Chapter 8

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Trains to Life—Trains to Death: Judith Kerr's Writing and Drawing from and about Childhood Exile in the Nazi Era as Intergenerational Solidaristic Practice

In March 1933, when children's author-illustrator Judith Kerr was nine years old, her family was forced to flee Berlin. Her father, writer Alfred Kerr, had been placed on the *Erste Schwarze Liste* (first black list) in the *Völkischer Beobachter* because of his mocking broadcasts about Hitler.[1] Tipped off by an anonymous policeman of the Nazis' intention to capture him, Alfred Kerr was on a train out of Germany within two hours. Kerr and his wife Julia feared the Nazis would try to take the family as hostages to force his return, so as soon as the house was packed up, the rest of the family – Julia, Judith, and her brother Michael Kerr – also boarded a train to meet him in Zurich (*Eine eingeweckte Kindheit* (*A Pickled Childhood*) 35-36). Twenty-four hours after the family were reunited, the Nazis went to their Berlin home to confiscate their passports. The tension accompanying the Kerrs' journey features powerfully in Judith Kerr's fictionalized three-part autobiography, *Out of the Hitler Time* (1971-1978).[2] The specific fear of discovery at the German-Swiss frontier is a climactic moment in the first volume, *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* (1971). Even more terrifying is the moment when the family mistakenly start to board a train bound back to Germany rather than on to France.[3]

Although they were technically safe, the Kerr family continued to feel the effects of the Nazis' rise to power. During the spring of 1933, Alfred Kerr's books were among those in the Nazi book burnings and his German citizenship was revoked, which made it impossible for the family to return to Germany under the Nazi regime. The exile that the children had been told would be temporary became permanent. By the end of 1935, the family's financial circumstances were so reduced that they could not afford to stay together. The children were sent alone by train to the south of France to stay with their maternal grandparents. During this stay, writing and drawing took on heightened significance for the young Judith Kerr. What had

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[1] For biographical information on Alfred Kerr, see Vietor-Engländer (2016).

[2] Judith Kerr also wrote about her family's flight from Nazi Germany in *Judith Kerr's Creatures: A Celebration of Her Life and Work* (8-10). The other volumes of Judith Kerr's autobiography are *Bombs on Aunt Dainty*, originally titled *The Other Way Round* (1975) and *A Small Person Far Away* (1978).

[3] See Chapter Twelve of *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*.

been pastimes and modes of play in Berlin[4] became means of maintaining a "spatial connection" (Weems 144)[5] with her parents. Her letters to them show that parents and daughter were in conversation about the development of their daughter's creative productions at this time.[6]

Judith Kerr deposited examples of these productions to Seven Stories: The National Centre of Children's Books, UK, in 2008. While Kerr's literature *about* childhood exile has received critical attention,[7] her literature *from* childhood has all but been ignored. This chapter is the first academic publication to bring a selection of the juvenilia to light.[8] In so doing, we can explore how the young Kerr drew on her craft to create a "spatial connection" with her parents on the page. Through close readings of two of the illustrated stories, *Pierre and Michelle* (*Pierre et Michelle,* JK/01/01/01) and "The Journey" ("Die Reise," JK/01/01/02), both of which fictionalize her and her brother's unaccompanied train travel from Paris, I argue that Kerr began to creatively reconstruct her exilic train travel as a child.[9] Through close

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[4] Judith Kerr explains how, as a child, to draw "seemed a normal way to pass one's time, just as it was normal for [her brother] Michael to kick a ball about" (*Creatures* 8).

[5] See the Introduction to this volume for discussion of Weems' thesis on how texts can forge spatial connections between generations.

[6] This correspondence is held in the Alfred Kerr Archiv at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin. See, for example, AK 453.

[7] See Lathey (1998, 1999) and McGillicuddy (2014, 2016) on the depiction of childhood exile in *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*.

