

Svenka Savic (Novi Sad)

In Memoriam

Vera Schosberger

(May 16th, 1927 – January 9th, 1972)

Vera Schosberger was born May 16th, 1927.

Had circumstances developed in a different way, these days she would have celebrated her 73rd birthday with us in a city in which she, as a child, played first pieces of music on the piano, danced her first ballet steps, rushed down the staircase from the first floor. It was future ahead of that little girl back in the thirties. On the Women's Section of the Jewish Community, her mother prepared various celebrations and holidays, just as women do these days in the Community. We have gathered in her memory, without her, though. Just as there are talented children who are being paid attention to over here; it was the same case 70 years ago as well.

Childhood: Let us try to unroll the scroll of Vera's life, just as a scroll of Torah is unrolled in order a portion of a text important for the history of the Jewish nation be read. This is an opportunity to feel as if an extraordinary piano player who had no equal in Novi Sad were with us, comprising the tradition previous to her and following her: the cultural one, the pianistic one, the familiar one. We would like to enclose her artistic personality into our memory like a jewel of this town's cultural and artistic life, where some other pianists preceded her or came after her.

In Vera Schosberger's birth certificate (copy in Hungarian, issued September 2nd, 1941, signed by chief rabbi Dr Kiss Henrik), beside the date (May 16th 1927) and place (Novi Sad), we also find some data on her parents: Jenő Schosberger, born 1891 in Novi Sad; mother Lili, maiden surname Furst, born 1903 in Pozsony. Both of them Jewish.

The first place of residence in Novi Sad was Futoska Street, after that being Magyar Street number 76 (somewhat later renamed Avgusta Cesarca Street, nowadays it is Danila Kisa 44). After the war the family lived in Karadziceva Street 5. From the father's identity card, issued 1942 on the occasion of moving to Budapest, we learn his description: high, strong, dark haired, dark eyed, without particular distinguishing marks. From the mother's identity card we see her personal description: middle high, oval face, red-brown

Hair, brown eyed regularly shaped mouth. The photograph in the identity card witnesses her extraordinary beauty and Vera's similarity with her mother. Her mother was educated, spoke Hungarian and German, which, presumably, she passed on to her daughters. In the heading occupation, it says she is a tradesman's wife – she had no carrier despite her remarkable education, which was usual for wealthy men's wives of that time in the city.

Thus, Vera was born in the family of a wealthy Jewish tradesman, Jenő Schosberger, as second child. Her elder sister Mira worked as an eminent scientist in Paris for many years

(at the Institute of Psychology Rene Zazzo). The first names of the two daughters – Mira (Rahela) and Vera (Lea) are supposed to symbolize the basic philosophy of this family: they lived in peace with each other and others, believing that it was the only right way of living.

Both girls received good education as early as in their childhood, thanks to the prosperousness of the family. Both of them finished elementary school and gymnasium in Nov Sad, along with other Jewish children, and attended classes of Jewish teachers. Both implicitly and explicitly, they cherished the tradition of the nation they belonged to. As for example, Mira and Vera, as children, took piano lessons, learned French and somewhat later English from Victor Dmitrijević's mother Claudia, a Jew of Russian origin. It should not be forgotten that back in 1940, the Novi Sad Jewish community amounted to 4,101 members (only 1,200 survived by the end of war, according to 'Jews in Yugoslavia', 1989, pg. 77). By their presence – culture and wealth – they enriched the multiethnic milieu of the city. In that milieu, the Schosbergers are unavoidable.

Vera showed talent for music in her early childhood, so piano studies followed as a natural result of that gift. Girlfriends from childhood remember Vera as a cheerful girl who would present her special show at children's gatherings, such as birthday parties: she would lie down and blow her belly up as a balloon. The children knew about that secret of hers, so, when the party got into its stride, they would ask her to show her secret. Vera would do it readily, because in that situation she was superior over others – being able to act out something others were not. That awareness of superiority will follow her throughout her life, either as a performance of real gift or as an obsession she should be like that. Superiority in this sense should be understood as human need to surpass the usual, the known, the common to everybody and to rise up beyond the truth of human power by which human consciousness gets changed and improved. Music is, for sure, one of the means by which such an aim can be achieved, believed Vera.

