

**Poland to America:
Polish Immigrants in Chicago and their Reactions to the Start of World War I**

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History 489: Research Seminar
Spring 2017

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Abstract:

This research looks at Polish immigration to Chicago in the years leading up to World War I, with a focus on the immigrants' feelings towards the War. Poland was split up in 1795 between Russia, Austria, and the region known at the time as Prussia; which became Germany prior to the start of World War I. The country regained their national independence after the war in 1918. During this time there was a lot of coverage on what was going on in the Polish territory because it was the majority of the front line, and Poles that recently immigrated to Chicago were paying attention. Local Polish newspapers printed articles trying to rally support for their homeland, discussing how evil the Germans and Russians were and attempting to gather funds for the Polish National Alliance which represented the desire for an independent Polish nation. These papers help us to understand how Poles that moved to America reacted to what was happening in their old home. This work covers a brief history of Poland at the onset of WWI to help explain the large number of Polish immigrants that moved to Chicago during that time. There were a number of newspapers publishing stories about what was happening in Poland leading up to, and throughout the course of the war, and they help expose Polish sentiment while the mayhem in their home raged on. These papers were translated from their original Polish to English by the Chicago Public Library and published as part of the Chicago Foreign Press Survey.

The Great War Begins:

“We firmly believe, dear brothers and sisters, that this mistreated, trampled, and calumniated Polish People has written at the very bottom of its soul the century-old injustice against its country and will soon utter its loud, sacramental words, "I am, I live".”

It was June 28th, 1914 when the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne was assassinated in Sarajevo, Bosnia which would set off a chain of events leading to what was known at the time as “The Great War”¹ The Balkan Peninsula had been in the midst of political and sociological unrest since the Ottoman Empire began contracting its borders in the late 1800’s as the kingdom weakened. Things started heating up in the region when Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina in an attempt to strengthen their foothold in an increasingly unpredictable Europe. This land grab angered Serbia in particular because Bosnia was considered a homeland of the Serbs as well as Slavic Russians.² Serbia responded to this by obtaining more land through wars in the Balkan area in 1912 and 1913 which effectively doubled their territory, further threatening Austria-Hungary’s regional power.

While this was going on Russia allied with France and Great Britain, both of whom had become wary of German ambitions in the region. After the Franco-Prussian war in 1871 Germany took land the French considered to be theirs, and Great Britain was concerned with how quickly the Germans were building up their naval capacity—worried it would soon rival their own. The leader of Germany, Kaiser Wilhelm, had allied himself with Austria-Hungary prior to 1914, effectively pitting himself against the forces of France, Russia, and Great Britain.

¹ “Outbreak of World War I,” History.com, 2009, accessed February 20, 2017, <http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/outbreak-of-world-war-i>

² Ibid

That fateful day on June 28th Archduke Ferdinand and his wife had travelled to Sarajevo to oversee the occupational army in Bosnia-Herzegovina, unaware that there was a plot unfolding that would see them both killed. The people responsible for the assassination belonged to a nationalist group called the Young Bosnian movement and were aided by the Black hand—a Serbian nationalist group whose purpose was to return land occupied by Austria back to the Serbs. The Archduke and his wife were travelling through town when a bomb was thrown at the vehicle, but lucky for the couple it missed and they sped off unhurt. Later that day the Archduke’s car took a wrong turn and they drove right past one of those “Young Bosnians” named Gavrilo Princip. Princip was close enough to the car that he was able to shoot the couple at point blank range before being tackled by the people around him. With the assassination of the Archduke, Poles living in the occupied territories decided it was time to leave their homeland in order to escape the fighting that ensued.

