

The Formation of Trauma in Ravensbrück

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Abstract

Since Freud's psychoanalytic school introduced trauma into the humanities and social sciences, academia has begun to discuss trauma from various perspectives. This article takes the Ravensbrück concentration camp during the Second World War as its main sample. Departing from a historical-philosophical perspective and combining historical documentary materials of the camp, it analyzes aspects such as the architectural design and participants. It argues that the unique structure of the camp has led to a distinctive pattern of concentration camp trauma, with the key factor being the extreme imbalance of power within the camp's specific environment.

Keywords

Ravensbrück, Trauma, Holocaust, Power Imbalance

The Holocaust was born executed in our modern rational society, at the high stage of our civilization and at the peak of human cultural achievement, and for this reason, it is a problem of that society, civilization and culture.

-Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman, 2000: p. 10)

1. Introduction

Trauma is a psychological term that is being used more and more these days. This term can be found in a variety of fields, including history, philosophy, sociology, and the news media. To be honest, this is a phenomenon that is very worth discussing in the current culture. Academics stayed silent about Holocaust research in the decades following World War II. The Holocaust is a prevalent taboo totem around the world, and no one likes to talk about it because it is such a deep wound in human civilization's history. Like deep scars left on the human body after severe injury, even after recovery, they will remain. From the perspective of human civilization history, the degree of the damage caused by Holocaust to human society is immeasurable. Actually, we are remaining mute because we do not know how to respond to the exposing of human nature's brutality in a highly developed civilization. Forget? Or remembering? Each attitude has benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, we have a responsibility as human beings to warn others to prevent a repeat of this catastrophe; on the other hand, it is a deeply painful topic that seems impossible to convey in words. With the rise of trauma literature and the question of identity, however, the Holocaust has become an unavoidable topic in history.

As Allan Megill says, "still speaking speculatively, we can posit that such self-fashioning would more typically be ringed by anxiety, and hence would require some form of justification. When Goethean or Nietzschean self-confidence is lacking, there would be a motive to appeal to the past-or rather, to a certain image of the past, which we call memory." (Megill, Shepard, & Honenberger, 2007: p. 44) This anxiety about identity is increasingly prominent in today's society, and therefore "putting the Holocaust into a perspective of European history makes this burdening past important for Europe today. This importance tackles the ongoing process of building a European historical identity. The Holocaust has gained a significant impact on the topical discussion about this identity." (Rüsen, 2004: p. 35) The question of identity is the key to studying the meaning of Holocaust trauma and it is always influenced by many factors, like environments and politics.

Even though many studies discuss trauma in the Holocaust, researchers are still unable to agree on a definition of trauma. As a result, I'm not going to try to be explicit in this introduction. Instead, I'll try to outline the trauma process in concentration camps, particularly Ravensbrück, by its underlying causes. We've been focusing on the role of men in the Holocaust for a long time, and we've always disregarded female figures. Women, on the other hand, have always played a major role in the Holocaust, both as victims of the Holocaust and as active participants, and they are an essential part of it. Ravensbrück is the world's largest female concentration camp, with over 130,000 women and children from over 130,000 women and children from more than 20 nationalities, mostly Polish (ca. 25%), German (ca. 20%), Jews of different nationalities (ca. 15%), Russian (ca. 15%) and French (ca. 7%), were taken as prisoners to the camp and its sub-camps (Rydén, 2017: pp. 511-530)

Thus, in the first part, I will introduce the basic information about Ravensbrück. I'll explain the process of trauma formation given both external and internal factors in the second section. In terms of the external environment, the camp's architectural structure is an embodiment of absolute power, providing the material environment for the formation of trauma; in terms of internal factors, I will primarily discuss the trauma production process from two different perspectives: prisoners and perpetrators. Finally, in light of the prior discussion, I will delve deeper into the definition of trauma.

