# Jackie Gerlich: The Road from Vienna to Oz Episode 14 of *Exile* with Mandy Patinkin A Production of the Leo Baeck Institute – New York | Berlin Released July 23, 2024

SFX: THEATER ATMOSPHERE

MUSIC - CINEMATIC, MAGICAL

**MANDY PATINKIN:** August 25, 1939. Europe is on the edge of war. Jewish refugees desperately try to find a way out of Nazi-controlled Germany and Austria. But in America, a different type of story is unfolding: one of the most iconic films of all time has just been released in theaters.

On screens across the nation, a young Judy Garland with long pigtails and a terrier named Toto steps out of a sepia-toned farmhouse—and into a world of dizzying color.

In autumn of that year, a Jewish refugee named Ryfka Gerlich sits down to watch the movie. She's been in America for just over six months and her head is likely reeling from what she's been through.

She may even relate to Dorothy's plight—the chaos, the confusion, the feeling that you don't belong. The desire to go home, wherever that might be.

She watches as Dorothy meets Glinda the Good Witch, as the Munchkins emerge from their hiding places and sing, "Ding dong, the Wicked Witch is dead!"

Ryfka leans in as a trio of small men trot out in striped tights and stiff, yellow wigs. They declare themselves The Lollipop Guild.

Ryfka gasps.

The Munchkin on the left, the Munchkin in red! He's Ryfka's son...a son she hasn't seen in three long years.

# THEME MUSIC

**MANDY PATINKIN**: Welcome to Exile, a podcast from LBI, the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. I'm Mandy Patinkin. When everything is taken away, then what? From LBI's archives, untold stories of Jewish lives in the shadow of fascism.

Today...how a boy from Vienna ended up on the silver screen—and how his family journeyed across the globe to find him.

# THEME MUSIC ENDS

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Ryfka Gerlich came to America from Vienna in 1939. But that wasn't her first time fleeing the dangers of war.

SFX: SHIP HORN

MUSIC - PIANO WALTZ

**MANDY PATINKIN:** More than twenty years before that night in the theater, she and her husband, Abram Fuks, abandoned their home in Galicia, a region in present day Poland and Ukraine. Galicia was invaded by Russians at the beginning of the first World War.

Along with around 125,000 other Jews, they ended up in Vienna.

**BENJY FOX-ROSEN:** Vienna had, like a tremendous influx of what were, referred to disparagingly as "Ostjuden," so "Eastern Jews."

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Benjy Fox-Rosen is a Vienna-based musician and researcher. He's also Ryfka's great grandson.

**BENJY FOX-ROSEN:** And this is a term that was used not not only by non-Jewish Viennese, but also by Jewish Viennese to sort of differentiate themselves, between their, you know, so-called, less cultured, co-religionists from the East who really were coming in large numbers to the city. My great grandparents were one of those families.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Life in Vienna was safer, but that didn't mean it was easy. Ryfka and Abram had come to this new city with no money and no education. And even Viennese Jews seemed to resent their presence.

Despite that, Ryfka and Abram managed to build a life for themselves in any way they could.

**BENJY FOX-ROSEN:** The way the story was told, it was that Abram sort of had jobs and Ryfka had work.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Ryfka ran a dry goods store in Leopoldstadt, an area of Vienna with a large Jewish population. The couple lived in an apartment above the store.

Abram made his money buying textiles to sell to hat manufacturers. But that wasn't how he preferred to spend his time.

**BENJY FOX-ROSEN:** He also, according to family lore, spent a lot of time in Kaffeehäuses, in coffeehouses, hanging around. And he was also an amateur actor who performed in Yiddish language theater in Vienna.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Abram dreamed of being an actor! He wandered around the house, humming old tunes from the synagogue and performing bits from his theater productions.

So when Ryfka started having babies, Abram was intent on instilling his passion for performing in his sons.

The couple had three of them: Jack, Dave, and finally, Leo.

Jack and Dave didn't take much to the performing arts.

**BENJY FOX-ROSEN:** I know that my grandfather and his older brother, Jack, were required to take violin lessons, which they hated. And I think that ended with one of the brothers breaking the violin, like, smashing it.