Pre-war Poland:

Poland in the early 20th century was a far different place than it is today. There were effectively three spheres of influence, one of which was under the control of Russia, one under Austria, and the third belonged to the Germans. All three territories were subject to some amount of pressure by their respective occupiers to conform to their rules but the German section was seen as the least forgiving by Polish nationalists. They were forbidden from using Polish as a language “in the administration, in schools, and in the judiciary system.”³ This means children

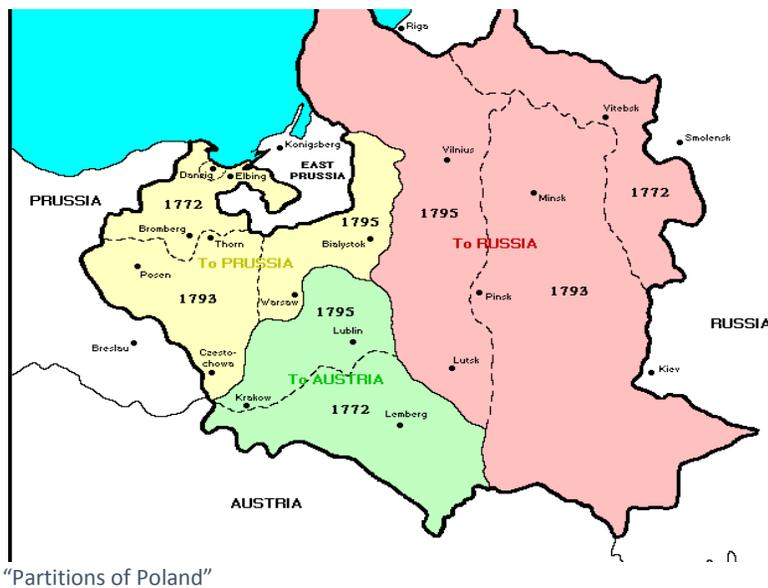
³ Piotr Szlanta, “Poland,” International Encyclopedia of the First World War, October 8th, 2014, accessed February 20, 2017, <http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/poland>

going to school in the German-controlled portion were forced to read and write in German which was a means of trying to make them “less Polish” and more likely to sympathize with Germany during their occupation. In the judiciary system and administration, it was the same rules, no Polish. This harsh treatment led many Poles to flee to the land owned by Austria, called Galicia, which was much more accepting of more traditional Polish nationalism. Since 1860

“Galicia had enjoyed extensive political and cultural autonomy, with a local parliament in Lviv, municipal corporations, and guaranteed citizens’ rights such as freedom of press, speech, and demonstration, and the right to establish political parties. Administrative, education, and judicial systems were polonized, Polish culture flourished and was able to develop without any political obstacles. Poles enjoyed a privileged status, both politically and economically dominating other ethnic and religious groups such as the Ruthenians/ Ukrainians and the Jews, who together made up more than half the population of Galicia.”⁴

Word of this relative freedom under the Austrian occupation spread to the Russian and German-held areas and soon families were fleeing in hopes of reaching Galicia. In the lead-up to the war two major political parties had come to the forefront in the Polish territories. One of the major parties sided with the Russians, while the other was favorable to the Austrians. The

Figure 1: The boundaries of the three occupied Polish territories.



Germans, who occupied the third piece of Poland, had been such ruthless oppressors that the Poles had little interest in siding with them in any way with a war looming just around the corner. A man by the name of Roman Dmowski (1864-1939) was the most well-known advocate for the

⁴ Piotr Szlanta, “Poland,” International Encyclopedia of the First World War, October 8th, 2014, accessed February 20, 2017, <http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/poland>

Russian sympathizers. Dmowski predicted, “that the approaching military conflict would have a racial character and would be fought between Teutonic Germany and Slavic Russia. In the future war, Poles should sympathize with and actively help Russia, who, after the victory, would unite all ethnic Polish territories and grant them autonomy within the Russian Empire.”⁵ This rhetoric was instrumental in uniting the pro-Russian sympathizers in the Polish territories and those that had immigrated abroad to avoid the maze of trenches that Poland would become. The idea that if the Poles helped the Russians during the war they would help unite the Polish territories and grant them autonomy afterwards struck a chord with a lot of Polish nationalists who were tired of their homeland being split up and occupied by different nations. The Pro-Russian sentiment echoed especially loud in the Polish suburbs of Chicago, where families who had escaped the political unrest were trying to decide which side they were going to choose in the upcoming war.

On the other side of the argument were those who thought the Habsburg Monarchy would offer the best post-war conditions for the Poles, due to the fact that leading up to the war they had been the most lenient in their occupation of Polish territories. This didn’t sit as well with the immigrants in Chicago because part of the reason they left their homeland was they were opposed to Poland being split up into separate territories.

