to follow the prepared interview plan including topics as follows: Estonian community, its relations and aims; social life and emergence of folk dance groups; hobby activity environment and circumstances (repertoire, music, performances, folk costumes, financial support); meaning of the folk dance activity for Estonians. Because of sensitive topics the interviews and conversations were held in free style and kept comfortable for interviewees.

⁴ A quotation from the chairman of the Estonian Society in the Federal Republic of Germany Richo Zieminski: "...it is really great that [you are] interested in the social life and folk dance hobby of expatriate Estonian communities in Germany. ... At the end of my letter I would like to stress once more that Estonian Society in the Federal Republic of Germany gives their support to the project initiated [by you] and its continuation." Bocholt/Annaberg, November 2006.

⁵ Several interviews could not be conducted because of the advanced age or poor health of the interviewees. That is the reason why we were not able to interview former dance directors and musicians in Cologne and Belgium.

Analysis of the texts was carried out in three steps. First, open coding was used to find themes related to hobby activities. Second, the categories describing folk dance hobby activity were found. Third, the main categories were established (Zajedova, Rüütel 2009).

Results: Categories of hobby activities

Results are described through categories found through three-steps analysis. Categories of hobby activities:

I. Places where people danced: a) refugee camps, b) summer camps/summer homes and scout camps, c) folk festivals, d) performances, e) political demonstrations.

II. Motives. What made people dance: a) hobby experience continuity, b) living together in a refugee camp, c) entertainment, d) a desire to teach folk dance to children.

III. The acting of folk dance groups. How did folk dance groups operate: a) the activity , b) support, c) the groups and interest, d) benefits gained form folk dance.

I. Places where people danced. Folk dance groups were mostly named after towns in the interviews: the Stuttgart group, the Hamburg group, in Cologne there was the so-called Worts group “*Worts Estov*”, in Bocholt a folk dance group named “*Põhjala*” (Northen) was active.

- a) Many people danced **in refugee camps**. JK (a man aged 81): “In the camps, everywhere where there were Estonians ... people sang and danced”. GB (a woman aged 63, not a former resident of refugees camp): “There were masses of them, ... who lived in the camps. ... Some were in the suburbs of Hamburg, some were a little further. ... We always met up with them. They invited us and when there was a Christmas party of the anniversary of the Republic, a summer festival, we always went and sang and danced. ... In Oldenburg there were also big camps and there they lived together and danced, sang together”. LP (a woman aged 85): “We had a young man who [organised] gatherings of refugees for at least twice a month, I think. There we danced and sang and baked home made cakes and everyone had to do something”.
- b) Children and young people learned dances in **summer camps/summer homes and scout camps**, organised for the children of Estonians in exile every summer. The camps usually lasted for three weeks and according to the memories of the respondents, 30 to 50 children usually gathered in a camp. “As a child I was in

summer camps and there were choirs and singing groups and folk dance groups and this is where I danced because in the town where I grew up there were no Estonians ... so I didn't have any contacts with folk dance groups ... only in summer camps and sometimes also in scout camps" (KR, a woman aged 48). However the main goal in summer homes and scout camps seems to have been to learn the Estonian language and history. The lessons took place in the mornings, in the afternoons children danced, sang and were engaged in other hobby activities. The language of communication was Estonian and at times this requirement was very strict. "There was strict discipline ... there was really so strict order in summer homes. I think boys even had to stand in a corner when they spoke German. ... I was not allowed to sleep in the sleeping hall in the summer home. They said that if there is a black sheep, everybody will speak German. And I had to go to another farm and stay there for the night. And then they said, yes, if you nicely learn Estonian in winter then next summer you can also come to the sleeping hall. Was it a stimulus? Yes, it definitely was" (GB, a woman aged 63).

