

A-863

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POL 13-3

Department of State

INFO : Embassies BUDAPEST, BUCHAREST, MOSCOW, PRAGUE, SOFIA, WARSAW
Amconsens MUNICH, ZAGREB

Embassy BELGRADE

June 20, 1968

The Shiptars, the Kosmet, and Destan Berisha

Belgrade A-726

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Some of Yugoslavia's national groups get talked about more than others; the Albanian (Shiptar) minority probably gets talked about least. Yet there are at least twice as many Shiptars as there are Montenegrins. In that rather special part of South Serbia described in the politico-geographic lexicon of Yugoslavia as the Autonomous Region of Kosovo and Metohija (Kosmet), where they constitute 70% or more of the population, the Shiptar presence is the dominating fact in the political and social organization of the region. Economically, the Kosmet is hands down the poorest part of Yugoslavia. The per capita income of its inhabitants is one-fifth that of the average Slovenian, an enormous disparity which simply means that most Shiptars live in a different society--a fact borne out by statistics on consumption and trade.

Statistics contribute to the story, and perhaps, if the next Yugoslav census is thorough and reliable, they may even tell it. But empirical analysis, in a world where the wish is not only father to the thought but midwife to the fact as well, has its limitations. What is Shiptar nationalism? Why did a court composed entirely of Shiptars sentence a naturalized American with Shiptar nationalist sympathies, Destan Berisha, to three and one half years of confinement (incidentally, characterizing the sentence as light) for simply being a member, though barely literate, of the "Main Committee" of an emigre organization called the League of Prizren in Exile? The following rather impressionistic account seeks to cast some light on the Shiptar question, which--while it can be safely ignored by most of the world's statesmen--does exist and must concern those interested in Yugoslavia and its destinies.

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POL:REskin (in draft)

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For the graveyard observer, Yugoslavia is a very interesting country. The multiplicity of peoples and religions and the availability of good raw materials--stone, marble--have happily conspired to produce some very interesting monuments. The Bogumil burial statues of Bosnia are world famous, but perhaps as interesting as any are the traditional Shiptar graves--those which have not adopted the typically Moslem turban design or the chastely engraved star (red) associated with today's heroes.

Part of the interest of the Shiptar cemetery lies in the fact that, until you know how to look for it, you may not even see it. For the Shiptar grave marker is a jagged shaft of flat rock thrust at about a 70° angle into the sod. The graves are not arranged in rows, the grass is often uncut, and the impression first may be of just another field of scrub and rock until the eye apprehends the angle and the fact that there are just too many such narrow shaped stones to exist naturally together all in one place. The effect is eerie and disquieting. The stark naturalism of the stones seems non-human. They are like the random bits of broken thunderbolts hurled into the earth in a moment of irritation by some absent-minded God.

But the graves exist perhaps as living Shiptars exist, on first glance not distinguishable in a generalized landscape but, when focussed upon, emerging in hundreds if not closely packed thousands, their presence suddenly a dominant fact.

How many Shiptars are there? Nobody is sure. The Shiptars themselves are only sure that there are more than the traditionally superior Serbs officially acknowledge. A figure frequently heard from Shiptars is "as many in Yugoslavia as in Albania." Though probably exaggerated, this estimate would place the Shiptar population at about 1.8 million--against official projections of 1.1 million.¹

Though a substantial Shiptar minority lives in Macedonia, the great majority still inhabits the Kosmet. Here the Shiptars, mostly peasants, constitute officially 70% of the region's population. Therefore, since the

1. The Shiptar population increased 22% between 1953 and 1961 from 754,000 to 914,000. Even though rates of population growth are not recorded by nationality, the same rate of increase probably prevailed between 1961 and the present. The Kosmet, where 647,000 Shiptars were listed as resident in 1961, has maintained the highest rate of population growth in Yugoslavia--in 1966, 28/1000 or 2.5% of the national average. Statistical Yearbook of Yugoslavia (Statisticki Godisnjak) 1967, 83, 327.