⁵ Piotr Szlanta, “Poland,” International Encyclopedia of the First World War, October 8th, 2014, accessed February 20, 2017, <http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/poland>

Poles in Chicago:

People have been moving around the globe ever since they could walk, whether it was following game or livestock, avoiding other groups of people, or simply looking for an area with more resources. As technology advanced people were able to cover ground more quickly than ever before. There was the horse and the camel, the wheel, steam powered engines, and eventually internal combustion engines.

If we look at America specifically there have been four notable large immigrations to the country. The first and probably most well-known was when Englishmen started boarding their ships around 1619 to escape the oppressive king and live in the freedom the American colonies offered. This influx of arrivals lasted until about 1775 and then began to taper off. There was a lull in immigration after 1775 due to the wars taking place in Europe and the newly formed country of America fighting for its own independence. The second wave was from approximately 1820-1870, and the majority of these were Irish and German settlers who had lost their homes and jobs due to the potato famine. The third wave of immigration, the one we're focusing on for the purpose of this paper, began pretty quickly after the previous surge. There are a number of hypotheses as to why this third wave began so shortly after the second but the most agreed upon reason is the late stages of the California gold rush and American expansion into the west. When gold was found in California people packed up their families into covered wagons and headed out west in hopes of staking their claim and striking riches. This boom in expansion created major cities in western territories that had previously been untouched wilderness. When word of what was happening in America reached Europe's shores, those who were already looking for a safe haven for their families in a tumultuous Europe saw America as the land of opportunity and untold riches.

Not everybody decided that heading for the Rocky Mountains was in their best interest though, because by 1880 word was coming back from the west saying there was less and less gold to be found every day. Chicago became home for many who had come to America and discovered the truth about the west, it was a dirty, rugged, lawless place—not exactly fit for raising a family. This led a huge number of Poles looking for a place to settle down to choose Chicago. Hard-working Poles often found good honest work in the factories and small businesses surrounding Chicago, heavily populating neighborhoods like “Oak Lawn and Hickory Hills, western suburbs like Berwyn and Lyons and northwestern suburbs like Norridge and Schiller Park.”⁶ To give you an idea of the numbers of Poles that had immigrated to Chicago: “There were 25,726 Polish immigrants in the metro area in 1890, and by 1920 the population reached 151,260.”⁷

The New Polish Home Front:

News of the gruesome fighting in Europe was being printed in all the American newspapers, and nobody was more interested than the Poles whose homeland was taking the heaviest hit. As they worried about friends and family back home they found solace in each other and their new lives in America. They printed their own local newspapers which have been compiled by the Chicago Public Library as part of a project to translate and classify selected news articles that appeared in the foreign language press from 1855 to 1938. The later selection of these which were released in the years prior and during the first world war are particularly

⁶ Polish American Association, *Polish community metro 2000 census*

⁷ *Ibid*

interesting in showing us what the poles in Chicago thought of what was happening in their old home. Even though they were thousands of miles from home they tried their best to make a difference. One example is an article published in the newspaper *Dziennik Zwiqzkowy* in 1908 telling all Polish merchants to boycott goods made in Germany. The beginning of the article reads:

Polish merchants in Chicago are planning a very energetic boycott on all goods bearing that hated mark "Made in Germany." This information was communicated to us by several Polish drug store proprietors, who are promoting an energetic agitation, not only among the druggists but also among other merchants who handle German merchandise. The number of merchants who sell German merchandise is very large; in fact, it is much larger than most of us suspect. Polish merchants in America sell millions of dollars of German goods every year. Many Polish merchants do not even know that on most articles imported from Germany there is the small stamp "Made in Germany." Our readers can easily prove this for themselves by taking a good look at some of the post cards showing views of Chicago; they will find, on one of the corners, in small print, "Made in Germany." Not only post cards but also pocket knives, brushes, combs, pins, pencils, notebooks, religious pictures, musical instruments, and hundreds of other articles manufactured in Germany are sold by German agents in Chicago.⁸