[8] Examples of the juvenilia have been published in *Creatures* (6, 9, 15-20), *A Pickled Childhood* (30-1), *Drawn from the Archive: Hidden Histories of Illustration* (Lawrance 2015), *Das rosa Kaninchen, Mog und die anderen – Die Bilderwelt der Judith Kerr (The pink rabbit, Mog and the others – Judith Kerr's World of Pictures*, Liesen and Linsmann 2013) and *Judith Kerr* (Carey 2019). While Nicola Otten's doctoral thesis on the Kerrs' autobiographical writings does not include the material deposited to Seven Stories, it does offer close readings of some of the poetry Judith Kerr composed and illustrated as a child that is held in the Berlin archive (130; AK 2626).

[9] In *Pierre and Michelle*, Pierre and his sister travel alone by train from Paris to rural France to stay with their aunt and uncle. While in "The Journey" ("Die Reise", JK/01/01/02), Puppi and Michel travel alone by train from Paris to Nice to stay with their maternal grandparents. It is difficult to date these two stories. In the compilation of material for Kerr's memoir, *Pierre and*

readings of these texts, this chapter establishes the "spatial connection" Kerr was able to forge with her parents on paper. Although she had her personal experience of real-life railway journeys to call on in her juvenilia, as a tyro author-illustrator she would also have been aware of the way other writers and illustrators had created narratives about trains, such as writer Erich Kästner and illustrator Walter Trier in their German children's novel *Emil and the Detectives* (*Emil und die Detektive*, 1929).[10] I begin this essay by establishing the significance of trains in *Emil and the Detectives* and how this novel is situated in broader, cultural discourses on trains at the time. Drawing on scholarship of childhood reading, I then demonstrate the young author-illustrator's creative practice evident in *Pierre et Michelle* and "The Journey" as intergenerationally solidaristic: firstly it builds on the text by an author and an illustrator of an older generation and, secondly, it creates a bond between herself and her parents in a period of separation as a consequence of forced migration. The final part of this essay turns to an example of train travel in *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* and finds that Kerr's intergenerational

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Michelle was dated 1935 (*Creatures* 12). This date corresponds with archival evidence. Letters to her parents from Nice allude to a story that she was working on at the time (AK 453). However, anecdotes in these letters are much closer to events narrated in the collection of illustrated stories entitled *Puppi and Michel in Nice* (*Puppi und Michel in Nizza*, JK/01/01/02), the first of which is "The Journey." Moreover, dating the letter from Pierre and Michelle's mother the 19th of September 1936 (*Pierre and Michelle*, JK/01/01/01/76) would suggest the story was written (or at least completed) in the autumn of 1936. While there are strong parallels between Judith's 1935 letters and *Puppi and Michel in Nizza*, there are clues in the story that indicate that it too was, if not drafted, at least completed at a later date. In "A Day in Nice" ("Ein Tag in Nizza"), the second part of the story, the narrator explains that Puppi did not yet have the pink pyjamas she wears, but could not resist including them because they are so fine (*"Die rosa Pyjamas hatte ich damals noch nicht, aber ich konnte sie nicht widerstehen sie zu erwähnen – sie sind doch SO FEIN!"*, JK/01/01/02/F9a). Judith made the final section of the story, "Birthday Speech: the best grandma of all time" ("Geburtstagsrede: die beste Omama aller Zeiten") to celebrate the sixtieth birthday of her maternal grandmother, Gertrud Weismann, in 1937. The illustrations are also drawn in what appears to be a more mature hand than those in *Pierre and Michelle*.

[10] See Judith Kerr's account of her childhood reading in Antonia Fraser (51-58) and Gillian Lathey's discussion of the novel's popularity amongst German Jewish children at the time surroundings its publication (104-105).

solidaristic practice continued in adulthood. In this example, the children's novel also forges a link between daughter and parents; the train in *Emil and the Detectives* can again be read as a departure point.