MANDY PATINKIN: But the youngest son, Leo? Well, he was a natural.

MUSIC - SHOW BUSINESS

**MANDY PATINKIN:** He could sing and dance and make people laugh, even as a small child. Abram was delighted.

This is Leo, many years later, in an interview with famed TV news personality Mike Wallace.

**JACKIE GERLICH:** I've always been in show business ever since I've been a boy, and I've always wanted to be a performer.

**BENJY FOX-ROSEN:** One of the incredible things that we saw were headshots from Leo when he must have been five years old, and there was one with a lit cigarette in his mouth. So I don't think you put a lit cigarette into a kid's mouth unless you want them to be working as a performer!

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Leo's talent and charm made him stand out. But his charisma wasn't the only reason he was different from the other kids at school.

**JACKIE GERLICH:** The glands stopped functioning. In other words, say five, six years old, all of a sudden I stopped growing.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** After Leo turned six, his parents noticed that he wasn't growing as fast as his peers.

Eventually, they took him to a doctor—who told them that Leo might be done growing for good. He would never be taller than 2 feet, 9 inches.

At first, other children were mean. But Leo, with his sparkling eyes and winning smile, managed to charm them.

**JACKIE GERLICH:** Well, in school it was. At first it was a little hard. You know, naturally, they saw the difference in sizes. As years progressed, they got to understand me. And I made friends. In fact, when I even used to get in a fight, I always had somebody else to help me out if I lost the fight.

MANDY PATINKIN: Despite his small stature, Leo was bold and blustery.

Which, it turned out, was great for a performer.

**BENJY FOX-ROSEN:** My grandfather told me about this one act that Leo would do. He would go out on stage with a ventriloquist, posing as his dummy, sitting on his lap. And they would proceed to talk until they got into an argument that escalated so much that the dummy, Leo, simply stormed off the stage.

MUSIC - PROPULSIVE

**MANDY PATINKIN:** As he got older, Leo kept performing. With Abram's dreams fulfilled, Jack and Dave were able to move on to other interests. Ryfka continued to run the shop.

But their lives wouldn't stay peaceful for long. Trouble was brewing in Europe.

By 1934, Austria was an authoritarian state. The Nazis had taken power in Germany. Antisemitism was on the rise. For families like Leo's, who were Jewish and didn't have much money, life was becoming scarier by the day.

So it was fortuitous when, in 1936, they were approached by a vaudeville showman named Baron Leopold von Singer.

MUSIC - PLAYFUL

**TRAV SD**: As rare as little people are, and as rare as talented people are, finding talented little people is even rarer. But kind of miraculously, it happened.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Trav SD is an expert on vaudeville and the traditional American performing arts.

From the 1890s to the 1930s, vaudeville was one of the most popular forms of entertainment.

**TRAV SD**: When you go to see your favorite musical acts at a concert, or your favorite stand up comedian, say, or performance artist or something like that. Back in the day, back before movies and radio and TV, they would ship all of the acts, all of the entertainment professionals around the country, usually by train. And your local theaters would all be sort of part of this big network. And they called it vaudeville.

SFX: DRUMS, SPRINGS, HORNS, CROWD LAUGHTER

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Vaudeville shows included everything from singing to dancing to comedy to acrobatics. The acts were led by impresarios who organized and financed the troupes.

Leopold von Singer, who was really a Viennese Jew named Leo Singer, was one of these impresarios. His best known troupe was called "Singer's Midgets."

**TRAV SD**: So you'll hear me use the word "midget" from time to time when we talk. Because we used it as a term of art back in the day in show business, and there are many acts that actually use that word in their name. So I'm using it, as a brand, really, as opposed to what we now say is "little people."

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Singer was one of the first impresarios to form a "Lilliputian troupe"—so named after the tiny islanders in Jonathan Swift's novel *Gulliver's Travels.* 

**TRAV SD**: In vaudeville, you have to have a gimmick, you know, you have to have some kind of interesting little niche.

MUSIC - PLAYFUL

**MANDY PATINKIN:** A common gimmick was featuring performers with unusual physical attributes—perhaps they were very tall, or had many tattoos, or were very flexible. Or they were little people.