That is why she wanted from her early childhood to reach beyond, for what is unknown to others (those ordinary ones), reach for something others did not even seek. That need of attaining the truth beyond was characteristic feature of her whole personality and destiny. To gain ability of interpretation of other's musical thoughts in a way these thoughts become superior in creating a better world, this meant for her a basic demand for living. I have been told that in the moments of complete devotedness to looking for that beyond, she could be seen in various kinds of moods or conditions, estimated by ordinary observers as unusual, absent minded, being beyond real.

Youth: As for many other Jewish families in the world, for Vera's in Novi Sad as well, the beginning of World War II meant a turning point. Well ordered civic life with all the special days throughout the year (marking the Jewish holidays, birthdays and other remarkable dates for both the family life and the community) lost any sense. Time was ripe for finding out a new way of life in order to survive, because the German Reich issued special orders for the extermination of Jews all over Europe.

One of the ways to survive, Vera's parents estimated, was to move to Budapest in 1942 (about what we get informed from her father's preserved identity card, issued in Budapest August 17th, 1942, with the address in Buda, 3rd district, Kolosi square 1/III). That is where the Schosberger family bought a flat, while the two girls, Mira and Vera took up false identities – they had identity cards of their friend Jelka Pecic and her sister, dyed their hair blond, trying to hide their identity, so they got jobs in a factory in Budapest. In the Schosbergers' flat intellectuals gathered mainly from Novi Sad, but from other places as well, who estimated Budapest to have been safer from other places in the war waged Europe.

Their flat was a kind of intellectual oasis in the belligerent storm of chaos and human sufferings, an attempt young Jewish intellectuals overcome the times of war: Vera would play the piano; Ladislav Schlesinger, the blind pianist from Novi Sad (born in Subotica) was Vera's councilor and critic in her pianist acrobatism; Fredi Aschner from Zagreb would entertain the circle with jokes; Vera's elder sister Mira would play the role of the hostess; Viktor Dmitrijev was the one who would lead fiery political talks, while Lidija Dmitrijev would translate from Hungarian some useful texts for the circle of friends. Some other people were around as well, trying to make up together the appearance of pleasant life. However, when Hungarian fascist took over power in Hungary in 1943, life worsened a lot for the Jews in Budapest. Vera, hardly having reached 16, must carry the yellow ribbon as well, as a mark of the nation that is ostracized among the others; possibilities for moving are limited, and control over the family becomes strong. Such a psychical terror is possible to be endured by a young person only if he or she has certain support – Vera did have such a support in her family with which she bore that sort of human offence.

Although it was expected the situation would worsen, the family was left with the hope that the worst would not happen to them. Although Vera's family was offered to move to America (for a lot of money of course), they stay in Budapest to be taken away June 1st 1944. They were taken away to a camp. From a statement given in Novi Sad 1963, signed by Vera's good friends Jelena Kasovic (teacher of music at the Novi Sad music school) and Ruza Kraus (retired at the time), we learn that "Vera Schosberger, a musician from Novi Sad was kept in a concentration camp in Germany, at Bergen Belsen, from June 1st 1944, till December 6th 1944". After that, thanking to favorable circumstances, her family, due to its respect abroad as well, was exchanged for trucks from Switzerland, so the rest of the war Vera's family spent in Switzerland, under much less bound living conditions than at the camp. She returned to Novi Sad from there with her family at the end of war. Lidija Dmitrijev (who lost almost all her family in the Novi Sad raid in 1943, so each reunion with friends in the newly liberated city was dear to her) evokes her memory on meeting her after the war:" We were walking along the Danube, when I caught sight of Vera, her sister Mira, father and mother with suitcases in their hands. That reunion made me happy, it was good to see them together".

Vera lived through four years of horrors of war. When I say *lived through*, that verb has two meanings. Firstly, she was not liquidated by advanced mechanisms of ethnic

cleansing so well developed by the German power. Secondly, *to survive* means, “ to accumulate certain experience which afterwards could be, A locomotive for certain behavior “. Both meanings of this word affected Vera Schosberger’s further life in Novi Sad. The experience she gained as burden of war affected her life for sure in the future, but how and how much, we will never be able to measure. That very experience might have been activated in a segment of life difficulties of another kind. It must have contributed to that particular recognizable sensitivity mentioned by everyone that ever listened to Vera’s piano playing. That ability of hers for an empathy with the composers whose thoughts she interprets into our experience, that high ability of feeling sympathy with other’s destinies is only possible if we ourselves experience such depths.