2. Ravensbrück, "The Women's Hell"

Ravensbrück is located next to the women's section at Auschwitz II-Birkenau. Not only women prisoners, but Ravensbrück also has a small men's camp, industrial facilities, the "youth protection camp" and some subcamps (more than 30). Though initially intended as a prison to be used for those who had transgressed laws of the Third Reich, it eventually housed a gas chamber and crematorium; many inmates were transported elsewhere for execution before the gas chamber was put into operation in 1945. (Herbermann, 2000: p. 27)

The guards here mostly are women, and their ranks are very different, they "were not members of the SS but members of the female SS retinue (weibliches SS-Gefolge), they were, like the SS men, subject to SS jurisdiction." (Megargee, 2009: p. 1188)

Political opponents, members of "lower races," criminals, and "shift-lesselements" (so-called "asocial") are the main sources of poisoners. The Gestapo designated these four categories as belonging to concentration camps. The living conditions there were not that awful until 1943 when a large number of inmates were transferred to Ravensbrück. Some of them perished due to a shortage of everyday basics such as food, water, tents, and so on, while others died due to exceedingly bad medical conditions.

Aside from that, the most horrifying things in Ravensbrück are human medical experiments, forced abortions, and female prisoner sterilization. The subjects are referred to as "guinea pigs" in general, and the majority of them are Poles. Newborns are not permitted here, and the majority of them are executed shortly after birth.

At the same time, sexual violence is not rare here. According to the records of Rochelle G. Saidel and Sonja M. Hedgepeth's book, numerous camps, including Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Dora-Mittelbau, and Dachau, developed official brothels. The majority of hookers originate from Ravensbrück, and Jewish women were the first to be taken to the brothels.

Ravensbrück's system is challenging to research not only because of its isolated position, but also because of its significant restoration in 1944.

The result was that the Ravensbrück complex, unlike those associated with other concentration camps, had already reached its maximum extent in the summer of 1944, with approximately 40 subcamps. Of these, one-quarter (about 10) were large subcamps, with more than 1,000 prisoners, and one-half (around 20 camps) were medium-sized, with between 250 and 1,000 prisoners. At the end of 1944, however, when there were around 334 subcamps for women existing within the concentrationcamp system in total, only 20 were under the control of Ravensbrück—considerably fewer, for example, than the number of women's subcamps under the control of Neuengamme or Gross-Rosen. (Megargee, 2009: p. 1192)

Thus, choosing Ravensbrück as the sample is very necessary, and its particularity is being valued by the academic circles gradually.

3. The Formation of Trauma in Ravensbrück

Before we go into the process of forming trauma, it's important to define trauma. Notice that I'm not attempting to provide a specific explanation for trauma; rather, I'm attempting to distinguish it from others.

Since Sigmund Freud introduced the concept of trauma into the psychoanalytic school, the topic of trauma has gotten a lot of attention. Although there is no universally accepted definition of trauma, one thing is certain: trauma is inextricably linked to identity. The first is self-identity, which is a continual knowledge of oneself in time and location, as well as one's affirmation and judgment of oneself as an individual.

Furthermore, one's identity is inextricably linked to one's surroundings, because one's surroundings influence one's self-evaluation directly or indirectly. When discussing the healing of trauma, Ankersmit mentions the following in his book Sublime Historical Experiences:

The traumatic experience has then been adapted to identity, and vice versa. Or, to use the right terminology here, a reconciliation of experience and identity has been achieved, a reconciliation respecting experience and identity-and, therefore, guaranteeing the continued existence of both. (Ankersmit, 2005: pp. 323-324)

So, the core of identification, or self-consciousness, is divided into two pieces, as Florian Coulmas summarizes: "two related problems arise here: the first concerns identity through time, the second the mind-body problem." (Coulmas, 2019: p. 28) As a result, identity is heavily influenced by other factors: "in socially relevant domains, identities are borders, borders that separate independent countries, distinct ethnic groups and races, languages and their speakers, genders and sexualities, exclusive clubs, self-governing companies, and autonomous individuals. These units erect and defend their borders jealously. However, fixed as we may imagine them being, these borders are fluid and shifting." (Coulmas, 2019: p. 132) When our long-standing boundaries are broken, trauma is created.