Trains to Life, Trains to Death: The Cultural Significance of Trains in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

The Kerrs' experience of trains was not unique; indeed, trains played a variety of roles in everyday life and the conflicts that were taking place across Europe. Like many children and their families who escaped from Germany, the Kerrs stayed in several countries before settling in Britain. Each border crossing was more than a geographical movement: it also involved political, cultural, linguistic, and emotional upheaval. The Kerr children's experiences are part of a much larger history of children's border crossings by train in the Nazi era. As commemorated by the bronze statue of Jewish child refugees and deportees at the Berlin Friedrichsstrasse railway station, *Züge ins Leben – Züge in den Tod* (*Trains to Life – Trains to Death*),[11] trains for many children in Nazi territories led to life, whether with their families as in Judith Kerr's case, or by means of rescue programs such as the Kindertransport.[12] For many, however, train journeys ended in one of the death camps. Journeys by train, then, were fraught with ambivalence. This dark side to train travel had a long history. Although as a child, Judith Kerr would not have been conscious of this history in its entirety, it would have informed the world in which she was growing up, her parents' perception of trains, and eventually, her account of the family's flight to safety on a succession of trains.

In a vignette entitled "The first locomotive" ("Die erste Lokomotive"), the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch endows trains with a "demonic nature" ("*die Dämonie*," 208) arising from their historical associations. For Bloch, their use as modern war machines was a new manifestation of "the hellish face of the first locomotive" bringing noise, smells and

[11] All translations in this essay are my own. This memorial is part of a series of Kindertransport memorials made by sculptor Frank Meisler (1925-2018), himself a Kindertransportee. The other memorials can be found at London Liverpool Street Station (*Kinderstransport – The Arrival*), Gdańsk Główny Station (*The Departure*) and the Hook of Holland (*Crossing to Life*). The Kindertransport was a rescue program that saw 10,000 unaccompanied Jewish children from Nazi territories travel to safety in Britain between the November Pogroms in 1938 and the outbreak of the Second World War.

[12] See my previous footnote.

catastrophic accidents to the modern world (209). His characterization in part reflects the fact that since the Crimean campaign (1853-1856), troop trains had acted as "extensions of battlefield logistics" in Europe (Beaumont and Freeman 33), but most importantly for Bloch, the introduction of conscription in the First World War had seen a particularly dark use of locomotives. As Matthew Beaumont and Michael J. Freeman explain, at this time "the railway became the means by which men left home for their training camps and postings, their railway warrants forming a kind of universal currency to the conduct of war" (34). Given the carnage on the front lines of the First World War, railway warrants were for many effectively death warrants.

Bloch was writing very closely to the time of the publication of *Emil and the Detectives*, where the train's "black raging circles" ("*in dem schwarzen rasenden Kreise,*" 63) gives it a demonic nature in the nightmare Emil has aboard the train on which he must travel alone to Berlin from his provincial hometown, Neustadt. Scholars have argued that Kästner employs the train as metaphor for the negative implications of modernity.[13] At the same time, the train acts as a brutal force that separates the young protagonist from his mother before he feels ready to leave her. In Emil's nightmare, the comparison of the train to a frenzied dog ("*Der Zug drehte sich um sich selber wie ein Hund, der sich in den Schwanz beißen will,*" *Emil and the Detectives* 63) mirrors Kästner's earlier description of the howling and hissing it makes when it pulls into Neustadt station ("*Dann kam der Personenzug nach Berlin, mit Heulen und Zischen,*" 51). This beast-like train does not wreak death or destruction as the train does in Bloch's vignette, but it does cause Emil distress.