This phenomenon began back in the 1840s, not with vaudeville, but with the circus.

**STAV MEISHAR**: So there would be, you know, the main circus tent where acts of, quote-unquote talent would perform. So acrobats, jugglers, aerialists, all that, and then you would have other small tents.

MANDY PATINKIN: Stav Meishar is a circus artist and circus history researcher.

**STAV MEISHAR**: There would be the tent where people come to gawk at quote-unquote, human oddities, whether people with born, visible conditions, like people of small statures, like, women who were naturally hairy and grew beards, or people who chose to become visibly other, like a tattooed man, I don't know, many piercings, etc., etc.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** This history, of exhibiting people with unusual features for the public, is a complicated one.

**STAV MEISHAR**: Like, on the one hand, there's a lot of oppression, abuse, a lot of exoticizing "the other", which is problematic, deeply, deeply problematic. But on the other hand, this is also a time where people who had, you know, visible differences might not have been able to find jobs easily, especially not well-paying jobs. So to be in a freak show with a circus also allowed people with visible differences to have the kind of life that they might not have been able to have otherwise.

**MANDY PATINKIN**: The circus has long been a world that welcomed those outside of the majority—including Jewish people.

**STAV MEISHAR**: Jews in show business is a long tradition. And that dates back to a time when, Jewish people were not allowed to take any or every job that they wanted to, right? Like, the ruling class would say, these are the jobs you're allowed to have. For a while, it was money because Christians were not allowed to handle money. And that's where the whole trope of Jews controlling the money comes from. But then also Jews and show business comes from, show business was considered to be a lowly job. Especially traveling performers, like you don't have a home. You can't set up roots. People would look down on it. And so naturally, that was the job the Jews were allowed to have. We allow you to entertain us. We allowed you to set up no roots and keep traveling. The wandering Jew. So, yeah, I think it's safe to assume that there were a lot of Jews in show business because when you only have a very limited range of jobs you're legally allowed to do, then you're going to do your best with whatever you're allowed.

**MANDY PATINKIN**: That tradition continued with the circus—and later vaudeville—becoming a haven for those who were simply born different.

**STAV MEISHAR**: Circus has always been a place for people who are other or people who live on the margins of society to find a home and to find a community.

**MANDY PATINKIN**: And in the case of little people, the shows were wildly popular! Everybody wanted in.

MUSIC - PROPULSIVE

**TRAV SD**: In time, what happened was, the showmen, the impresarios, needed to outdo each other. And so you wouldn't just have a single little person. You might have two. And then that would grow to larger companies putting on operas or parodies of operas, of little people, touring the country for 1880s, 1890s. That grew to entire villages at amusement parks, both in the U.S. and in Europe.

SFX: HORN, KAZOO, DRUM, CROWD LAUGHTER

**MANDY PATINKIN**: Sometimes the performers were very talented—they sang and danced, did tumbling tricks and acrobatics, or performed comedy. Many did impressions of celebrities like Fatty Arbuckle and Mae West.

**TRAV SD**: And obviously some of them were just small and didn't have a lot of talent. But if you have an entire company of them, they don't have to be really gifted, per se. They could sing in the chorus or, you know, dance in the chorus.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** But Leo was not one of those chorus dancers. Thanks to his father's encouragement, he already knew how to perform.

And Baron von Singer was very interested.

We don't know exactly how Singer heard about young Leo. But at the beginning of 1936, he visited Ryfka and Abram with a pitch.

By the 1930s, vaudeville's popularity was fading. But Singer was still on the hunt for new talent.

**BENJY FOX-ROSEN:** So there was a contract between Baron Von Singer, as his stage name was, and the Fuks family, that Leo would earn \$15 a week. Pretty

tremendous sum. And, that sum would be sent to his parents weekly. And the contract stated that it would be for a term of 20 weeks, something like that.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** In exchange for Leo's services as a performer, Singer agreed to provide him food and shelter, and send the family money every week.

At first, Ryfka and Abram were reluctant. But Leo convinced them.

