

Voices of Plight, Voices of Paradox: Narratives of Women Refugees from the Balkans and the Hungarian Host Population¹

Eva V. Huseby-Darvas, Michigan and Michigan-Dearborn

I.

Ilona, a refugee woman in her 30s from the Voivodina told me in August of 1993,

It is a horrible misfortune to be born in this part of the world.... If one looks back in history, just about when people would be able to forget the last feud, then it starts all over again. There is no way to forget this one for a good many centuries.... I tell you simply: we just would like to survive. We don't want to perish in this senseless mess. We hope somehow to raise our children and to find jobs and a place somewhere in this world.... It is horrible to be a refugee and being torn out of one's own surroundings. Where are we going to find a place where they will take us in? A place that we can once again really feel and call home?!

The voices of plight that I refer to in the title of the present endeavor are those of refugee women, while the voices of paradox are those of their hosts. By evoking some of these voices I examine here two facets of the current refugee crisis in Hungary. First I look at how refugee women talk about their predicament and how they interpret the reactions of the host society to their presence. Then I discuss a couple of different responses of Hungarians to the flood of refugees in the past few years. The present work is based on refugees narratives, in addition to primary and secondary data I have collected in and around four refugee camps in Hungary during May of 1992 and August of 1993.

The women's stories emphasize the trauma of their recent experiences. They talk about how much they long to return home and rebuild their lives there. And they often talk about how the possibility of going back home is diminishing. Some of the women, like Ilona who was

quoted above, also talk about how they wish for a chance to build a viable new existence either in Hungary or further in the West. Yet for most refugees there is no encouragement for permanent resettlement either in Hungary or elsewhere.

In 1992 I found 'wanting to go home' to be the primary motif of the stories voiced in the camps. This intention to return was additionally illustrated by the fact that over 95 percent of the refugees from the former Yugoslavia in Hungary asked only for temporary asylum. And thus they were representative of refugees world wide. As Sylvana Foa, spokesperson for Sadako Ogata, the United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHRC), said, "99 percent of the refugees in the world want to go home. People don't give up their culture, home, friends, and belongings lightly" (cited in Forbes, 1992). In 1993, however, I have heard repeatedly expressions of 'nowhere to go' which, as I suggested elsewhere (see footnote 1), became the leitmotif of the refugee women's stories and inherent dilemma of their quandary.

II.

In the spring of 1992 the bulk of the refugees from the former Yugoslavia in Hungary were ethnic Croatians (about 65 percent) and ethnic Hungarians (25 percent). It was then estimated that only about 15 percent of these asylum seekers actually stayed in camps. Those who had friends or relatives in Hungary stayed with the latter; others who had money paying guests in pensions, hotels, and private homes.² When I returned in 1993 the situation was quite different: over 90 percent of the refugees from Bosnia were in refugee camps, and the ethnic composition of the camp populations changed so that in the most populated camps the great majority of the refugees were Bosnian Muslims.

Many of the refugees were simply not registered so it was impossible to establish the precise number of refugees in Hungary either in 1992 or in 1993.³ As elsewhere in the contemporary refugee population, which, according to UNHRC reports, is an estimated twenty million worldwide, about 65 to 70 percent of the refugees in the Hungarian camps from the former Yugoslavia are women and their young offspring.⁴ I was told that some of the men were killed before the women and children left their homes. In other cases the husbands, fathers, sons left with their families then returned home to fight. In still other cases, men encouraged the women to leave with the children while they stayed home to fight. Where the young or middle-

aged men came with their families and stayed on in the camps, the most heatedly and frequently discussed topic among the men was returning to their home towns so they can be counted there in what some deemed an escalating crisis in the late Spring of 1992. At that time the average age was 32, reflecting the overrepresentation of seniors (again, mostly women) and children. While a number of professions were represented, the majority of adults were agrarian workers -- either peasants or commuting worker-peasants -- who lived in rural settlements before they were forced to flee their homes.