Returning to Ravensbrück, trauma is not the result of a brief period of strong stimulation; rather, I like to think of trauma as the outcome of a combination of continual high mental stress and brief intervals of extreme stimulation in the concentration camp's specific environment. Physical trauma is the outward expression of trauma; spiritual trauma is the internal manifestation. There are a variety of reasons for this distinction from other social structural units, but one of the most crucial is the tremendous power imbalance: misuse of power and massive inequities that empower those who perpetrate violence to violate the boundaries of others' existence with impunity. The endless violence and imbalance of power eventually turn every member of the system into a slave to power: the guards are slaves to power and only know to constantly demonstrate the authority of violence; the prisoners are the greatest victims of power and suffer a more extreme and tragic fate – their basic right to live is controlled by power completely, language, perception, thought is deprived in the violence, again and again, endless labor, sudden death, and the overthrow of the bottom line of human nature, which finally makes them become a living corpse. In this huge and tight power system, every member in it is a tyrannical transformed object of power, and there is no way to escape. The endless violence and power imbalance eventually turn each member of the system into a slave to power: the guards are slaves to power and only know how to constantly demonstrate the authority of violence; the prisoners are the greatest victims of power and suffer a more extreme and tragic fate, their basic right to life is completely controlled by power, language, perception, and thought is deprived in the violence, endless labor, sudden death and the overthrow of the bottom line of human nature, which finally makes them become a living corpse. Every member of this massive and tightly knit power system is a despotic transformed object of power, and there is no way out. At that point, the camps had transformed into a veritable prison of power, a death factory, where the lines between good and evil in human nature blurred, moral norms were reinterpreted, and people in them gradually lost their humanity. Trauma leaves permanent wounds on everyone who lives there, and they never fully heal. I'll go over this subject in detail in the next sections.

4. The Exterior Condition-The Buildings of Concentration Camps

Let us now consider the concentration camps themselves. As for the link between power and buildings, Foucault once said: "in more general terms, an architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them." (Foucault, 1978: p. 172)



Camp prison, SSphotoalbum, 1940



Ravensbrück concentration camp 1945

Wolfgang Sofsky has demonstrated that the construction of a building is inextricably tied to its power. He investigates the link between concentration camp layout and absolute authority. Absolute power is the true master of all things in concentration camps. Absolute authority liberates violence, kills freedom, and controls each element via terror. "Absolute power transforms the universal structures of human relatedness to the world: space and time, social relations, the connection with work, the relation to the self. It seizes on various elements and methods of traditional forms of power, combining and intensifying them while casting off their instrumentality. In this way, it becomes a form of power of a distinctive, singular kind." (Sofsky, 1997: p. 18)

Power is represented in concentration camps through architectural distribution. It uses grids and zones to divide the space for each person's activities, constraining each person's area of activity to a defined spot. Any attempt to cross the established boundaries is regarded as a challenge to power and will be punished severely. Individuals cannot be seen at will under normally circumstances. In concentration camps, however, everything a person does is monitored by an all-powerful force. Individuals are inert, unconscious objects of power surveillance, not self-aware human beings. "Individual is no longer the center pointof his or her world, but only an object in space. Sealing persons off from the outside world is merely the simplest procedure pursued by power. Social control demands an internal structuring of space." (Sofsky, 1997: p. 47) Usually, concentration camp rooms are designed as small cells close to each other, with straight, unobstructed passageways between cells, serving to facilitate surveillance.

Ravensbrück's layout is a good illustration. The camp's overall layout is a right-angle structure, with barbed wire fences and watchtowers encircling the perimeter to keep a watch on the prisoners' every move. Walls separate the SS's residential and consumption sections from the prisoners' prisons, and the camp's entrance is totally under SS's control, with no blind spots. Although we cannot perceive the face of strength, its mind is present everywhere.

Individual trauma is caused by the geographic environmental conditions created by this meticulously built building structure.

5. The Internal Conditions-the Formation of Trauma

As indicated previously, the structure of concentration camps provides a special environment that separates the normal world and hell, but it's not the decisive factor for trauma. Moving on now to focus on the process of trauma formation.

5.1. For Prisoners

Regarding prisoners, they are the largest victim group in the usual sense. One of the survivors Loulou doesn't want to remember this horrible experience at all: "One didn't believe in the goodness of human nature anymore. I had to learn it again. And I did. But it took a long time." (Helm, 2015: p. 746)

Trauma, unlike others, is caused by a combination of powerful short-term consequences and weak long-term repercussions, as we previously discussed. Strong and weak are, without a doubt, relative terms. In concentration camps, everything is scary.