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Statistical Yearbook of Yugoslavia lists very few "Shiptar statistics," Kosmet statistics (which exist in abundance) may be cited as a fair reflection of the condition of the Shiptar people in southern Serbia. If anything, the Kosmet statistics should err on the side of optimism, since the inclusion of the Serbian minority, traditionally on top since the Turks left, should, if anything, raise Shiptar averages. Furthermore, any Shiptars not comprehended in the statistics are most probably subsistence peasants who contribute nothing to the market economy. Their inclusion would exert downward pressure on the area's per capita statistic, which in 1965 officially indicated an average income of 1357 New Dinars per person (Slovenia 6835 ND). The Kosmet Shiptar is demonstrably poorer than anyone else in Yugoslavia.²

Figures and statistics do assume flesh--in a whitewashed bare room about 45' X 25'--the main chamber of the District Court of Prizren. At one end

2. These figures were determined by dividing regional income by regional population. Ibid, 326, 363. (Note: 12.50 ND=\$1.00, but because of differences in buying power, as determined by the Yugoslav Government, a straight application of the exchange rate might be misleading. For example, the GOY determined the purchasing power of the average Slovenian to be \$107% in 1967. Given the 1.5 ratio, the Kosmet inhabitant's would have been about \$210.) Useful comparative figures are also contained in the following report of per capita income of communes in the various republics for 1965:

Per Capita Income of Communes by Republic (in new dinars)

| | <u>Under</u> <u>1000</u> | <u>1000-</u> <u>1500</u> | <u>1500-</u> <u>2000</u> | <u>2000-</u> <u>3500</u> | <u>Over</u> <u>3500</u> | <u>Total</u> <u>Communes</u> |
|---------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Bosnia- | | | | | | |
| Herzegovina | 15 | 27 | 21 | 5 | 12(11%) | 106 |
| Montenegro | 3 | 3 | 5 | 1 | 5(25%) | 20 |
| Croatia | 0 | 4 | 11 | 13 | 41(37%) | 111 |
| Macedonia | 0 | 5 | 8 | 2 | 4(12%) | 32 |
| Slovenia | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 52(87%) | 60 |
| Serbia: | | | | | | |
| proper* | 4 | 13 | 22 | 6 | 28(24%) | 115 |
| A.P.Voivodina | 0 | 0 | 0 | 12 | 29(66%) | 44 |
| A.P.Kosmet | 12 | 7 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 22 |

Ibid, 504.

*Figure for "narrow" Serbia only, does not include autonomous regions.

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of the room, slightly elevated, sit the judges (three professional and two lay) and before them is placed the witness stand flanked along the wall by tables for defense and prosecution. On a low bench facing the judge behind the witness stand sits the defendant Berisha. At his back is a more open space containing a few rickety hardback chairs on which sit privileged spectators such as UDBA (internal security) officials and the American Consul. Then, in the back one-third of the room come a half-dozen benches upon which are crowded, through some miracle of human geography, at least ten rows of spectators--mostly Shiptar peasants. Destan Berisha's relatives from the village of Bilusha occupy honor places in the front row, though in their homemade peasant garb they seem more related to the King of the Gypsies than to the crew-cut broad-shouldered man in the salt-and-pepper suit whose back is toward them.

A wag with recent exposure to American TV commercials might say that you can tell the Shiptars by their white hats since a small, once-white skull cap forms the most characteristic element of their national dress. But you can also tell the Shiptar peasants by filthy multi-patched shirts and pants, the latter either homespun or made from the cheapest store-bought material. Feet are wrapped in rags and covered often only by crudely made rubbers. These are subsistence peasants who live in crude cottages or shacks which lack not only plumbing and heat, but also beds.