Living in the camp is difficult for many refugee women, particularly for those who were used to individual village houses close to orchards, plots, and vineyards. A number of the camps were run-down army posts before they opened in 1991 to house refugees and, in spite of some minor changes, these facilities wear all the characteristics of 1950s socialist architecture and workmanship. The bathrooms were obviously designed for men only, without locks on the doors, and with many more urinals than lavatories. The barracks are multistoried with huge rooms that were originally accommodating up to 50 soldiers. In most cases these difficulties of daily living are compounded by the frustration of not having anything to do, by missing family, neighbors, and home, and by differences between what the refugees perceive and interpret as the behavior and values of the host population and the refugees themselves. Magda, an ethnic Hungarian woman in her early fifties who fled from her village just across the border, expressed some of these frustrations and alienation:

These Hungarians here really don't know how to work and they don't like to work either. But the other day I saw this woman work in her field and it just about broke my heart. Who is working on my land? They give us everything here, I would be lying if I complained about anything. They are kind to us, feed us, the kids are in school, they set up everything right here in the camp for us, but there are days when I just go crazy. I had my own orchard. I miss it, I miss working on the land too. Here we are just pacing, walking up and down several times a day, eating, sleeping a bit, and talking. We are talking so much....

Indeed: there is much talk in the camps. It was particularly obvious that recalling, articulating and repeating the stories of how, why, when and with whom they fled their homes, and what they

left behind was immensely important for the refugees. These stories were like enactment of a ceremonial, or confirmation for ritual among other political refugees (Forbes, 1992). Some women tell their histories over and over again to one another and I had no difficulty eliciting dialogue. Rather, while some of the men and teenage boys were openly suspicious, none of the women displayed distrust or hesitation toward me.

The women's concern about their own plight and future were often overshadowed by the constant worries about the whereabouts of their kin -- sons, husbands, fathers, brothers -- and their uneasiness, at times even helplessness about the children's activities and conduct in and beyond the camp. Fatima, a 31 year-old woman from Srebrenica told me that she considers herself more fortunate than most in the camp where she has been living for eighteen months with her husband, mother-in-law, and two children who are 12 and 10 years old, and her five months old infant. She cried when she said,

I don't know what is with my parents and cousins and other relatives back home. I would like to know and somehow help them...more than anything else I wish that we could be together again. I had five brothers before the war. One was killed. Two are held in concentration camps by the Serbians. I have no idea where the two youngest ones are. They just disappeared. I don't know anything about my cousins or other kinfolk either. The food is not very good here in the camp, but every time I have a bite to eat I wonder if they have food, if they are well, if we will be ever together again. There is not much else to do here than think. The only thing that keeps me going is that all day long I take care of my family, then visit and talk with the neighbors. We go from day to day like this. Who knows what tomorrow holds?

There is ongoing behavioral problems with the children. According to parents and teachers alike, most children either became very aggressive, or turn within and refuse to communicate. As one teacher, a 43 year old Bosnian woman compared her pupils' behavior before and since the war:

The children [here] are excessively nervous and jittery. They are awfully hard to discipline and their attention span is very short. No wonder! Many of these

children lost their parents, or grandparents, or other close kin in Bosnia. We are trying to keep the children busy and educate them in the meantime. But it is not about education alone: we are trying to make children forget. And that is our most difficult, nay: irresolvable task here in the camp...

The advice of the handful of psychologists, she continued, who, on rare occasions, come to the camps and work through interpreters make mighty little difference in the everyday realities mothers and teachers face. While women and most of the children did communicate readily and with apparent ease with me, I found that non-verbal communication frequently told me more about their situation than words. For example, I found that children talk much more about daily life in the camp than anything about the past. On the surface, children are considerably more concerned with present issues than either with the war at home or with what happened to them just before they became refugees. They talk about the arrival of a new shipment of oranges or toys; or laughingly talk about the tray full of dessert falling on the mess-hall floor; or about a stylish jacket or jeans they got or would like to get from the clothing bin in the warehouse; or what and with whom will they play, dance, or sit in the classrooms of the camp-school.

However, observing children at play and looking at their drawings and paintings told me another story: their games and artwork deal explicitly with the war. Children of all ages frequently playact as soldiers with guns, with the smallest and weakest playing the role of victims and the older, stronger children playing that of aggressors. In one camp the favorite indoor playground of children is a stairwell. This camp -- which was also an army post like most of the refugee camps -- there is a mosaic wall that displays a life-size cannon which is frequently incorporated in the children's games. In a similar vein, children's drawings and watercolors often show war scenes, with huge, faceless soldiers in uniforms aiming their guns at figures of faceless, yet open eyed children who are depicted bent and disproportionately small.