Trier's illustration of Emil running from the train in his nightmare with his arms outstretched <figure 8.1> also recalls the farewell between mother and son. As they had waited for the train, Emil took his mother by the arm ("*Er faßte die Mutter an Arm*," 50) and then hugged her closely ("*Er drückte die Mutter fest an sich*," 50-1), tightening his arms around her neck a little more when the train arrived ("*Emil fiel der Mutter noch ein bißchen um den Hals*," 51). The lateral movement in the nightmare illustration is to the left; Emil reaches back in the story to his mother, just as he had clung to her at the train station. This movement is disconcerting; it also guides the reader's eye to the preceding rather than following pages. It emphasizes Emil's resistance to go to Berlin. Frau Tischbein might have thought that her son was "old enough" (*"er ist ja groß genug*," 38) to travel alone by train from his home and mother, but Emil, in these two instances, is reluctant to do so.

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[13] See, for example, Haywood 111.

Separation by train became a theme of children's artworks in the various conflicts that broke out in Europe in the 1930s.[14] As Zérane S. Giradeau et al. show in their study of child wartime drawings, "[a]t the individual level," it is family separations that "mark the real entry into the war for children, that is to say the moment when a vague concept—war—becomes intelligible and tangible, which can be experienced in the everyday life" (143). If war for children is understood to begin with family separation, then in the child war art the train can be read as an instrument and a symbol of this separation.

Rebuilding the Train: Judith Kerr's Writing and Drawing as Intergenerational Solidaristic Practice

Discourses on childhood reading have established that children identify literary patterns and devices in books, which they carry in their memories and with which they can later write "something new, yet something old" (Greenway xxii). The theme of separation by train in *Emil and the Detectives* provided the young Judith Kerr with material with which to shape her own fictional accounts of her experience of separation by train. I also argue that this children's novel had particular appeal to Kerr as a tyro author-illustrator because it encouraged its readers to collaborate with author and illustrator. In the preface, Kästner invites child readers to have a go at constructing the novel themselves before reading it. He places ten of Trier's vignettes between the preface and first chapter of the novel and implores child readers to treat them as "building blocks" and "build" the novel as they would a church or train station (*"Es ist eine Arbeit, als solltet ihr aus Bauklötzen, die man euch gibt, einen Bahnhof oder eine Kirche aufbauen," Emil and the Detectives* 16).[15] The simile that Kästner chooses in his invitation is striking. A child can play with building blocks over and over again, each time using the same material to construct something new, or, at least in a slightly different way, placing for example, a red block where a green one had been. When child readers use these blocks in texts they craft

[14] See, for example, Anna Lehinger (57-62) on a collection of drawings children made in Switzerland in response to the Swiss mobilization of the 2nd of September 1939, S. Girardeau (242) for the painting made by C. Frédéric, a primary school student in 1940 Paris, and the Spanish Civil War Collection, University of California and Children's Drawings of the Spanish Civil War, Columbia University Libraries Online Exhibition.

[15] Kästner's preface is not translated into the English editions of the novel. The vignettes, with their lengthy captions, are dispersed throughout the text of the English editions, close to the events they illustrate.

themselves, then these texts contain an intertextuality that is intergenerational because they are built from a text by an author and an illustrator of an older generation.

In Kerr's case, the child writer and artist becomes adult author-illustrator who once again picks up and arranges Kästner's building blocks. This notion of the reading act evolving as the reader grows older is explored in discourses on childhood reading. Katherine Jones has proposed children's literature as generational literature because it "come[s] along" with readers over the course of the lives (305). For this very reason it is also *inter*generational because it first passes from an adult author-illustrator to a child reader. Furthermore, as Kimberley Reynolds has observed, stories encountered by children "continue to unfold and inform how we interpret the world" (9) throughout childhood and into adulthood. Young Kerr's reading of *Emil and the Detectives* unfolds as she faces her own nightmarish train travel and then seeks to reconstruct it, firstly in childhood and then in adulthood.