- c) Every year several **folk festivals** were organised for the Estonian community as well as for the wider audience. Those festivals provided Estonians with a chance to introduce Estonian culture, dances and songs to Germans, to demonstrate themselves and their folk costumes. But not only Germans were kept in mind, Estonians themselves enjoyed the beauty of their folk costumes and folk art as the following childhood recollection from Münster demonstrates (the Estonian Central Council had its headquarters in Münster). "And there [was] a great summer festival, I remember. From Sweden and everywhere else Estonians gathered. People came from Göteborg, Stockholm and all other cities and danced. The folk dance group was very-very big and great to look at" (KR, a woman aged 48). The festivals were interactive – also the members of audience became involved, remembers a woman aged 80 (HK).

Folk festivals provided a chance to speak Estonian and to make contacts. "It must've been in 1964–65, that time. After that there was every year in Münster or Helsingør or Heidelberg There I also learnt to speak Estonian" (KR, a woman aged 48).

- d) **The performances** of folk dance groups (there were 20 couples, 30 couples) mainly took place during Estonian holidays – Midsummer Night Festival, Victory Day – and reunions. Estonians came from Sweden, from Southern Germany and they all danced

together. However, also joint events of Estonian and Latvians, Estonians and Baltic Germans, or events with German folk dance groups were mentioned, as well as the days of East-European culture and refugee culture. There were also performances for townspeople, in old people's homes and by invitation of German groups. Sometimes there were also performances abroad (Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, England) by invitation of Estonians residing there (VJ, a woman aged 61).

- e) Some respondents remembered large festivals as **political demonstrations**. For instance a woman aged 80 (HK) said: "...in Lübeck ... Münster ... Geislingen there was a rather large demonstration". "In Cologne there have been and in Heidelberg ...there was a very large demonstration" (RK, a male aged 83). "In Bocholt there was a large procession. The whole Germany had come together, the town was closed" (RZ, a man aged 57).

Large festivals provided Estonians with an opportunity to explain to the audience who Estonians were, where Estonia was and why Estonian refugees were in Germany. Before the performances, information was given to the audience, and after the programme more clarifications were provided. LP, a woman aged 85 recalls: "Choirs and folk dance ... that was our weapon. ... With that we introduced ... in the countries of residence, who we were, where we had come from, why we had come. ... And we were not allowed to do politics in Germany but we could do cultural politics and by means of that we still managed to introduce our culture, our songs, our Estonian language. We always invited German guests from the ministry but in spite of that our addresses were in two languages – always in the mother tongue first and after that out of politeness in German. And you know, I claim that this was our weapon for restoring independence, our contribution. ... It makes me proud, Estonian songs are beautiful, Estonian dances are beautiful".

II. Motives. What made people dance?

- a) **Earlier dancing experience.** Among the older generation some had already learned folk dances when going to school in Estonia. JK (a man aged 81): "I had my first [folk dance] experience at a very young age. I finished primary school in Viru-Jaagupi [village in Estonia] and then there they also taught folk dances". That's why folk dances were taught in summer camps/summer homes also in Germany.

- b) The emergence of folk dance groups was facilitated by **living together in refugee camps**. “I just liked being together with other Estonians. I think, it was the main reason ... and they all were great people, wanted to meet other people. I think that it was not exactly dance - I didn't have a great desire to dance at all - it was more a desire to meet people. Social life was great there ... hiking and social gatherings ... naturally we also visited each other at home” (RL, a man aged 50). “There was a camp here ... in Hamburg ... there we met. There they had a room for us. A large room, so that we could dance and sing there. About a hundred [people who gather], maybe, but not more. ... The thing was, that there was this lady. And she taught the Estonian language then” (VJ, a woman aged 61).
- c) **Entertainment**. People danced and performed for pleasure: “Indeed, for pleasure, it gave me pleasure ... and it, [performances] was a great honour and we did it willingly and with Estonian spirit ... never asked for money. Even paid expenses ... When necessary, I danced. ... We knew how to do it anyway. ... Did they come from Cologne, Munich or Oldenburg – doesn't matter where they came from. It was like a big family. We sang and danced together” (GB, a woman aged 63).
- d) **A desire to teach folk dance to children** could lead to the establishment of a dance group, which later was active for years: “... this [wish] was mine that this [folk dance group] ever existed. Children grow ..., in order to teach them Estonian folk dances. But I was not able to teach that well, I had never ... been involved and then I asked my cousin to send me a folk dance book” (HK, a woman aged 80). Another reason leading people to dance was their desire to teach Estonian dances to their children. When there was no dance teacher, dances were learnt from Ullo Toomi's book “*Eesti Rahvatantsud*” (Estonian Folk Dances) published in 1953, which was the most important folk dance book of the 20th century in Estonia and abroad.