While most refugee women talk more readily than the children about their experiences in and since the war, there are certain non-verbal expressions that articulate their anguish even more graphically than their words do. To me none of these are more telling than the picture montage seen in many rooms in the barracks. These are composed of photographs taken in different times and in various places of members of extended families, both dead and alive and missing [i.e. women often did not know if certain loved ones were incarcerated, or if they were

dead or alive back in the homeland], and also of relatives in the refugee camps and those who are guest workers or refugees in the West. The montages often include portraits of family houses and home interiors, at times orchards and vineyards. Usually the photos are glued on a stiff board or paper, and occupy a center place on the walls just above the bunk beds, or single cots, so they are visible both when one stands front of and faces the bed and also when an individual's head is on the pillow. Clearly, these wall hangings express the refugees most acute concerns about their families amid the uncertainty and devastation of refugee life. At the same time, these and similar examples of material culture in the camps are most significant in the symbolic reconstruction and validation of destroyed families and homesteads, families and homes that were radically deconstructed and disaffirmed by the aggressors in the former Yugoslavia.

For a number of refugees reciprocity, or to be more precise: the lack of reciprocity, becomes a major and gnawing issue in refugee life. This is best expressed to me in the words of an internist, a 34 year old woman from the Voivodina, who with her husband who is a pathologist, and two young daughters spent 23 months as refugees in Sweden before they, along with 800 other ethnic Hungarians from Northern Yugoslavia, were expelled by the Swedish government. The ethnic Hungarian refugees were expelled because, according to the Swedish edict, 1/ Serbia is not officially at war; 2/ even though Hungarian ethnics constitute a minority, they are not in danger of "ethnic cleansing"; and 3/ the Serbia, like all other countries has a right to conscript its citizens. Ergo, they don't qualify for political asylum and cannot stay as refugees according to Swedish law. However, reports of Human Rights organization and the United Nations express grave concern about the ethnic Hungarian population in the former Yugoslavia, clearly suggest otherwise. As this woman told me,

...our lives have taken on a very different direction in the last couple of years.

Before the war, at home we would never accept gifts, not even a good word unless we knew that we could reciprocate....since we are refugees, we accept anything that is offered to us and that in itself is difficult and humiliating to accept and to live with.... we are charity cases. This also contributed to the misery we felt during our 23 months in Sweden and our weeks here in this refugee camp.

There are obvious manifestations of ethnic group conflict and competition between groups of refugees in the camps. The use of combination bathroom-lavatories is one source of dispute that clearly indicates ethnic conflict, although it is expressed, on the one hand in terms of culture and hierarchy (i.e. who is "cultured" and who occupies higher rank on some undefined scale that measures being "really European and civilized"), and, on the other, in terms of healthy and natural ways, or cleanliness and personal hygiene. In one of the camps there is only one bathroom on each floor. These combination bathrooms and lavatories are designated alternately to be used by men on one floor and by women on the next and so on. But this is less of a problem than the fact that most rural Muslim refugees from Bosnia use the facilities differently (i.e. placing their feet on the seat, they crouch or squat over the seat), than do the ethnic Croatian and ethnic Hungarian refugees (most of who, with feet on the floor, sit on the toilet seat). As a result, members of the latter two groups accuse those in the former that they do not know how to use the lavatories and consequently they urinate and defecate not in the bowl but either on the rim or next to these, on the floor. In turn, the Bosnian Muslim refugees reproach their Croatian and Hungarian counterparts that the latter use the lavatories in "repulsively unhealthy and unnatural ways."

Work opportunities are a major and continuous source of competition in which ethnic allegiance and nepotism play important parts. After all, there are only two legitimate sources of income for refugees living in camps. One is the occasional paying job within the camp, (and, here it is the women who most often earn some money, versus the rare chance men get). The other source is a relative who is a guest worker in Western Europe or elsewhere who either sends money or something of value that the refugees can sell or exchange. The refugees from Bosnia are at a distinct disadvantage in most situations while ethnic Hungarians have the clear advantage of speaking the language of the host population. They are most often the interpreters, and serve in other functions as liaisons between the administration and the self-governing refugee organization, most of whom are Serbian- or Croatian-speakers. Often ethnic Hungarian refugees are said to take advantage of their situation by controlling the most lucrative jobs, securing for themselves the best clothes and other supplies from the warehouse, and (in the largest camp) the most frequent passes. As Rozsi, a 56 year old ethnic Hungarian woman from the Voivodina told me,