Even though a boycott seems like somewhat of a trivial attempt at making an impact on the German's large economy, millions of dollars in German goods were being sold and they wanted to make sure that as few of those dollars as possible made it back to Germany. You can get a sense for how they felt about the German goods bearing that "hated mark 'Made in Germany'" by the way they talk about them. They also issue a call to arms to all Americans in hopes that this boycott has a further reaching effect: "American firms are in favor of this boycott, because, if it proves successful, it will force out all cheap German goods, representing millions of American dollars, and will furnish work for thousands of American working men. Well organized agitation may spread this boycott throughout the whole United States."⁹ They tried

⁸ Polish Merchants Will Boycott German Goods, *Dziennik Zwiqzkowy*, February 01, 1908

⁹ Ibid

appealing to Americans all over the country by pointing out that boycotting all these German goods would create more jobs in America and help decrease the amount of money leaving the country.

An even more interesting article I came across was one written on September 28, 1910 titled: “Poles Organize to Aid Homeland” which talks about the existence of “many Polish military groups in various cities of the United States.”¹⁰ This sounded kind of odd until I read that they were mainly volunteers and participated for celebratory purposes:

To begin with, these groups are not trained or organized adequately, and they lack arms of the latest make. Our Polish divisions are composed of volunteers who, after first organizing the military societies, have to furnish their own uniforms and equipment. From time to time these volunteers are called upon to take part in various celebrations. This is done for the purpose of reminding our people of the military splendor that existed once upon a time in Poland. The main purpose, however, is to maintain in our people the faith that Poland will some day become a free and independent nation through the armed efforts of her sons on foreign soil.¹¹

These volunteers are groups of “soldiers who gained military rank while serving in the armies of other European nations. The privates are volunteers of various ages and professions, most of whom never completed their military service in Europe.” The main purpose of these troops was to build morale among Poles in America, since a large number of them had family who was unable to flee their home country. The military groups weren’t only in Chicago however, the “entire Polish-American ‘army’ numbers several thousand soldiers, scattered throughout the United States” At this point in the article it seems like some of the Polish immigrants in America are trying to build some sort of paramilitary force, but it makes sure to clarify “So far no provision has been made for maintaining paid officers and leaders or for building a military

¹⁰ Poles Organize to Aid Homeland (Editorial), Dziennik Związkowy, September 28, 1910

¹¹ Ibid

school to train these soldiers.” Later on in the article it clarifies further: “It is perfectly all right for our fellow-countrymen who have settled here permanently to create military groups, but they should not think of maintaining paid officers and creating a regular army ready to leave against an enemy”¹² So, the volunteers aren’t building some sort of guerilla force within the United States, it is mostly army veterans and interested young men trying to rally people behind the polish army with the feeling of an impending war on the horizon. But this level of dedication goes to show just how much they still cared about their homeland even if they were settled in America. The article praises these military groups for what they do:

The sacrifices made by our brethren belonging to these Polish military groups are enormous and worthy of admiration. These soldiers, although employed at hard labor during the day, are willing to devote their evenings and holidays to the drills. They purchase their own uniforms and go into other expenses just for the sake of retaining our military tradition and spirit, thus awakening a desire among our youth to take part in these military drills¹³

Clearly the men and women who participated cared very deeply about keeping their traditions and culture alive, and even though the “military forces” are merely symbolic, with their large size they reached a lot of home sick Poles across the country. Keeping morale high among the polish immigrants was important because many of them felt that an immense war was coming, and the most likely location was their homeland.

Once news had reached America that Archduke Ferdinand and his wife had been assassinated the Poles knew what was coming. An article published on August 1st 1914, just over a month after the killing, speaks volumes for how a majority of the Poles thought about the war. Simply titled: “War”, this piece discusses a variety of subjects from whose side the countries are

¹³ Poles Organize to Aid Homeland (Editorial), Dziennik Związkowy, September 28, 1910

on, to who they should hope to win, and even includes predictions and a course of action for after the war is over. We already know how the Poles feel about the Germans after living under their occupation for years leading up to the war, but this newspaper article contains perhaps some of the most anti-German rhetoric printed in the Polish community before war broke out.