There are four stages to generating prisoner trauma:

First and primarily, persons recognized by the Gestapo as prisoners were forcibly removed from their homes. This is the step towards the development of trauma. People were ordered to move, from safe and stable living places, and their previous interpersonal relationships, such as family and friends, in this step. Many people suffered brutal beatings, arbitrary confiscation of their possessions, and other forms of abuse on their trips to the concentration camps. However, this separation was accompanied by fear, anxiety, and perplexity as a result of the abrupt departure from familiar surroundings. The consequence of this is "procedures remove people from their accustomed surroundings, casting them into an ambiguous threshold state characterized by submissiveness and silence, sexlessness and lack of possessions, anonymity, and absence of social status." (Sofsky, 1997: p. 83) People's social positions change the moment they are taken away; they leave their homes, not in quest of a better life or larger rewards, but because they are compelled to accept their fate of death and torture as the lowest level of concentration camp prisoners. At about this point, the individual's mind is filled with terror, but it hasn't yet shown itself. This period is characterized by a sense of insecurity.

Second, there is a breach of formal identity. When they walk through the camp's gates, they must let go of all previous identities. All clothing was taken, personal possessions were seized, and all items used to confirm one's identification were asked to be thrown away.

What other way was there to establish one's identity? A unique appearance. Prisoners in concentration camps have all been forced to wear the same hairdo. Individuality in the camps was sometimes associated with increased scrutiny from the guards and a higher risk of death. The women prisoners, on the other hand, were more affected by the nude body and shaven hair. More than one camp survivor says she doesn't want to recall what happened there. The inmates changed into uniform prison uniforms after being asked to clean themselves thoroughly. This was the first zap to individual consciousness, as well as the first step toward symbolism. "For a long time ordinary individuality-the everyday individuality of everybody-remained below the threshold of description. To be looked at, observed, described in detail, followed from day to day by an uninterrupted writing was a privilege. The chronicle of a man, the account of his life, his historiography, written as he lived out his life formed part of the rituals of his power. The disciplinary methods reversed this relation, lowered the threshold of describable individuality, and made of this description a means of control and a method of domination." (Foucault, 1978: p. 191)

The symbolization of the prisoners deepened further sequent measures. "All prisoner categories in the concentration camps had to wear prescribed markings

sewn to their clothing-a serial number and colored triangles, affixed to the left breast and the right trouser leg." (Kogon, 1998: p. 35) Individuals become muddled under various markers, morphing into a shifting label and a code name in the management book. Short numbers and numerical symbols take the role of realistic social identities. "The victims were dispossessed not only of what belonged to them, but of what was part of them." (Sofsky, 1997: p. 84)

Next, destroying the bottom line of human nature. In camps, different blocks or barracks may change the destiny of prisoners. Many remains have proved this view:

Jehovah's Witnesses or the "Bible Students," as they were referred to in German and in camp parlance. They were clean, quiet, earnest, and studious. By contrast, every account Block II, the infamous asocials' block, describes it as filthy, chaotic, noisy, and full of inmates who were often ill and given to stealing and various forms of violence. This is the block to which Nanda Herbermann was assigned shortly after her arrival, first as barracks elder (supervisor of one side of the block) and then as a block elder (supervisor of the whole block and the two barracks elders). Most of the inmates in Block II were prostitutes, arrested because the Nazis considered them morally degenerate; some of these women were also lesbians. (Herbermann, 2000: p. 29)

The Nazis objectified everyone as dots, but the captives, strangely enough, seemed to embrace this unjust designation as well. The lower the level, the closer you were to die. Those who attempted to resist initially were publicly executed, demonstrating that terror was quite effective.