...you know, the lack of money is a perpetual problem here. There is no money if we want to buy something, and for cigarettes, fruit, candy, gum. The Bosnians and Croatians curse at the Hungarians. I am really Hungarian too, even though I was born over there, so I let it go in one ear, out the other: I don't let these comments bother me, or I try not to. These Hungarians here do everything for us. But you know: people will be people and even saints are depicted as having their hands turned toward themselves, so even saints look out for themselves first and foremost. There is so much envy and mistrust in the camp. Somebody always question the fairness of food and clothing and shoes distribution. True, the distribution really could use improvement. Others ask: who knows where some of the [refugee] money goes. True, a large amount was spent on the refurbishment of this camp before we were moved here. But what did they really do? They could have done a much better job: to make small rooms would have meant so much in cutting down frictions between people. You know, a couple of doors, a few walls here and there, and these large rooms would have been separated into smaller, more livable ones.

Still another type of ethnic strife is over who, a member of which ethnic group, is more qualified for either temporary political asylum, or refugee status. This is evident in the following remark of a 46 years old ethnic Hungarian woman from the Voivodina. Her comment also shows how the refugees behold their own reflections in their hosts' eyes. In this particular case she said about her Swedish "hosts,"

...they got rid of us. They could not fit *us* into their category of refugee.... What kind of refugee is one who escapes in a car and thus arrives to their shore? Now the Bosnians, they could easily categorize *them* as refugees. So they shoved 798 of us out to make room for a few dozen Bosnians....

As an elderly refugee man from the same group told me,

I am most grateful for Hungary's help. So many other [countries] turned away from us: how would their people feel if they were in our situation? Some [people] are without hearts, they don't feel the bind we are in....If Hungary would not have taken us in, god knows what would have been our destiny by now.

III.

Now let me turn to the "voices of paradox." I was also eager to examine the Hungarian host population's reactions to the refugee situation while I asked: what are some of the perceptions of self and other in an escalating and increasingly obvious refugee crisis? Amid growing internal socioeconomic difficulties in the transition period since the late 1980s, the responses of the host population to the seemingly endless flood of refugees have changed considerably. It must be noted that by July of 1992 there were serious -- and well publicized -- concerns that the entire refugee supporting infrastructure would soon be crumbling in Hungary. These concerns were well founded: only 20 percent of the costs to house, clothe, feed, care for the refugees came from the United Nations and other Western sources. The remaining 80 percent was either advanced by Hungary or outright covered by Hungarian sources without much hope of reimbursement (Hirmondo, 1992: July 20). The situation did not improve for 1993 (Agonies Ambrosia).

Hungarians were first open and helpful to refugees, but eventually many became ambivalent, and even hostile toward their uninvited guests.⁵ Clearly, these reactions of the host population are neither surprising revelations nor uniquely European, East-Central European, or Hungarian ones. Nevertheless I find the responses of particular interest for a number of reasons. Among these are (1) Hungary's own historical experiences of massive emigration; and (2) current discourse about asylum-seekers often focuses less on their plight than it does on Hungarian national identity, Hungary's place in Europe and what is periodically proclaimed as Hungary's "historic humanitarian mission in a singular moral universe amid the inactions of the West." I will deal here with the second point.

While there are perhaps as many different voices responding to the refugee situation in Hungary as are respondents, I will categorize (admittedly in a crude manner!) and discuss here only two types: 1.) positive and 2.) negative reactions.

1.) There are evident expressions of pride in many Hungarians for taking the refugees in because it is the "humane thing to do." There is, at the same time also anger toward the "proud and wealthy and compassionless West" for turning away trainloads, and boat-loads of refugees.⁶ And at the same time, as a prominent intellectual wrote in reaction to the disclosure that Jaques Attali, then representative of the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations' High Commission of Refugees, once again promised but did not send enough money for the maintenance of the refugees,

the West is turning away from us and from our needs, so we are, one more time behind the back of god and the West.

This was a very frequently used phrase. Similarly, the mayor of one of the cities with a large refugee camp told me that:

like so very often in Hungarian history, now too the West is turning its back to us while we get stuck with the trouble and troubled.