This war is not a war between two or more kings--it is a war of races, a war of nations, a war of humanity against militarism, which has been for many years oppressing the people and drawing out the very essence of life from the masses, obstructing their development. In this war races will fight each other. Just as once on the fields of Grunwald the Slavic world, under the leadership of Poland, fought a battle for life or death with Germanism, so now will the Slavs stand together as a barrier before Germanism and will cry out, "Kill or die!"¹⁴

The first few lines illustrate how much bigger they thought this war was going to be compared to the wars of old between feuding kings. They knew this was going to be a war of epic proportions, describing it as a "war of humanity against militarism", referring to Germany's continued use of its military might to annex Polish lands and oppress its people—"drawing out the very essence of life from the masses, obstructing their development."¹⁵ Most Poles considered themselves to be Slavic, which can be defined geographically as the East and Southeast portions of Europe, as well as the language spoken by those who identify as Slavic. Despite identifying as Slavs, Polish culture in general was more in line with western ideals when they weren't occupied. They use this identity to separate themselves from the Germans whom they referred to with disdain and rhetoric consistent of militaristic barbarians. Even going so far as to say: "Germanism is the avowed enemy of everything even remotely Slavic."¹⁶ In an effort to conjure up more support behind beating the Germans, they recall the battle of Grunwald and

¹⁴ War (editorial), Dziennik Związkowy, August 01, 1914

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

their defeat of the advancing “Germanism” into slavic lands, ending the note on a rallying battlecry—“Kill or die!”.

Poland was one of the first and only territories to break away from the Byzantine Empire, also known as the Eastern Roman Empire, which was very strict in its governing. Historically speaking this should have been the beginning of a new and free Poland, which it was to an extent, but few countries have been as unfortunate as the Poles who always seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. As the article goes on you can see this feeling of misfortune come to the surface:

“Justice, which civilization promises to spread, had commanded that the Poles be saved, because they were the first and the only ones to break with the Byzantine East; they were the first to raise Christ's banner high and to carry the words of brotherly love and the fear of God into the dark masses of their peoples. Unfortunately, this justice turned out to be our hangman, and civilization, our stepmother. We were betrayed, robbed, and, after the final blow was dealt us, we were ridiculed.”¹⁷

They felt as though they had done everything right, breaking away from the ruthless Byzantine, establishing Christianity in the nation, and forming a new place for their people to call home without fear of persecution. Although this secession happened quite a while ago and a lot has happened since, Poles often found themselves at the short end of the stick, and on the eve of World War I things were looking gloomier than ever for Poland. For those considered lucky enough to have made it to America, and were old enough to know the disastrous history of Poland, there must have been an unbearable amount of dread for what was to come.

With few practical choices, and being almost completely encompassed by powerful countries which had made an enemy of Poland over the years of mistreatment, it was time for the

¹⁷ War (editorial), Dziennik Związkowy, August 01, 1914

Poles to pick a side in the battle. At this point it had become a choice between the better of two evils, for there was no way Poland could stay out of it when the intersection of three major powers met in the heart of their country. Poland at this time considered Russia an enemy for a myriad of reasons, but as much as they disliked the Russians they absolutely despised the Germans, going so far as to coin the term “Germanism” to describe their seemingly uncivilized neighbors. The Poles considered Russians to be fellow Slavs at least, and looked past their hatred to see a Russian victory as the best option for Poland. The article recognizes the reality of Russia’s strength, and hopes to see it pitted against the Germans: “Russia has now at its disposal the greatest military power of all the Slavic nations, and, possessing it, she can and should, in the name of the Slavs, give battle to the German hordes.”¹⁸ A Russian victory was seen as a far better alternative than a German victory. Obviously they wanted to see the Germans defeated but there was another reason that Russia leading the rest of the Slavic nations into battle might be beneficial for Poland. As the article states:

Just as we wish the Slavs victory and the Germans absolute political annihilation, so do we wish that Russia, in gaining the victory, become so weak as to give us a chance to settle our score with her. With a weak and enfeebled Russia, we will be able to settle our account easily, the more so since, after an eventual successful war, Russia will become the debtor of the Slavic nations, contracting obligations which she will not be able to circumvent so shamelessly as she did with us more than a hundred years ago.¹⁹

So while the Poles were rooting for Russia to win, they were shamelessly also hoping that after the war was won the country would owe the frontline nations serious debts and thus be weak enough that Poland would be able to “settle the score”. The author mentions a debt that Russia must have failed to repay...”more than a hundred years ago.” Of course it doesn’t stop there, the