Furthermore, the trauma problem was exacerbated by the demand for survival supplies and the inadequate circumstances of the cells. People typically resort to increasingly aggressive rivalry for what little chance they have to survive as more convicts are forced into concentration camps and basic survival essentials such as food and water are not guaranteed. People are more commonly in fierce competition with each other than growing close due to race, faith, gender, and other reasons:

We were no longer the human society we'd been in the Ghetto. True, there, too, we'd given expression to human anger and hatred, but here in the concentration camp, feelings had undergone a transformation, the relationship between people was changed, as though people were total strangers who spoke different languages. And the words that people acquired here, a whole lexicon of expressions that they mastered right away! A special language reigned in the place, consisting of the rudest and most vulgar terms and definitions, stripped of every human feeling. It was another world, another planet, governed by different concepts and laws. (Selver-Urbach, 1986: pp 128-129)

Worst of all, the guards sometimes recruit Jews to assist in the execution of Jews, thereby shattering the inmates' reasonable perceptions and passing responsibility for the murder to others. And, in the face of unending slaughter, the inmates' moral conscience could no longer be measured by convention; right and wrong had become entwined and indistinguishable. And when confronted with such misery, these detainees have no choice but to close their eyes, numb their senses, or ultimately give up. Morality isn't worth considering in the face of severe horror.

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl describes that "It is quite unimaginable how a man should act when he has the choice of betraying and thereby murdering his friends or surrendering his wife and children... to the murderer, especially when his suicide would automatically mean the murder of his own family. The choice is no longer between good and evil but between murder and murder.....". (Young-Bruehl, 1982: p. 345) When confronted with a situation that defies logic, the most essential goal is to live, and in order to attain this goal, prisoners can only choose the most advantageous choice, and the prior pursuit of conscience is too severe for them:

In the concentration camps, there were three strategies for adaptation to the center of power: mimetic servility, total obedience, and economic common interest. Mimetic servility was manifest where prisoners sought close contact with the camp SS and adopted its modes of behavior. (Sofsky, 1997: p. 137)

The victim, who should have dreaded the offender, instead strives to stay alive by imitating the abuser's rules of behavior. Under the shadow of ultimate control, the victim abandons his original consciousness and gradually modifies his behavior pattern, leading to mutation.

Labor, of course, had a different connotation in the concentration camps. In the eyes of the guards, "prisoners, male or female, posed an inveterate danger to the national economy, the national community; they had to be forced to serve the economy against their 'nature'. The distinction of Ravensbrück prisoners as 'out-casts' had the effect of removing whatever prohibitions existed against the brutalization of the female body in civilian factories." (Thad Allen, 1999: p. 207) As a result, labor is punishing and unrewarding in this setting, and the goal of labor is death.

Those who are unable to work are simply exterminated. This is the anomaly of labor under the rule of overwhelming authority.

Human beings eventually become inhuman as a result of the numerous variables of severe work, the threat of death at any moment, and the instability of the surrounding environment. Because the victims' ability to impair has been lost, the trauma cannot be healed. "Alexithymia" is the name given to this phenomenon.¹

¹More information please see "Alexithymia involves a diminution of the usefulness of affects for information processing. It is recognizable by disturbances in three areas: impairment in the patient's ability to name and localize emotions, and to recognize and use emotions as signals to themselves. The affects are experienced as vague and confusing, and remain undifferentiated and unverbalized. Object representations are characterized by a lack of individual attachment and appreciation. Instead, there tends to be an exploitative quality. The capacity for self-caring, self-comforting and self-regulation are seriously impaired, sometimes to life-threatening proportions. The blocking of the normal development of the transitional process causes lifelong impairment in the capacity for 'solacing'." Psychoanalytic Approaches to Trauma: A Forty-Year Retrospective, Henry Krystal in Charles R. Figley (ed). (2006). Mapping Trauma and Its Wake: Autobiographic Essays by Pioneer Trauma Scholars (pp. 116-117). Routledge.

5.2. For Perpetrators

As I stated in the last chapter, I believe that the perpetrators are also concentration camp victims.

Female guards were usually recruited in one of three ways: 1) they volunteered; 2) they were allocated by the employment office, and 3) they were convinced by enterprises that set up factories in the camps.

Female guards thus enjoyed a specific status in the hierarchy. On the one hand, like SS men, they benefited from their status as employees of the Reich, and came under the jurisdiction of the SS. On the other, and unlike their male equivalents, they were not formally members of the SS, and did not belong to the SS-Sippschaft, the "clan." Their official designation—as "female auxiliaries [weibliches Gefolge] of the Armed SS"-denotes their special position: they were civil employees within a paramilitary organization. Yet to attribute to them a merely subordinate status fails to take into full account the historical reality. Responsible for roll calls, for organizing prisoners intokommandos (labor detachments), and for supervising women inmates in the barracks and at work, the guards exercised direct power over the prisoners. (Mailänder, 2005: xiv in Introduction).