They are a primitive and wild-looking people, who watch the proceedings with curiosity, but their curiosity somehow lacks focus. They stare unflinchingly, open-mouthed--often with no visible teeth--Daumier caricatures suddenly sprung to life. And a dumb anguish is there, as if the maker of

3. Statistics on retail trade demonstrate the subsistence orientation of the Kosmet economy. Such expensive items as meat are barely "sold" at all; in 1966, retail meat sales in the Kosmet (population 1.1 million) amounted to 8.2 million ND compared to 474.6 million ND in Slovenia (population 1.65 million). For retailed dairy products the figures were 3.7 and 175.5 million ND respectively--notwithstanding the fact that the Shiptar diet leans heavily toward milk products. The difference in buying patterns is dramatically shown in the comparison between sales of wheat-flour and sales of whitebread and baked products. The Shiptars bought twice as much flour per capita as the Slovenes; the Slovenes bought 12 times as many bakery products. In 1965, 15 of 22 Kosmet communes averaged less than 490 ND retail trade per inhabitant; 58 of 60 Slovene communes averaged more than 1090 ND. Nearly one-half of the Slovene Communes (29/60) averaged more than 2440 ND; none of the Kosmet communes more than 1630 ND. There were eight communes in all of Yugoslavia where trade was less than 220 ND per inhabitant; seven of these in the Kosmet. Ibid, 430, 431, 508.

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their world had put his lips to their ears and blown out the lights behind the eyes. Some of the younger faces show intelligence but not enough of them.⁴

This second day of the trial, January 30, 1968, is very cold; the streets of Prizren are frozen solid. Inside one small wood stove provides the only heat, but the little courthouse janitor in his worn five-dollar blue suit keeps at least one window open all the time as he eyes the mob balefully, vainly attempting to order it back into place as it gradually encroaches forward into the "gentlemen's area." The janitor is obviously very unhappy at the presence of so much dirt and disorder in his courtroom.⁵

At the head of the court, the presiding judge, a well-dressed handsome young Shiptar, controls the proceedings calmly and concisely, commanding a respect that would lie beyond the wildest dreams of many Yugoslav officials who allow themselves to get involved in discussions of principle over such matters as the collection of a bus fare. Judge Durush Kocina is cut from a different piece of cloth and perhaps for his job he must be. His are violent people whose blood feuds are not only tradition. (An assistant judge to the Consul over coffee at recess: "Our main crime here is murder.") Even though the people have been temporarily deprived of their weapons, mostly knives, collected at the beginning of the session by a policeman and now reposing in a drawer in the Prosecutor's desk, the Judge never lets control slip. He knows that he, his court, and the three or four policemen in attendance would be nothing if the accumulated injustices suffered by the mob found voice and sprung the veneer of the judicial process. But the eyes of the judge tell that he knows about the injustice, as well as the justice, and when he rules, he rules for the whole room.

Destan Berisha faces two charges--conspiracy and espionage. The first is worth up to fifteen years imprisonment; if convicted of the second, the State can order him killed. According to Yugoslav law, espionage knows no Statute of Limitations and, even eighteen years later, the police were waiting for Destan. According to an informer's statement, in 1950 he had led an armed group into Yugoslavia from Albania where it had fought unsuccessfully against the men of Enver Hodza, losing its original leader. The group had, according to the indictment, parachuted into Albania at the behest of the "American

4. A recent article in Der Spiegel, without citing a source, stated that every second Shiptar is illiterate. This figure is plausible since official statistics for the Kosmet show 41.1% of the regional population to have been illiterate in 1961 (Slovenia 1.8%). Of those aged 10-19, the figure was 13.4%; for those 20-34, 36.2%. Ibid., p. 324. According to Bell Deva, LCY Chief in the Kosmet, only 4% of the area's adult population has completed 8 years of school. Politika, June 3, 1968, 6:2.

5. According to legend, a Shiptar is bathed at least three times: At birth, at death, and before his wedding.

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"Intelligence Service" and after its failure to overturn Hodza (thanks perhaps to Herbert Philby) crossed into Yugoslavia, also on behalf of said intelligence service to achieve espionage objectives in the Kosmet. The group reportedly trained for these assignments in Italy where they allegedly also received briefing from one Dzafer Deva, Interior Minister during the Italian Fascist occupation when the Kosmet had been incorporated into Albania. Deva's popularity in the Kosmet's current ruling circles may not quite approach Eichmann's in Tel Aviv, but it comes reasonably close: guilt by association with him is a very serious business, even for a hawer of wood and drawer of water like Destan Berisha.