¹⁸ War (editorial), Dziennik Związkowy, August 01, 1914/

¹⁹ Ibid

author goes on to use a clever analogy to describe how Poland might be able to change the way the Russians treat them: “We should, then, wish Russia that, having crushed the Germans, she might break her teeth on them and accept us as her dentists. We will know how to extract her old and crumbling roots and, in setting in new teeth, we will set them in such a manner that she will not be able to bite us with them.”²⁰ This is an interesting way to put it to say the least, but Polish immigrants that had fled the Russian-occupied territories were still a bit salty about the way they were treated. This bitterness led to the conclusion that it would be better for Russia to win rather than Germany, but Russia should be so damaged that the Poles could settle the score with them and even make it so that Russia would have far less control of them in the future. One thing stood out above the rest in the minds of the Polish immigrants on the eve of a terrible destructive war, they wanted their independence back. The author of the article speaks of “prophecies uttered some fifteen years ago by Dr. Simon Aszkenazy, professor of the University of Lwow.”²¹ which must have stuck in the minds of many Polish men and women as they watched their homeland divided among great nations. The “prophecy” is as follows: “The Poles, as a Slavic nation, are related to the East, but, through their civilization, belong to the West. Therefore, if Europe, after a European war, wants to assure itself peace, it must separate the Eastern sphere from that of the West, and it can do this only by resurrecting Poland.”²² It makes sense that while the author was writing this article, assuming correctly that the beginning of the war was just around the corner, he should remember to give hope to those who wished to see Poland returned to its former glory as an independent state.

²⁰ War (editorial), Dziennik Związkowy, August 01, 1914

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

On August 14th, upon hearing news of German advancement into Poland, the author published another article titled: “In the Name of the Homeland, to Action! [An Appeal by The] Department of Independence of the Polish National Alliance”²³. The Poles had founded the organization just days before this article was published as a means of collecting funds and raising awareness of their cause which was of course, Polish independence. The alliance includes a call for donations with the same rhetoric we’ve been seeing from the Poles all along, referring to the Germans as barbarians:

The souls of our brothers and sisters have begun to fill with the idea of lifting our homeland out of the shackles of imprisonment; their hearts and generous hands have opened in order to bring aid to this Alma Mater of Slavism, the Alma Mater of freedom, for which the barbarians have tortured her. May your offerings, dear brothers and sisters, flow in the widest stream for this need of aiding our homeland; and be assured that they will not be squandered but will go to the place which you have destined for them.²⁴

No matter how long they had been in America, many immigrants still considered Poland to be their home and cared deeply about what was happening, especially if they had family or friends that might be caught up in the fighting. The alliance recognized that the fate of Poland was up in the air and it was their duty to stand behind their people no matter what. They reassured their readers that “Whichever road the homeland takes, on that road our Polish National Alliance will follow it, because this is the wish of the entire hundred-thousand-strong confederation of our brothers and sisters.”

²³ In the Name of the Homeland, to Action! [An Appeal by The] Department of Independence of the Polish National Alliance, *Dziennik Zwiqzkowy*, August 14, 1914

²⁴ Ibid

Conclusion:

Poles that immigrated to Chicago were almost 5,000 miles away from their homes, but they held onto their aspirations of an independent Polish nation they might one day return to. The country was split up and occupied for more than 100 years so when World War I began it was seen as an opportunity to return Poland to its former glory as an independent nation. Chicago became a prominent region for this Polish nationalism in America due to its central location and large concentration of Poles. Even after the war, when their country became autonomous again, many Poles decided to stay in Chicago where they had made new lives. The culture and pride these people brought with them can still be seen flourishing today in certain suburbs that maintained higher Polish populations. For example, the Polish National Alliance held the first Polish Constitution Day parade in Chicago in the 1890's and it has been held annually ever since.

The outbreak of World War I was met with a reasonable amount of dread and fear for what was to come, as most of the world understood the consequences of such a large-scale war. However, for Poles that had emigrated to escape the oppressive regimes of Germany and Russia the fighting between the two was seen as an opportunity for the resurgence of a Polish state over its weakened oppressors.

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