At the same time, the mayor recounted that:

let me tell you that, after the initial mistrust, the people in our city took readily to the refugees. Not only have they helped in many ways but also built multiple connections between the city and the camp. For example, there are football matches between our teams and those of the camps'...And imagine: on Christmas day there was a joint program in the [Catholic] church where even the Bosnians were singing '*Kis Karácsony, Nagy Karácsony*' (a Hungarian Christmas song), and we all cried.... Of course, I have to make certain that the city folks know that the refugees don't take any jobs away from the natives and the refugee camp does not cost any money directly to the city. For that matter, we benefit in the long run: last year a Japanese foundation specifically wanted to help a settlement that aided in the housing and medical care of refugees and gave us 11 million forints for medical equipment so we were able to replace an old x-ray machine. Otherwise, if

the city would have to support the refugees the relations would not be so peaceful....

A similar, yet more extreme version of the positive response is one that stresses the victimization of Hungary and Hungarians. On the one hand, emphasized are the goodness, helpfulness and humanitarian ways of Hungarians who act in the spirit of Saint Stephen, the founder of the Hungarian state, and thus making the Hungarians' actions during the escalating refugee crisis an altruistic, historical, mission-like feature of Hungarians being in the Carpathian Basin, and by extension of Hungarian ethnic identity. On the other hand, into this view of the national self enters the concern which is best expressed by the following quote:

once again we are being put upon: the West is, once again taking advantage of us, once again we are the protectors of European humanitarian values but we are once again pushed out on the semi-periphery between the Balkans and the European community (Kéri, 1992).

Reports are published about the average, simple-hearted, hard-working man of the street, folks who take it with great aversion that

again Hungary, this little island of peace, is taken advantage of by the West and used as a *végvár*" [final fortress] of a civilized Europe (ibid.).

Still others ponder that Hungary is in a different moral universe from the "other Europe," the Europe that prides itself to be

so very sweet smelling, so affluent and civilized while it is turning away from helping the unfortunates but Hungary is still helping --in spite of the tremendous economic burden that the great flow of refugees means to the country, the country that is already struggling with unemployment and inflation, that is accompanied by political and socioeconomic hardships (Verebes, 1992).

2.) Then there are negative, and at times overtly hostile and racist reactions to the presence of refugees. The proponents of these construct and pass on different types of stereotypes than those discussed in the previous section. It is best illustrated by some of the voices, for example that of a 42 year-old clerical worker in Budapest who told me indignantly,

Demszky [the mayor of Budapest] wanted all these foreigners to come here. Don't ask me why, I don't know. So now all the Gypsies, Romanians, Yugoslavs and other foreigners are all over the place. To top it off, Demszky urges us to give these foreigners clothes, blankets, food. But from what? We hardly have enough for ourselves anymore. Listen, today there are people in Hungary who are starving. There are the decent people on fixed incomes, on retirement and disability pensions. There are people who go to the streets and chant in processions of tens of thousands that 'we are hungry, we are cold.' So why should we give anything to these strangers? They come here, and then decent Hungarian folks are fired from their jobs so the foreigners can be hired because they are willing to work for a quarter of what the decent Hungarians were paid. Where is the justice in this? Tell me.

A few days later, the same person said to me, "even when I turn on the tap instead of water now outpours the news about refugees. Enough already! Who the hell cares?"

Many people blame not only the economic problems on the refugees but also the explosive growth of street crime, drug and prostitution rings. I found this kind of scapegoating strikingly similar to what I found elsewhere (Rydl, Jan and Sabina Slonkova, 1992). As another informant, a commuting skilled worker in his late 30s told me,

now here is this mob. Strangers, you know: *szedett-vedett, jöttment népség* [rabble from only god knows where]. Not that long ago they killed a decent Hungarian kid nearby. No wonder that everyone is against them. Everybody curses at them in the factory [in which I work] too. The government set up a proper camp for the Yugok [Yugoslavs]. So I told the wife: 'soon they will be eating better than we are eating.' Imagine: meat every day, in these hard times. So what did this foreign

mob do? They rebelled and beat up the decent, hard-working Hungarian guards.
Let the barbarians in and this is what you get for thanks....