Fortunately for Destan, the evidence to support these sensational charges is rather thin. The key witness is the informer, Hajreddin Vucitna, who says that he too was a member of the group. Hajreddin is a man in his early 60's, nearly bald except for a fringe of snow white hair around the back of his head. He stands with his head well back and his eyes gaze calmly, gently, almost beatifically at his audience. Dressed as a convict, he has a police escort at all times since, notwithstanding his services to the UDBA, he is also a convicted murderer.

Confrontation of witness by accused is a dramatic part of the Yugoslav court procedure. After Judge, Prosecution and Defense have asked their questions, the defendant is called forward and the witness is told to face him. The two thus confront each other, talk to each other freely as they wish; and the court sits back and observes the encounter.

Hajreddin seems to be saying "Hello, Destan, long time no see."

Destan answers: "I never saw you before in my life."

Hajreddin, genially, "Come on, Destan, you know me Don't you remember the time"

Destan, calmly, gesticulating slowly but with emphasis with upward palm "How can you invent such stories???"

The dialogue picks up, they crouch slightly, waving their hands like Japanese sumo wrestlers squaring off. Hajreddin radiates disbelief that his old comrade in arms won't recognize him. Destan continues to regard him coldly, the murderer and informer, and carefully begins to work over the inconsistencies in Hajreddin's testimony.

Hajreddin was inconsistent, particularly regarding the group's purpose in Yugoslavia. In the pre-trial investigation he had signed a statement saying that the group had come to the Kosmet to achieve U. S. espionage objectives. But in court he denies this: "Yes, the group had come from Albania, but we planned nothing against Yugoslavia. I never said that." Judge Durmish reads back sections of previous testimony: Hajreddin sticks to his denials. The

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Judge is exasperated, but he pursues the questioning and goes after the smallest false sounding detail. At one point, he glances up at the other members of the court, as if a light were suddenly dawning: "If that is true, they used Yugoslavia only as an escape route." But he returns to the record, he cannot let go quite so easily and refers again to the written statements of Hajreddin and other witnesses with whom Hajreddin later spoke which state that there had been espionage against Yugoslavia.

The pre-trial record is the work of the so-called Judge-investigator--a court official charged with the task of examining all the evidence, holding hearings as necessary and then recommending to the Public Prosecutor under what articles of law the accused is to be charged. The investigating judge in this case was a tiny, very ambitious, and intelligent young Shiptar named Masar, who though he might weigh 90 pounds wringing wet is a very tough fellow indeed. Masar's eyes radiate a hatred of the big things of this world among which the United States and its Intelligence Service are probably included. But while he is intelligent and tough he is also young (less than 30) and this time has tried a little too hard and overreached himself. As the witnesses give evidence it becomes clear that, in nearly every case, their pre-trial testimony as recorded by Judge Masar contains statements against Perisha that were not really theirs. The evidence against Destan is erected in two rather tottery columns. At the base of one is Hajreddin and on him are placed other witnesses who knew him at the time or who subsequently served in prison with him and heard him talk about Destan (hearsay evidence is admissible). The other base is Perisha's family from the village of Bilusha, and here Masar has collected such bits and scraps as the testimony of a cousin, at the time resident in Belgrade, who told about receiving a letter from Destan's mother in which Destan's illegal arrival was described. Of course, Destan's cousin and mother are both illiterate so that the alleged letter was written by another person and read to the cousin by a third. But family testimony could have been more damaging; in this respect Destan was lucky.

Destan's wife from the village, Hanumshah Perisha, could have testified that one night in 1950 her husband Destan, who had fled as a refugee several years before, had suddenly reappeared bearing two revolvers. But the defense counsel, Hassan Kriezju (pronounced crazy you) managed to disqualify her--even here a wife cannot legally testify against her husband. Later, over coffee, smiling broadly, Hassan confides to the Consul that Masar failed to do his homework--Hanumshah is only a common-law wife; her testimony could have been demanded.