III. The acting of folk dance groups. How did folk dance groups operate?

- a) **The activity** of a dance group primarily depended on enthusiasts who were prepared to lead. Knowledge and skills were not as important as initiative. Older people told that often whole families attended folk dance rehearsals and people travelled long distances to get there, for example, some people came from the Netherlands because they did not have enough Estonians for a folk dance group. At the same time the distance may have been the restricting factor: “...rehearsals were only twice a month.

Mostly because the distances people travelled were so long, we could not meet [for rehearsals] every week” (LP, a woman aged 85). According to the respondents, rehearsals took place regularly one or two times a week for 1.5 to 2 hours. In case of younger respondents the rehearsals seemed to be more related to performances. “When there was an event, we had to come to the rehearsals 2-3-4 times” (GB, a woman aged 63). On the occasion of big festivals people had to get by with a relatively short time for preparation. “There was no such thing that ... we were given a chance to come together for a rehearsal. People went there a bit earlier on the same day and talked things over a little, only some things were rehearsed. On the same day before the festival started” (JK, a man aged 81). On some occasions additional forces had to be “borrowed” from other dance groups.

During performances, the dancers wore folk costumes of valued authenticity. The cloth was ordered, but sewing and embroidering was done by the people themselves. The folk costumes of small children were combined of the available items. Receiving a “real” folk costume was an important event. “My aunt wove ... she made everything herself and when I was 13, I received it as a present from her. It was a great present for me. Then I could properly participate, before that my things were sort of ... assembled ... a skirt and a blouse that were not authentic ... and I had an inferiority complex because all children kept saying: well, but this isn't real” (GB, a woman aged 63). No distance was too long for obtaining a folk costume. Items were received either from native Estonia or from relatives and acquaintances living in other countries.

- b) At first, the refugees did not receive any financial **support** in the camp. They could only rely on themselves. Later, in the 1950s the German state began to support the cultural activity of ethnic minorities but only through the central organisation of the Estonian Society in the Federal Republic of Germany, which could apply for 50% of the cost and had to cover the remaining 50% by self-funding. Support was also received from America and Sweden in the form of invitations to summer camps. Children from Germany were able to recuperate there for several weeks. This was followed by support from Estonian World Council although the application had to be submitted by the representative of the member country, which in Germany was the Estonian Society in the Federal Republic of Germany. One source of support was a house in Berlin belonging to the Estonian Society in the Federal Republic of

Germany. “Yes, we had a source and it was and still is our house in Berlin” (RZ, a man aged 57). People actively looked for an opportunity to use rooms for a small rent or free of charge. At the same time these rooms were rather modest. The respondents mainly mentioned using gymnasiums of schools, or free rooms offered by an international organisation, the Young Men’s Christian Association, etc.

Money was not of primary importance for people engaged in folk dancing as their hobby. “We did it all voluntarily, we did it out of patriotism. We thought it was our duty to do it without expecting a reward” (LP, a woman aged 85). “It was wonderful to be there together” (MKV, a woman aged 57). “We weren’t there to earn, we enjoyed being able to play and others were also happy to dance” (AK, a man aged 80).

- c) What has become of **groups and interest** in dance by now? It seems that there was a certain post-war period when people danced more. The activity of dance groups ended because young people got married and the number of the remaining dance couples was not sufficient for a dance group to continue and there was no new generation of dancers coming to increase the numbers.