**JACKIE GERLICH:** I realized what my talents were, and I knew what I could do. And I talked to my mother and father and explained to them that, in fact, that would be the best thing for me to do because, after all, it's what I want to do. It's not something it's pushed on you. If you want to do something, you want to do it. If you push something to do something that you don't like, you're not going to be a success at all.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** So Leo's parents let him go. But perhaps, it wasn't just because Leo wanted it, or because the money would help.

Perhaps, they thought sending Leo away—a Jewish boy, a boy who was born different—might keep him safe.

**BENJY FOX-ROSEN:** The situation in Europe was quite unstable and people were considering how to leave. And I think Abram and Ryfka were also considering how to leave. And certainly in their minds, you know, when they were sending their 11-year-old child, they certainly did not view it only as a financial transaction. I mean, I think sending your 11-year-old child is a heartbreaking decision to make, and they understood that they might be losing their contact with their child, but saving his life.

MANDY PATINKIN: But there was still one small problem.

MUSIC - PROPULSIVE

**BENJY FOX-ROSEN:** Leo would have been too young to leave. And his older brother would have been then of age. So he had to use his older brother's passport.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** On March 2, 1936, Leo left Austria with Singer. He had a passport and a visa stamped with his older brother's name and date of birth. Because of his short stature, he could pass for any age.

SFX: TRAIN, STAMP

MANDY PATINKIN: And that's how Leo became Jackie.

In Singer's troupe, Leo—now known as Jackie—was happy. He traveled across Europe and America, and even to Mexico and Canada.

**JACKIE GERLICH:** Oh, I love to travel. That's one of my education in life. I think that's the biggest education because you meet people, you get the understanding of different people and you learn about life.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** But while Jackie was blossoming in his new life abroad, his family was still in Austria. And they hadn't received a cent from Leo Singer.

In the fall of 1936, about six months after Jackie left, Ryfka and Abram started to worry.

Jackie was supposed to be gone for twenty weeks. That time had passed. The few postcards they received contained little information. Where had this man taken their son?

The efforts Ryfka and Abram made to find Leo were recounted in a letter written by the Fuks family lawyer, which is now in the LBI archive.

SFX: TYPEWRITER

**LAWYER:** My client, the bearer of this statement, is desirous of retaining counsel in California to prosecute several claims which my firm and I feel are worthy and meritorious. The following is a statement of the facts.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Ryfka and Abram sent Singer a registered letter in September 1936, demanding that he return their son to them and pay them the money they were owed.

**LAWYER**: This letter was received by Singer in New York, as evidenced by a return receipt. In subsequent correspondence, Singer claimed that he did make several remittances via International Money Order, but a check with the postal authorities revealed that no such sums had been sent.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** They even sent an American friend to check on Jackie, but he had no luck.

**LAWYER**: Singer stated that the child had not been working, as he was too young. As a matter of fact, the child had made a tour with the "Singer Midgets" to Galveston, Texas, Sacramento, Honolulu, and other points.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Ryfka and Abram kept trying to contact their son for the next three years. All while the situation in Vienna seemed to be getting worse each day.

And then...March 11, 1938. The Anschluss.

It was time for the Fuks family to get out of Austria.

#### MUSIC - THE TERROR OF TINY TOWN SCORE

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Across the ocean, Jackie's star was beginning to rise. With vaudeville on its way out, Singer took his act to Hollywood.

The late 1930s was a great time to be a little person performer in America. A number of movies were made with little people at the center.

The 1939 New York World's Fair featured a "Little Miracle Town," with little people singing and dancing or just going about their days.

Singer was ready to cash in on the craze.

**ANNOUNCER**: Ladies and gentlemen, and children of all ages, we're going to present for your approval a novelty picture with an all midget cast. The first of its kind ever to be produced!

**THE VILLAIN**: I'm the toughest hombre that ever threw lead! And I ain't afraid of the biggest one of you. I'm the Terror of Tiny Town...*[fade under]* 

**TRAV SD**: I've come across a lot of people calling *The Terror of Tiny Town* like one of the worst movies or a bad movie or whatever. And I have to very strongly disagree.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** *The Terror of Tiny Town* was released at the end of 1938. It was produced by Jed Buell, a well-known maker of B-movie Westerns.