"*une grande bête furieuse*": Nightmarish Trains in Judith Kerr's Juvenilia

Kerr builds the trains in *Pierre et Michelle* with similar characteristics to the train in *Emil and the Detectives*. The train that carries Pierre and Michelle away from their parents is also described as a frenzied creature: as the train nears the French village where the children are to stay with their aunt and uncle, it "emerges from the nearby copse like a great, furious beast, dragging behind her all of the carriages like a long tail. The train arrives, hissing like mad. The white steam trails behind spreading an unpleasant smell" (*"la locomotive sort du bosquet voisin comme une grande bête furieuse, traînant derrière elle tous les wagons qui ont l'air d'une longe [sic] queue. Le train arrive sifflant comme fou. La vapeur blanche part en arrière répandant une odeur desagréable,"* JK/01/01/01/07). This beast delivers the children safely to their awaiting relatives because their uncle, Monsieur Bidon, as signalman, can control it. However, in an episode in the story's final chapter, where he cannot do so, the train's potential to wreak death and destruction is fully realized. Here, just as in Emil's nightmare, there is threat of a train crash; Pierre has lost the key to the signal room and so Monsieur Bidon cannot operate the signals to keep the train on track rather than derailing. Pierre sees in his mind's eye vivid images of "a great train, turned over by the signals, in flames," "children who search for their parents," "women who cry into their hands" and "newspapers with long articles entitled 'A terrible railway accident…'" *("Dans son imagination il voit un grand train en flames renversé à côté d'une aiguille. Il voit des enfants qui cherchent leurs parents, des femmes qui pleurent leurs maris. Il voit des journaux avec de longs articles intitules «un terrible accident de chemin de fer…».*," JK/01/01/01/67). These images inspire him to act. In the nick of time he saves the

train by climbing up to the signal box, squeezing through its window and operating the controls so that the train stays on track.

As Emil's train nightmare is intratextually linked with his departure by train at the beginning of the novel, so too the nightmarish train in *Pierre and Michelle* is coupled to the train earlier in the story. While the nightmare in Kästner's novel links intratextually to Emil's separation by train from his mother, this near nightmarish scenario in young Kerr's text highlights aspects of the children's anxiety about their separations by train from their parents. The focus on windows in the illustrations of Pierre averting the derailment <figure 8.2> achieves an intrapictorality with the illustrations at the beginning of *Pierre and Michelle* and "The Journey," which show the train carriage windows out of which the children lean and wave to their relatives as they approach their destinations <figure 8.3> <figure 8.4>. All three images emphasize the children's movement on and around trains. While Pierre stretches through the window and up to the signal board, the children stretch out of the train windows. Kerr's early talent as a visual storyteller is evident here. As William Moebius explains in his "Introduction to Picturebook Codes,"

> the frequent depiction in picturebooks of grates, doors, windows and stairs, of roads and waterways, and the changing representations of light, artificial and natural, to accord with different degrees of character understanding, are not accidental or fortuitous phenomena, but downright basic to the symbolic force of the story. A character who looks out of the window or stands in the door, as Max does in *Where the Wild Things Are,* is implicated in the unspoken meanings of thresholds. Whether stairs, steps or extended ramp, the incline may provide a measure of the character's stature or of progress towards a depth or height of understanding or confusion (146-7).

The train windows, then, allow reading the train as a threshold. For the children leaning from the train windows, the train might be regarded as a threshold into exile. Both of the girls' faces and arms are positioned downwards. With Moebius' window code in mind, these young girls are arguably descending into exile with all its negative connotations. While these images are neatly framed, the children are not confined by the borders. As they lean out of the window in *Pierre and Michelle*, Michelle's handkerchief crosses over the line Kerr draws to mark the train carriage. Similarly, in "The Journey," the girl Puppi's arms extend past the window frame. The characters' movement in these images is depicted in ways that suggest that the children want to break away from exile just as Emil wanted to return to his mother. Moreover, the breaking the frame illustrates the child's desire to maintain a degree of intergenerational solidarity,

Michelle reaching back to where she had been with her parents and Puppi towards her grandfather, eager to re-bond with the adult awaiting the children's arrival in Nice.