Here, clearly the identities of "us," the good, decent, helpful, hard-working, humane Hungarians are juxtaposed to those of the "other," the evil, barbarian, the foreign, the rabble, whose lot by some weird quirk of fate is destined them to become privileged people at the expense of their host population.

Similar to these reactions yet more extreme is the reaction of the far right. Hungary's skinheads, who proudly declare to be "number one in Eastern Europe," and whose leaders carefully cultivate their association with German, Austrian, and other western skinhead organizations, focus their frequent verbal and written attacks generally on foreigners as well as on Hungary's Jewish and Gypsy populations that are estimated to be 80,000-100,000 and 600,000-800,000 respectively, depending on who is doing the counting and for what purpose. The slogans of the far right, "Hungary for the Hungarians," and "Arabs, go home" are central to their ideology (Gerlóczy, 1991). "Out with all foreigners!" is the cry of battle of other organizations of similar ilk, like the Hungarian neo-Fascists (Hajba, 1992:1, 4), and of the more recent formation like the far rightist *Világnemzeti Népuralmista Párt* (HVG, 1994, January 22). It is still crucial to note that -- even though these and similar xenophobic voices amid new politics of prejudice are clearly heard since 1989 -- in Hungary the growing number and increasing visibility of refugees have not (or not yet) elicited the kind of rampant xenophobia characterized by blind, pogrom-like eruptions against refugees as it did elsewhere. However, there clearly is official concern. For example, in April of 1992 József Antall, then prime minister, declared that

It is undoubtedly the case that there is direct correlation between acute economic problems, unemployment and the fall in the standard of living, and growing xenophobia. However, our government tries everything in its power to curb xenophobia in the country.

More than a year later Péter Boross, Mr. Antall's successor, was also addressing the refugee question and said that since the new refugee laws one and a half million refugees were prevented

from entering Hungary. Daily between 2000 and 2500 asylum seekers are turned away by the Hungarian border guards. He added that

Hungary is Europe's most endangered country: not an other European country has a war so near its borders, not another country is endangered by so many refugees.⁷ Our population around the borders need to be calmed constantly (reported by MTI, cited in *Hírmondó*, 1993).

IV.

These and similar divisions will grow as the needed resources dwindle, as warehouses in the camps are becoming more and more depleted, while the West turns away from helping with both the moral and the financial burden. In addition to a growing need for more funds, more clothes that are usable and practical, more food that takes into consideration the now largely Muslim refugee populations dietary needs, and above all, there is dire need for more humanitarian attention, more understanding. Most importantly there is dire need for the Western world to put forth more flexible, open and reasonable immigration policies that fit the post-socialist European refugee crisis.

In Hungary, like throughout the former Soviet Block, these are critical times. The transition of economy from central control to market orientation is a difficult one. Among the various attempts to fill the ideological vacuum are the efforts of still relatively small, but rabidly fanatical and loudly belligerent groups. Some of these groups, using the rhetoric and symbols from the very darkest period of recent Hungarian history, incite xenophobia and monger other, similar hatreds and fears among a growing number of followers. With Hungary indeed beyond the saturation point in playing reluctant host to an increasingly needy and growing refugee population, the imbalance is becoming critical between the real, tremendous economic and social problems and the ideal self image of Hungarians, as the noble, helpful, nurturing folks who are helping the downtrodden while the West, the world is turning its back. In the summer of 1991 Jane Kramer commented that in the West

the panic about immigrants from East Europe has been mainly a financial panic. As time goes on, the West turns its collective back both financially and morally to the situation of refugees.

While she made this observation relatively early, it became a prophetic one. One of the key questions became "who is asking to be included? who wants in?" As far as the refugees are concerned, European borders have not been dissolving but are becoming strongly fortified. With the red scare gone, the fear of refugees are with us. Both the symbolic and actual boundaries between east and west, and between the needy refugees from the east and their reluctant hosts in the west are being reinforced. Unlike when the "iron curtain" -- as Winston Churchill called it -- was erected, this time the curtain is buttressed from the western side. We owe it to the refugees to hear and respond to their voices of plight. And we must listen to those other voices in the host societies that are becoming increasingly liminalized.

Notes

2. According to newspaper reports, safety and other bank deposits grew measurably in the provincial towns along the southern borders of Hungary since 1991. (information through the kind courtesy of Tamas Fabian)

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