Hassan is a plump genial white-haired Shiptar in his early 50's who knows how to operate. Rather than simply cross examining, which is his right, he encourages the Judge to ask certain questions of the witnesses to bring out evidence favorable to Perisha. Then Hassan listens carefully as the Judge dictates, in the presence of all, the official record of testimony and interpellates immediately against the slightest inaccuracy. But he never argues

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when he can suggest and he clearly enjoys the judge's respect and liking. An apprehender of fine nuances and a born actor, Hassan's style of utterances ranges from small pleadings delivered in a falsetto-like fluttering voice supported by the upstretched hands of a supplicating rug seller to sternly delivered pronouncements of his client's innocence sounded in tones of Jovian wrath. Hassan's performance in court is brilliant; out of court, it is even better and far more important.

Hassan is a man with "connections" in a country where, to quote Hassan himself, connections are everything. In the courthouse, on the streets of Prizren, in the restaurant, he knows everyone and everyone knows him, even though his home and office are in Pristina, 50 miles away. Hassan obviously has the confidence of and a reputation among the Shiptar peasants who are apparently nearly as litigious as their Serbian brethren. While now fully engaged in private practice, he worked after the war for 10 years as a public prosecutor and later as general counsel for an enterprise. Thus, he is uniquely at the same time "one of us" and "one of them."

Hassan acts around the courthouse thoroughly but unobtrusively and manages long private individual conversations with all members of the court. These conversations prove their worth in regard to the espionage charge. On the one hand, it is clear as the testimony comes to an end that the prosecution has not proved the charge as formulated; there has been no evidence that Destan intended to establish a base in the Kosmet from which to carry out hostile acts against the government of Yugoslavia. On the other hand, Hajreddin testified that Destan entered Yugoslavia illegally while in the employ of the Intelligence Service of a Foreign State, and, according to the Law, these allegations, if accepted, are alone technically sufficient to sustain a finding of guilty of espionage. Of course, it does make a difference whether the action is directed against Tito or Enver Hodza and when part of the charge falls through, the public prosecutor, a young, soft-spoken Shiptar decides to drop the rest. He announces to the court that he is formally withdrawing the charge of espionage.

The charge of conspiracy against the State remains, and "conspiracy," in the lexicon of Balkan politics is a serious word. Destan has admitted membership in an Albanian emigre organization based in New York which dreams of an ethnic state uniting all Albanians and the territories they inhabit under anti-Communist rule. First, both Tito and Enver Hodza must be fired and the objections of 10 million Serbs of all ideologies, whose holy historical places lie in the Kosmet, overcome. Can this dream really threaten the existing state of things? Furthermore, Hassan argues that the conspiracy of a "little man" like Destan Berisha who never attended a day of school cannot threaten any State—especially not a state which tolerates the free movement of a Croatian fascist like Krunoslav Draganovic. (Belgrade A- 828, December 28, 1967)

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But, perhaps the state of the Kosmet may not tolerate Destan Berisha. The reality of a threat is determined by the state of mind of the one threatened and the judge and his associates do not relax their concern. Perhaps the mob makes them ponder the problem of precept and example—or perhaps it is their own position which does so—Shiptars above the mass—well-dressed, consumers of the mainstream culture orienting toward apparent success symbols—the party, the Serbs (several of the young Shiptar lawyers spoke Serbo-Croatian when among themselves), and yet sharply aware of their membership in the Shiptar nation. Committed to the rightness of the present scheme, they must, the more they orient outward toward the country as a whole, feel the injustices that are a part of it. Whereas the half million Montenegrins constitute a national group, the Shiptars at present writing still count as a minority.⁶ Despite the commitment of the Yugoslav government to channel investment to underdeveloped areas, the Kosmet, starting from a much smaller base has in relative terms, only been able to increase its income half as rapidly as Slovenia.⁷ In absolute terms, the average Slovenian received 1050 ND more in 1952 than his Kosmet counterpart; in 1965 this disparity widened to 3091 ND—(1960 values). And even where investment has been concentrated as in Pristina, which in 1965 received 33 times as much investment per capita as Suva Reka, a nearby rural commune of 35,000 inhabitants, poverty is evident everywhere.⁸ The center of town contains nice new government buildings but also beggars, shoeshine boys, and young lads who will carry a gentleman's bags. Away from the center rise brand new apartments, but not far from them crowd together ramshackle shacks comparable to any favela between which hordes of dirty children play among the garbage.