The 1990s and the restoration of independence in Estonia also seemed to reduce the impetus for folk dance among Estonians in exile. It was then that an opportunity opened up for them to go to Song and Dance Festivals in Estonia. “I went there ... It was the first Song Festival when Estonia became free again (in 1991). ... My brother from England, ... sister from Valga [town in Estonia], then we were there ... in the song festival grounds. ... And we also went to the Dance Festival” (RK, a man aged 83). The fate of a dance group may, for example, also be like that of the Stuttgart group, which ended its activity since the group leader and some of the dancers went to live in Estonia: “five of them are in Estonia already ... the core of the group went to Estonia” (RL, a man aged 50). So the Stuttgart group began singing instead of dancing “... But dancing they finished earlier, by then the dance group had mutated into a choir” (LKL, a woman aged 46). Growing into a singing group clearly demonstrates the wish of the people to keep up their joint activity.

However, folk dance is no longer the primary reason for coming together. In the reunion in Annaberg it became evident that it is mainly the wish to hear how other Estonians live, to speak Estonian and to play games popular among the members of

this community of Estonians, Corona and Dutch Shuffleboard (Jakkolo). “One of the reasons, for example, is to meet my long term friends. ... And to speak in my mother tongue again and exchange information. ... And then naturally this game ... the Jakkolo game ...and then there’s another thing that we sing in the evening” (KR, a woman aged 48). “It is very important for me to be with young people. ... Times have changed and things are different now but this reason bringing us here together remains, these days of culture. ... It is [necessary] to maintain Estonian culture, it’s important” (LP, a woman aged 85).

- d) **Benefits gained from folk dance.** The people fleeing Estonia were first and foremost political refugees, whereas initially they were convinced it was a temporary phenomenon. This was also confirmed by several respondents. LP (a woman aged 85): “... and with this hope we fled, that we’ll be coming back”. (HK, a woman aged 80): “ ... that why go out [to America], maybe when Estonia will become free ... it is so difficult to get back here from America ... because for several decades we had a firm wish as soon as Estonia becomes free ... to return”.

Even if it became clear that the exile would not end immediately, the attitude remained the same. Children were taught Estonian and given all the knowledge there was about Estonian culture. From the point of view of maintaining Estonian culture it was considered extremely important to teach folk dance to schoolchildren and young people, which links with Czech scholar Šatava’s concept about maintaining/preserving and renewing (Šatava 2001; 2006, 42-50).

Although folk dance was beneficial for self-preservation it can be claimed that the most important factor in the emergence and activity of folk dance groups is the connection between personal self-definition and the traditions of national culture. Through folk art activity it was also possible to mediate cultural policy with an emphasis on Estonianism. “Well, that we hold together, that we have something ... uniting us. Yes, indeed, uniting us. It has given and keeps giving today ... Half of my life ... this one part is my family and the other part is my Estonianism, where I spent a lot of time, energy, nerves, everything. This is how it is” (GB, a woman aged 63). “This has been my childhood and young woman’s life. It was somehow very, very important for me. ... I’m not trying to say that we were different from Germans or anything but it was some kind of ... as if a homely feeling, we were always together

and it was like a big family. It was really very important for us to be Estonians” (VJ, a woman aged 61).

Discussion

The research affirmed the important role of hobby activities in preserving Estonianism among Estonian refugees in the period of post-World War II in Germany and assured that Estonianism can be studied through Estonians folk dance activities. For Estonians national format (which Estonians were always able to offer) became the politically correct form of self-expression. For long decades this form containing folk costumes, folk songs, folk dances, song festivals in a national romantic spirit, which originated from the period of national awakening, has suited Estonians.

Such self-expression has acquired the role of specific self-definition and self-empowerment in several politically critical periods. Folk songs and dances as well as folk costumes were like roots in Estonian soil for Estonian refugees after World War II, helping them cope in a new environment. Hobby activities of Estonians in the post-war refugee centres may be viewed as essential ground for self-restoration and self-preservation.⁶

The research revealed some principal aspects facilitating hobby activity in exile. Hereby the presence of two closely intertwined aspects – internal (as hobby activities continuity, living together in the camps, wish to be together with other Estonians, a desire to teach folk dance to children) and external (as World War II, refugee camps, summer and scout camps, festivals and performances, financial support) should be pointed out.