Education: Upon return to Novi Sad with her whole family August 1945, both sisters started up with academic life: Mira got a grant in France and never ever returned home again, Vera enrolled in the Academy in Belgrade. From her student booklet (index) from the State Academy of Music we can see she Matriculated on the Department for piano studies (September 29th, 1945) as regular student. She was taught by the most prominent domestic music experts of the time: Ciric Licar – piano; Stanojlo Rajcic – harmony; Milosevic – punctuation; Bingulac – form studies; Kozina – intonation and choir singing; Manojlovic – History of music; Marko Tajcebic –counterpoint; Dragutinovic – choir singing; Krstic – piano methodology (she also had lectures in pre-military training, taught by captain Nikola Jancic). At the end of her student booklet it says: “ She passed her final degree June 14th, 1949 with A in piano, musical aptitude outstanding”. It was signed by B. Dragutinovic on behalf of the Rector of Music Academy.

So far we have no data about her life as a student in Belgrade. From an acknowledgement having been kept (hand written) we can see that Vera acquired a piano (October 2nd, 1946 in Novi Sad) from Gutman Rene, which fact shows the readiness of the family to enable Vera devote herself to music: **“To Ms.Vera Schosberger, N. Sad.**

I hereby state that I have sold my property: a piano of “Bluhtner” branding num. 109710 for 65,000 Din. In letters: sixty five thousand.”
Gutman Rene

From the transcript of the diploma (issued as late as June 30th, 1951, num. 785) we see that her teacher in major was Ciril Licar, head of department Emil Hajek, Rector Mihajlo Vukdragovic.

As a student Vera got II award for piano at the competition within the framework of the Youth Festival of Yugoslavia in Belgrade (November 11th, 1948). Upon getting her degree, Vera wants to devote herself to pianist career and that is why, on one hand she keeps intensively in touch with pianists in her city – Milica Moc and Jelena (Ila) Kasovic, who at the time already had had remarkable pedagogic results and, on the other hand, she wants to receive advanced training in world centres. First of all she goes to Zagreb to

professor Stancic, after that to Switzerland to Edwin Fischer, the most prominent pedagogue for Beethoven's music. Somewhat later she goes to Paris, to Ciccolini, which was followed by an invitation from Clara Haskil to Switzerland. She travels to other music centres as well in order to receive advanced training and to deliver concerts. She does not want to devote herself to pedagogical work at that time. All her effort is aimed at performing art.

Professionalism: From the very beginning of her career, upon getting her degree, Vera Schosberger showed an expressive musicality and devotion to her profession. She did not have a permanent job, although she regarded herself to be a piano soloist of Novi Sad. She accepted this kind of individual artistic engagement convinced that a career of a pianist must be devoted to completely and she thought she would disperse her energy in vain working with pupils at the school (she taught for a while, though, at the Music School in Novi Sad in 1956).

Dura Rajkovic, a pianist from Novi Sad, recalls Vera as a very educated person with refined musicality, who was "born as a pianist". He remembers interpretation of Stanislav Preprek's songs (on Vladimir Nazor's words), with the vocal interpretation of Anica Cepe, opera soloist from Novi Sad. He remembers Vera playing at Milica Moc's farewell recital when Milica Moc played together with her pupils and colleagues, including Vera Schosberger.

There is very little, more precisely hardly anything we know about Vera's intimate life, her loves, about her friends she was seeing and trusted. It seems she had no lady friends at all, or she had only a few, who gradually, from one reason or another, abandoned her. One must bear in mind what Ilja Vrsajkov said about her, namely that "Vera was not a usual person", she was too peculiar to be followed. She was completely devoted to music, highly professional, she did not particularly cherish friendships because they drew her away from that great obsession of hers. It was hard to cope with frequent travelling and obligations that friendship demand, especially new lady friendships and which would have meant she belonged to someone she can confide in (especially after 1954, when her mother was not beside her anymore).