6. The Shiptars have pressed steadily, and, since the Brioni Plenum, with some success for greater political and administrative power. According to a recent article in *Politika*, they have increased their share of positions in the Internal Security organ of the Kosmet to 40%, from a share of 13% just prior to Rankovic's ouster. A movement is also afoot to seek a quasi-Republican status for the region which is probably designed to give the majority Shiptars decisive policy control. See JTS of May 13, 1966, p. 53. Also Belgrade's A-757 of May 6, 1966.

7. In 1952, per capita national income in the Kosmet and Slovenia, using the 1960 value of the dinar, was 375 and 1425 new dinars respectively. By 1965, the average Slovene's income had increased by 170% to 3625 new dinars; his Kosmet counterpart's by 95% to 734 new dinars. *Statistical Yearbook*, 326, 356.

8. *Statistical Yearbook*, p. 536.

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There are new apartment buildings and factories, but perhaps the contrast becomes thereby all the more crass and painful. The judge and his court who are young communists involved in the engineering of this change may at times wonder how they are doing.⁹ Is progress going fast enough? Are they providing the right kind of leadership or will they later stand accused of having been Uncle Toms? Is Tito's regime really righting the injustices suffered historically by the Shiptars at the hands of the Serbs?

A loud doctrinaire "No" is shouted nightly from across the border by Radio Tirana and thus relations with Albania vary between bad and worse. Though Hodza and his crew of goat herders provide little immediate threat -- political, military, or economic -- they do present the example of an outside force intervening to seek changes in the status of the Kosmet. The example disturbs, irritates, worries and so do others like Dzafer Deva and his friends in the League of Prizren (including Destan Berisha) who argue that the Shiptars must separate their future from the Serbs.

Thus, as the verdict is read in a courtroom jammed with nearly 300 spectators, Judge Durmish, neat and dapper as always in a dark silk suit with fresh white shirt and tie, makes clear that the court takes Destan seriously. At length he recapitulates the Statutes of the League of Prizren which call for the overthrow of Tito's authority. When Destan Berisha returned to Yugoslavia and to the village of Bilusha near Prizren, he returned, not as himself, but as part of a movement, and perhaps it is the movement which is now being sentenced. Three and a half years is not much time in the life of a "movement" and the people seem sincere when they insist to the Consul that Destan got off easy.

Comment: At the conclusion of one day's session, the drafting officer was walking in the company of Hassan Kriezju toward the hotel along the Prizrenska Bistrica, a fast flowing mountain stream which comes down from the Sar mountains and passes through the middle of Prizren on its way to the White

9. Of the five principal court officers involved in the trial of Berisha (three district court judges, public prosecutor, and judge-investigator), four were Shiptars under 35. The reporting officer has no definite proof of their LCY membership but considers it most likely. Interestingly once, during a recess over coffee, a clerk stumbled in with a list of the Party members for the District Court (apparently people were being asked to sign off in connection with some fund drive). The Consul did not consider it politic to ask for a copy but got enough of a glance to see that at least 20 names were listed -- this number suggests a high rate of membership since during four days in the courthouse he saw less than 15 different people at work, including janitors.

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Drim River and Albania. The day was bitter cold, about 20°F, and in the middle of the stream stood a Shiptar woman in baggy pants (Moslem dress) beating her laundry against the icy rocks. Hassan commented jovially, "Now that's an exercise!" The reporting officer believes that whoever determines the destinies of the Kosmet, be it Serbs, Serbs and Shiptars together, the Shiptars by themselves, or some third parties as yet unheard from, the "exercise" of ruling the area will not be unlike that of the Shiptar washerwoman - cold, exhausting, and difficult and without much guarantee that the wash will come out clean.

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