The mass exodus from Estonia during World War II took place within a short period of time. Consequently, the majority of Estonians arrived abroad without advance planning as larger communities and believing that it was just a temporary stay in a foreign country (e.g. category III d). Obviously, that was the reason why they stuck to their traditions even more tightly and continued their customary activities in the new place of residence (singing and folk dancing). One of the moving forces of the internal aspect was clearly the tradition of

⁶ One of the most powerful symbols of artistic self-expression in Estonian history was the “Singing Revolution” in 1987-88, where the political events of restoration of independence in Estonia were supported by joint singing of Estonians and creating songs on the topic, expressing people’s urge for freedom as well as their responsibility and readiness for political change.

hobby activity brought along from Estonia (e.g. categories II a and c), which was expressed in creating the so-called little Estonia in refugee camps. People tried to make their environment into a home and Estonian-like, and to give them an opportunity to constantly feel they were Estonians (e.g. category III d). At the same time Estonians tried to prove to themselves and to the world that the Estonian nation is viable. Thus hobby activity had an important role as bearers of culture and identity while bridging the past and the present and united the community of Estonians in exile (e.g. category I e).

The background of the refugees may be considered an important factor intertwining interior and exterior aspect for establishing a society of refugees. The majority of Estonian refugees were of working age, most of them with secondary education. There were also many intellectuals and artists who were able to lead and direct the social and cultural life of Estonians abroad (Kool 1999). However, research revealed, that the activists and leaders of folk dance did not necessarily have special training, but rather the desire to dance and teach folk dance to their children stimulated them to learn and study dances and to teach them to other people (e.g. category III a).

This enabled people to preserve a positive image related to the nationalism, which was expressed in Estonian songs and dances and was visually enjoyable in their folk costumes. Thus cultural activities maintained a positive link between the past and the present offering a balancing effect to the tragic realisation that temporary asylum had become a permanent state of exile, and preventing people from being trapped in the disconsolate condition of a refugee.

It should not be forgotten that people who fled from Estonia were political refugees. Folk dance was not only a hobby activity, but helped to organise actions at politically demanding times. Politically activity by refugees was forbidden in the Federal Republic of Germany, but Estonians found a phenomenal weapon: besides singing also folk dance was used to introduce Estonia to local people (e.g. category I e). On a couple of occasions bigger festivals became demonstrations exposing Estonians and Estonia to view of others and thus uniting Estonian communities even more closely.

It became clear from the interviews that the other facet of the internal aspect was not less important: the joy of hobby activity and being together. People came to dance and sing together with the others or simply speak Estonian (e.g. categories II b and c).

Beside the aforementioned internal aspects also external conditions facilitated hobby activity. Folk dance groups became compact, using respective rooms for gathering,

rehearsing and performing. Initially these premises were offered by the refugee camp, and were used to the maximum, if even not more. The interviews revealed that also Estonians who had an opportunity to live outside the camp also kept coming back (e.g. category I a).

It was considered especially important to increase the interest of young people in maintaining and renewing culture-related identity (Šatava 2001; 2006, 42-50). People attempted to pass all the knowledge they had about Estonia on to their children (e.g. categories I b and II d). Hobby activities and folk dance were a great means and opportunity to maintain and teach the Estonian language. Connection between folk dance and the Estonian language was observed through all the categories assuring the role of Estonian language and culture based on Estonian language as the defining features of identity. The language a person uses for communication with his or her society is a semiotic tool in the intra-psychological system of that person, which directs the way this person thinks, feels and formulates his or her utterances (Valsiner 2007, 28). With their ideas, visions, motivation and vitality the older generation tried to pass on to young people their attitude, loyalty and pride of being an Estonian. The desire to communicate in Estonian was an essential motivator for Estonians' reunions.

Andrus Saareste (1956, 31-41) reminded Estonians abroad in 1956 their three national duties: to organising political action abroad for the restoration of Estonian's independence, preserve the Estonian language and cultural characteristics, and to uphold the ideal of the democratic Republic of Estonia. Hobby activity and folk dance, although primarily a pleasurable pastime and an incentive to come together, was a means for Estonians in exile to fulfilling their national duty. That was constantly applied by Estonians in exile over decades in order to maintain the continuity of Estonianism. This is the phenomenon of hobby activity in preserving Estonianism.

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