Among the property bequeathed, among the few documents, there is a certificate (issued by National Board of the Novi Sad Municipality, Department for General Administration November 19th, 1963, "at Vera Schosberger's request, living in Novi Sad, Karadziceva Street 5, based on article 171 and 172 of Regulation on General Administration), which says that "a certificate is issued that Vera Schosberger, a musician from Novi Sad, has not been married so far... The Certificate is being issued "in order to be presented abroad".

Vera never founded her own family: her friends cannot remember her having talked about children, about any wish to have them, some even recall her mentioning frequently

that she did not want to get married. She felt completely lonely when her family lessened – when her parents died, first her mother in 1954, after that her father in 1957; her sister Mira had been in Paris ever since 1946. At first sight, this fact should not necessarily have caused her feel lonely. Many people live alone nowadays, especially among Jews, but not all of them feel loneliness the same way. Vera was very close to her mother, because she was her great support in life. Since her mother was not only a beautiful woman, but educated as well, according to friends' recollection, she passed over to her daughters the same values. Presumably mother's support, her guarding over Vera like an umbrella enabled her daughter devote herself completely to the advancement of her profession and not to getting to know the needs of everyday life (cooking or preparing something for others). That is why her mother's death meant for Vera a new burden in life causing emptiness. Nobody ever could take over her place. To all that disappointment in love life could be added, what, altogether with other misfortunes made up a life burden, indivisible with others.

Years of full life accomplishment arrived, years when one runs back over the past to see what one had done and where one would go – the decade between one's forties and fifties. It became clear that her status as a free lance artist did not enable financial security, not even the minimum inevitable to survive, nor did it enable the necessary professional feedback showing she was on the right professional track. Her gift, built up with her education and later on with her work and high professionalism, could not be valued by appropriate criteria in a society she had been moving in. The first positive criticism and first successes meant in the same time the first disappointments meaning that she would not reach the destination if she continued to go that way.

Reviews: The pianist career of Vera Schosberger did not last for long, but as long as it lasted, her recitals took place frequently and the reaction of public was always favorable. Her first record with the Novi Sad Radio was made 1954 and the last one 1965. Altogether she had about 30 concerts both in the country and abroad. The beginning of her professional career could be regarded year 1948, when she took part at the already mentioned Youth Festival in Belgrade. The very beginning could be put even earlier, if by "playing in public" we mean playing during the war in Budapest before a selected circle of friends in her home. As early as in 1965 (writes Mihalek), she stops playing in public after a recital dedicated to Mozart, at which she played perfectly his Rondo. She preferred recording at the studio – she felt more secure in a closed space than in front of public playing live, when she had stage fright and felt nervous. Her admirers remember various pieces of music she played: for one it was Schumann, others remember Brahms, for some it was Scarlatti and Debussy, while it says somewhere that she played "all the more important soloist pieces of piano literature". The majority of her admirers think she played Mozart with an exceptional sensitivity, with a dose of specific humor. The list of piano pieces Vera Schosberger played and the collection of criticism that is, regretfully, hard to obtain due to the fact criticism is printed in daily newspapers, following public concerts and not in the occasion of recordings at the studio, what became her preoccupation.

At the guest performance of the Novi Sad philharmonic orchestra in Belgrade February 1956 (at the Kolarceva National University), in the occasion of celebrating the 200th

anniversary of Mozart's birth) the soloists were Vera Schosberger and Anton Eberst. Vera played the Concerto for piano and orchestra in c-minor and Symphony in g-minor. A critic wrote on Vera's part in the success: "Pianist Vera Schosberger played her part of the c-minor Concerto correctly, with good musicality, a little bit too loudly, though and not completely cleared in style, especially when Mozart's transparent, rapid passages are in question (signed with the initial P. "Republika" February 14th 1956). The same recital was played in Novi Sad (January 10th 1956) written about by critic Mihajlo Vukdragovic: "Pianist Vera Schosberger played the soloist part of the Concert in c-minor with an intensity of refined musicality and culture and on a serious technical level (Borba February 15th 1956)".

Andrija Preger (periodical "Savremenik" July-August 1956, 173-174) estimates Vera's musical performance in detail: "Vera Schosberger, a young pianist from Novi Sad, who has already drawn attention on herself by her performances so far, especially by an impetuously refined and ripe in style performance of Mozart's Concerto in B-major (with the Belgrade philharmonic orchestra) last season, played at the beginning of May at the Kolarceva National University Hall. She successfully performed a diverse program comprising old classical composers, through the Vienna classics and Romanticists, all to the impressionists and the contemporary maestro Slavenski.