**TRAV SD**: So the very strange aspect of *The Terror of Tiny Town*, is that it's a legit serious, melodramatic Western script. And so after you adjust to the novelty of seeing an all-little people cast with Shetland ponies for horses and things, it's just a story.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** This was Jackie's first time on the silver screen. Over half of the cast was made up of Singer's troupe—primarily Jewish immigrants from Austria.

**BENJY FOX-ROSEN:** You know, they're supposed to be in the Wild West, and there's a scene where the cook is instructed to catch a goose, to cook the goose for dinner.

MANDY PATINKIN: Benjy Fox-Rosen again.

**BENJY FOX-ROSEN:** And the cook is going out and he's trying to chase this goose, and he has this, like a thick Yiddish accent. He's like, *[in a Yiddish accent]* "Come here, goose, I'm going to cook you! I need to catch you to cook you for dinner!"

CHEF: Ducky ducky! Fritz! Come here, ducky! [fades under]

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Jackie wasn't in the main cast. He wasn't even credited. But in several of the big ensemble scenes, you can see him running by in the background and singing.

**BENJY FOX-ROSEN:** There's a scene where there's a song sung in the bar and somebody, like, climbs out of a fridge behind the bar. I think that's Leo.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** His next opportunity was just a few months later, in *East Side of Heaven*—alongside Bing Crosby, no less.

Jackie plays a bellhop named Bobby who is instrumental to the plot. He still wasn't credited.

But his big break didn't come until 1939—the same year the rest of his family landed in America.

## MUSIC - CINEMATIC

**MANDY PATINKIN:** The major production company MGM was working on an adaptation of the beloved L. Frank Baum novel *The Wizard of Oz*. The film would be a visual marvel, with elaborate costumes, sets, and dance sequences, all rendered in vivid Technicolour.

In the film, our hero, Dorothy Gale, is transported from her dull life in Kansas to a magical fantasy land called Oz. And her first stop in Oz...is Munchkinland.

To make Munchkinland a reality, MGM needed a lot of very small people. 124, to be exact. And who better to call for a troupe of little people than Leo Singer?

**TRAV SD**: If you're working for MGM and you're casting this movie, you're like, who can I get to give me lots of little people? And then there's only a handful of names you're going to get, you know? It's just kind of like, It's going to be known that that's the guy to call.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Because of the sheer number of Munchkin characters in the movie, the actors who were chosen were not all talented performers. In fact, they weren't even all little people—12 of them were actually children, who were used to fill out the crowd.

This presented a problem for the choreographer. Some of the dancing parts were more complicated than others. He needed to make sure that only the most talented actors on set would be front and center.

So, despite the fact that casting was already done, the choreographer held auditions.

SFX: CROWD NOISE

**MANDY PATINKIN:** First, he organized the crowd of little people into groups. Then, he instructed them to stand in lines.

He taught them a simple dance sequence—just a few steps.

SFX: TAP DANCING

**MANDY PATINKIN:** And then they performed it for him. And then they performed it again. And again. And again.

Until finally, three young men started to stand out from the crowd.

He had found the Lollipop Guild.

**TRAV SD**: All three of the little people in the Lollipop Guild are significant little people performers. Harry Doll is most famous for the movie *Freaks*. Jerry Maren was in stuff until just a very few years ago. So you can see him in things like the Marx Brothers. Very often little people are used as sight gags in shows, and very often it would be Jerry Maren. And then the third one is Jackie Gerlich.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** In early 1939, while Jackie was in costume fittings and dance practice, the Fuks family were arriving as refugees in New York.

That's where they were living when Ryfka saw Leo, a.k.a. Jackie, in *The Wizard of Oz.* And that's where they were living when they hired a lawyer to help them reunite with their son.

#### SFX: TYPEWRITER

**LAWYER**: The parents do not desire to interfere with the child's career. He is very talented and should enjoy considerable success. The parents are interested in procuring damages for the wrongful detention of the child, and further are desirous of being placed in control of the child's earnings.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Shortly after that, Ryfka and Abram moved to California with Jack and Dave. That's where they finally saw Jackie again. But it wasn't quite what they expected.