Male and female guards have a delicate connection because of their affiliation discrepancies. Women's uniforms and substantial pay enhanced their sense of belonging to the Nazis as part of the camp's supervisory hierarchy; on the other hand, these sentiments of doubt fill with their minds, so under the hierarchy of power, some female guards even revealed a more vicious side to be promoted.

We can't deny that Hannah Arendt's perspective is more accurate. Totalitarianism is shattered everywhere in concentration camps. Totalitarianism tries to remove the individuality of each of its members to maintain its total authority and guarantee the absoluteness of its power, and "it is important to the political and social sciences that the essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them."

In the totalitarianism system, "totalitarian domination attempts to achieve this goal both through ideological indoctrination of the elite formations and through absolute terror in the camps; and the atrocities for which the elite formations are ruthlessly used become, as it were, the practical application of the ideological indoctrination-the testing ground in which the latter must prove itself-while the appalling spectacle of the camps themselves are supposed to furnish the 'theoretical' verification of the ideology." (Arendt, 1979: p. 437)

A possible explanation for this view is that obesity is the nature of human society. Stanley Milgram thinks obedience is a separatable element of social life. "Obedience is the psychological mechanism that links individual action to political purpose. It is the dispositional cement that binds men to systems of authority. Facts of recent history and observation in daily life suggest that for many people obedience may be a deeply ingrained behavior tendency, indeed, a prepotent impulse overriding training in ethics, sympathy, and moral conduct." (Milgram, 1974: p. 1) Following orders entail relinquishing control of one's body and actions to the person issuing the order. In this method, each person receiving the order does not have to consider the significance of the behavior and simply follows the orders of others, completing the transfer of responsibility for one's behavior and transforming into a common link in the power chain. This is one of the key reasons Eichmann refused to confess his guilt. He assumed he was simply following the leader's directions. Stanley create a new term "counter anthropomorphism" to explain this process "some people treat systems of human origin as if they existed above and beyond any human agent, beyond the control of whim or human feeling." (Milgram, 1974: p. 9)

In addition, for perpetrators, the meaning of punishment plays an important role in the process of trauma formation. "Violence is both a mode of experience and a form of action, an interplay of social practice, symbolic attribution, and the production of meaning." (Mailänder, 2005: p. 11) Any act of civil disobedience is a defiance of absolute power that should be met with retaliation. The abuse of the body is a manifestation of power to subdue the individual, and the punishment imposed on the body is an externalized representation of authority. The perpetrators are the power's cringing slaver as a component of the death factory.

Of course, when we discuss the trauma of guards and prisoners in concentration camps, it is not to overlook the unethical behavior of guards towards inmates. Undoubtedly, the trauma suffered by prisoners is many times greater in severity and quantity than that experienced by guards. It can even be said that the trauma of prisoners constitutes the main body of the trauma within concentration camps. Although guards also endure psychological and physical harm, compared to the inmates, they seem to inhabit a completely different world. Moreover, in their interaction with prisoners, guards, as the perpetrators, are the primary cause of the inmates' trauma. While we also analyze guards as part of the trauma model in concentration camps, it should be clear that the absolute subject of concentration camp trauma is the incarcerated prisoners.

6. A Brief Conclusion

The thesis has so far focused on the process of trauma generation on various items. Trauma is difficult to define; in concentration camps, it is a mix of a long-term process and a brief, strong stimulation. Having said that, it appears that the above discussion can help us refine our understanding of the concept of trauma. Trauma is the loss of previous experience (this type of experience comprises all parts of our lives, such as beliefs, conventions, and so on), which leads to insecurity and a sense of threat to one's existence.

The extreme imbalance of power in the concentration camps was the primary source of this suffering. The larger the disparity, the more the perpetrators of violence operated outside the bounds of human reason. Every member of the power structure is a victim of totalitarianism in this process, and no one is exempt. As a result, the majority of the trauma's effects remain permanent, and all are transformed.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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