In Bach's Prelude and Fugue in a-minor for organ (in Liszt's transcript), in the rendering of Schosberger, the strength and grandeur of the architecture of the maestro as well as the plasticity of sounds got full expression. At the beginning, the fugue was interpreted too fast, but upon its gradual development the initial rush calmed down, giving space to the monumentality of the masses of sounds. The refined tissue of Mozart's beautiful sonata in C-major (K.330) gained its real fulfillment under Vera Schosberger's fingers. The pianist managed to pass from Bach's massive and full style onto Mozart's transparent music with great sense for real values regarding this sunny and cheerful art. She did not insist on the rococo character of this music, but emphasized its masculine and refined but still virile character. One must laud the rendering of the dreamy slow movement played with refined poetry and a lot of sound fantasy, as well as the capricious Rondo of the Sonata. Schumann's "Butterflies" (that a bit obsolete, naively romantic piece of music) was given by Schosberger a real fantastic character, emphasizing contrasts of the sentimental and capricious, while Brahms's Intermezzo and the Balade she gave the necessary dramatic character and that melancholic longing so typical to that late romanticist from the north. Undoubtedly the highest peak of the evening Vera Schosberger performed rendering the impressionists: Debussy and Ravel. She knew how to conjure up the true luxury of the tonal of a refined palette which nuances and reflections were fluid just as the water itself that is being painted by these authors with a lot of subtlety and richness in color. She closed this successful concert with a strong and brilliant interpretation of the Yugoslav Suite by Josip Slavenski.

The young artist once again confirmed her expressive musical and pianist talent by which she successfully interprets authors of the most versatile styles, reviving their music in a vital and convincing way. “From this criticism we can understand the general estimation of Vera’s repertoire – she played all the important soloist pieces of piano literature, or ” concerts, sonatas and concert pieces of domestic and foreign composers” (Eberst, 1997, 95).

In his review *Saula* writes back in 1954, following her guest performance in Zagreb, that at the very beginning of the career of this artist, a nice sound can be perceived in her playing, rich in nuances, with no insisting on external means, but rather on the internal strength and imaginative interpretation – quoted by Mihalek in the already mentioned radio program.

We learn about Vera’s piano playing from her friends as well.

Antonia Toth assesses Vera played so well together with her sister Claudia, the cellist, due to the fact they had similar ideas about the ways of interpretation, as well as about the contents and the emotions that should be visible in the course of interpretation. They performed together in 1958-59 and it was Vera who in a way helped Claudia get job engagement in Dubrovnik, back in 1960, where she still works. Antonia recalls the extraordinary interpretation of Cezar Franck’s Symphonic variations. These are just some of the elements to depict the versatile repertoire of Vera’s. Vera gathered around artists in her home, those first years after the Academy Enriko Josip and Glid the sculptor were coming.

Mihajlo Kelbli remembers working together with Vera for a short while and talks about her high professionalism and energy to complete each task she once had begun. He regrets they worked together only for a short while.

Ilija Vrsajkov says (in the before mentioned program of Dusan Mihalek) the already quoted statement that “Vera was not an ordinary person”. He talks about a good idea of hers from 1955, which was never implemented, but it was good to have existed at all, namely that a group of artists get organized in an association and to give cultural life in town an impetus by its artistic strength.

The fact is that Vera recorded more at the Studio than she played in front of the public. Reviews are written only of live concerts, but it should be stated that media promotion of artists was still in initial stage. Recordings stay at the Radio, they get broadcast many times, remaining with no adequate media visibility, though. One of the reasons why Vera has been forgotten by music critics is that recordings were not played over onto contemporary cassettes, neither were they advertised; recollection of her performance has not been kept in a materialistic sense, which would have otherwise led to preserving her

music from oblivion. Thus, one of our tasks should be that what is still preserved be played over onto CD and be shown to the public for successors. After the death of the artist, nobody particularly took care about preserving her bequest. These are all reasons why the artistic personality of Vera Schosberger was not estimated properly neither in her life, nor later, neither was the mechanism of collective recollection of the artist cherished systematically.