MUSIC - MELANCHOLY

**BENJY FOX-ROSEN:** There was never like, you know, a reunion.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** A lot had happened in the three years since they had last seen their son. He was different, and so were they.

**BENJY FOX-ROSEN**: So we imagine often when we think about the Shoah, this, like, amazing, you know, family members finding each other after years of separation. But interestingly enough, with Leo's separation from the family, it doesn't seem like there was a dramatic meeting. It wasn't something that was retold to the next generation as part of family history.

**MANDY PATINKIN**: Even though they found their Leo, they never really got him back.

**BENJY FOX-ROSEN:** Jackie visited semi-regularly, maybe just for Passover, but I think, that was the extent, you know, for a couple of days at a time.

MANDY PATINKIN: Singer's troupe disbanded in the mid-1940s.

After that, Jackie left Hollywood and joined the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus as a clown.

## SFX: APPLAUSE, KAZOO, CANON

**MANDY PATINKIN:** His act included everything from being shot out of a rocket to doing classic gags alongside clowning legend Lou Jacobs.

Just like when he was a kid, performing made him happy. It was what he was born to do.

**JACKIE GERLICH:** That's another thing. I believe. That's why I'm very fortunate. Even if I am a midget. We have to travel a lot and do a lot of hospital shows. If you see small children, just 4 or 5 years old. Their legs, they have infantile paralysis. Some of them are on their back. When you get them to smile and laugh, you can't feel sorry for yourself. It's impossible because those children, they are ten times worse off than anybody else. People should realize that if they got their normal health and they move about, they should be happy.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** When he wasn't traveling, he lived in a house in Sarasota, Florida, with four other little people who worked with the circus.

Jackie died young, at just 35 years old. On December 26, 1960, he went into the hospital with stomach cramps, and passed away just a few hours later.

**BENJY FOX-ROSEN:** After Jackie died, it was decided not to tell their father, Abram, that he passed away. So...I think that Abram's mental health was declining at that time. Probably dementia, to some degree, is what we would call it. But it was decided not to tell him. And he continued, for the rest of his life, to ask regularly, hey, what do you hear from Leo? How's he doing? And his sons would say, oh, he's doing fine.

# MUSIC - CINEMATIC, MELANCHOLY

**MANDY PATINKIN:** He was buried in Sarasota next to his close friend, another circus clown. The funeral was attended by all the circus greats, including iconic clowns Emmett Kelly and Lou Jacobs, Ringling Brothers director Bob Dover, circus band conductor Merle Evans, and the famed hand balancer Unus.

Today, Jackie's legacy lives on. His great nephew, Benjy, moved back to Vienna and lives near where Ryfka and Abram once made their home. And just like Jackie, he's an artist. A musician.

**BENJY FOX-ROSEN:** As somebody also who works in the arts, it's also like the sense of having somebody in the family who chose quite a different life. You know, my grandfather was also in the arts. But I think Jackie's story is a little bit more mysterious. And a little bit more tragic, of course. You know, this whole biography is just, it's a strange story that we don't really hear in these narratives about the Shoah, in these narratives about immigration. It sort of defies categories in some ways.

But that was Jackie—defying categorization, carving his own path. And always striving to make an impression.

### JACKIE GERLICH: Well, it's been a pleasure. Goodbye!

## THEME MUSIC

**PRODUCER**: The Salomons-Fox Family Collection in the Archives of the Leo Baeck Institute includes the details of Ryfka and Abram's efforts to find Jackie, including the original contract with Leo Singer and legal documents laying out their case. You can also see press clippings of Jackie in his clowning years. Check them out at <u>www.lbi.org</u>. Exile is a production of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York and Antica Productions. It's narrated by Mandy Patinkin. This episode was produced by Emily Morantz. Our executive producers are Laura Regehr, Rami Tzabar, Stuart Coxe, and Bernie Blum. Our associate producer is Emily Morantz. Research and translation by Isabella Kempf. Voice acting by Cyrus Lane. Sound design and audio mix by Philip Wilson. Theme music by Oliver Wickham. Special thanks to the Bentley Historical Library and the Syracuse University Special Collections Research Centre.

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