In conclusion: She was only 45 when she summed up her life and experience: 16 years of artistic career, with no family, with no permanent job, living in a country where free lance artists mainly starve and where associations of professional musicians mostly care about general issues, not individual ones, Vera Schosberger realized she would never gain that power beyond she had dreamed about as an artist. One thing she knows for sure is that she does not want any compromise either with her surroundings or with herself. At the very beginning of 1972, more precisely, January 9th, one cold winter morning, freezing and full of fear, she decided not to live the life that was not worthy herself. A life over which she did not have power-beyond any more. So death prevailed over her. In the river Danube that was part of her youth, her experience, she found ultimate harmony of her life. Music of waves of the river existing from the times immemorial replaced her life obsession. The gifted life full of music ceased to exist.

Today it is hard to give a rational estimation of the reason that led to such a decision, although she had attempted several times to commit suicide. What happened to Vera after she stopped rendering concerts, after her mother's death, after her father's death and much later, after her friend Ila Kasovic's death (1971) is hard to explain without a close research. Some remember Vera by the fact that she liked being alone, searching for sounds of music she was listening to inside herself and in the nature. Some others saw her wandering through the forest until she got exhausted, having left her shoes on tree stumps and growths on the path covered with leaves. She stopped walking only when tiredness crushed her, when her legs became painful. Some good people found her in such a condition. Time spent in hospital or clinics followed. Was she being healed properly? She underwent medical treatment and escaped from the institutions, which seemed not to have been able to help her. There were attempts to impose guardianship over her. She gradually dissolved her own identity by stopping to be what she wanted to be and what she had really been.

After treatments she felt hardly well enough to sit by the piano in front of the public. Doctors that healed her are not alive any more and most probably the diagnosis of her illness is not so important any more either (depression or schizophrenia it was). The diagnosis could have been a certain sort of depression or schizophrenia, which is not important now. It is important, though, to state that at the time nobody could help her. She found herself in the cleavage between her talent and desire to become first class artist. The society, however, did not have a solved status for such a choice. She, once rich and wealthy, was left after the state nationalization only with basic personal properties, which she slowly had to sell off: first furniture, later jewelry of the family...

The last years of her life were neither nice nor good. Many can mostly remember that last period of her life when she wandered through the city tumult all alone, drugged with medicines and sedatives, overwhelmed with loneliness. It could have been expected she would commit suicide in such a condition. Many a clever lady before her time did commit suicide. Let us just remember the excellent philosopher Anica Savic Rebac from Novi Sad, who killed herself not being ready to continue living without the man she had lost: her husband. Before her, Milica Stojadinovic Srpkinja, an outstanding pouters, collector of folk literature, an exceptional intellectual of her age and society around her, committed suicide in a time when she lost everything, not coping with life she thought unworthy of her.

To cut short life that is not satisfactory, not to accept any compromise seemed to have been a natural way for many intellectuals in this region, but not only over here. Women decided to kill themselves in situations they regarded unworthy of their capability – a capability of excellent artists, intellectuals or scholars.

This recollection is a memory on such a lady who did not want any compromise, but was searching for her superiority in the world she found herself too early in. The story of Vera Schosberger is just one of similar ones in the history of exceptional women of our city, but of world culture in general as well, a story of those lonely firs broken by winds of social destiny. That is why I feel the story of Vera Schosberger, both the professional and the personal one, as a rule concerning clever and gifted women who were crushed by the patriarchal society. Indeed, they are victims of their own ideal that life should not be lived in an ordinary way. We support those ones and confirm that opinion by this reminiscence.

I will end with a suggestion that systematic research begin concerning work and personality of Vera Schosberger, as a significant woman of our city. What is that we know about her so far? Very little. A few lines in music lexicons, random notes – and that are all.

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This text is a part of the project 'Significant Women of Novi Sad', coordinated by Gordana Stojakovic in the year 2000 within the framework of Women Research and Studies.

I would like to thank to all those who helped me bring together this paper in the shape it is in front of you now. It gained its accomplishment through longer or shorter talks by telephone or face to face with Lidija Dmitrijević, Andrija Preger, Mihajlo Kelbli, Djura Rajković, as well as relying on private documentation given to me by Pavle Sosberger, Antonija Tot, Anton Eberst, while Marija Adamov enabled me listening to Dusan Mihalek's footage. My special thanks go to photographer Branko Lucić.

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