Connecting Trains: Continuum between Judith Kerr's Literature from and about Childhood Exile

The trains in Kerr's juvenilia separate the children from their parents, but, perhaps paradoxically, the two texts created a link between the child author-illustrator and her parents during a period of separation in the exile years. The train travel in the juvenilia is omitted from *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*,[16] but the children's novel does also feature some of the exilic train travel and forges a link with Kerr's parents, as she wrote the novel in memory of them. This intergenerational solidarity goes further as she wrote the book for her own children, thus carrying the family story forward.[17] Each instance of train travel in the novel is with one or both parents so that the parents' as well as the children's stories can be foregrounded and the link between them can be portrayed. I take as an example in this section of the chapter the flight by train from Berlin, the first instance of train travel in the novel. Knowledge of Kerr's childhood reading of Kästner's novel sheds light on the construction of the railway carriage in which the protagonist Anna, her brother Max and Mama travel the last, and perhaps most important leg of their journey from Stuttgart to Zurich, where Papa awaits them.[18]

Kästner introduces the railway compartment in which Emil travels to Berlin as the third "building block" <figure 8.5> between the novel's preface and first chapter, titling it "A fairly important railway compartment" (*"Ein ziemlich wichtiges Eisenbahnabteil*," *Emil and the Detectives* 21). The significance of train carriages in Kerr's juvenilia, notably the train carriage windows, has been discussed above; Kerr picked up Kästner's building block again many years later to rebuild the train that crosses the German Swiss frontier. There is an evident intrapictorality between Trier's and Kerr's illustrations of the railway compartment. The combination of economy and expressiveness in Kerr's line is similar to that of Trier's. Focusing on Kerr's vignette for the railway compartment in *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* (33), we see

[16] There is a threat of separation in the novel (see Chapter Twenty-Two), but here, the family's financial difficulties are remedied before they have to go through with it.

[17] See the Introduction to this volume for discussion of this element of intergenerational solidarity.

[18] As a fictionalized autobiography, the characters do not bear the same names as the Kerrs. However, Anna was Judith Kerr's first name; she was born Anna Judith Helene Gertrud Kerr.

that the luggage rack is drawn in the same cross detail as Trier's, and hatching is used in both illustrations to mark the spaces within the carriages. <figure 8.6> Kästner's caption draws attention to the varied characters that can be encountered in railway compartments; in turn, Kerr places a passenger who plays an integral role in the family's border crossing in her story. This passenger, "the lady with the basket" (36), acts as a foil to Herr Grundeis who gives ignorant Emil a highly exaggerated account of Berlin (*Emil and the Detectives* 55-6). Although the lady sharing the compartment with Mama and the children is similar to Herr Grundeis in her possession of power stemming from her local knowledge of the destination, she does not abuse it. She answers Mama accurately each time the latter asks if they have reached the frontier when the train stops (*When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* 35-6). Moreover, the inclusion of this passenger in an otherwise empty compartment (35) positions Mama on a similar level to her daughter, whose questioning, like Mama's, shows a lack of control of the situation. In the sudden flight from their Berlin home there is a kinship (Gubar, "Hermeneutics…" 300) between child and adult where their helplessness and unknowing is related rather than differentiated.

As in *Emil and the Detectives* and Kerr's juvenilia, attention is also drawn to the characters' arm movements. When the train pulls safely into Zurich railway station, "Papa, who was always so dignified, who never did anything in a hurry, suddenly ran towards them. He put his arms around Mama and hugged her. Then he hugged Anna and Max. He hugged and hugged them all and would not let them go" (*When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* 38). Here, Kerr emphasizes the bond of the nuclear family unit by showing their reunion after their time apart rather than focusing on their separation, as she does in the juvenilia.

When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit as a children's novel that fictionalizes a real child's experience of exile from Nazi Germany is widely read and acclaimed; Judith Kerr was awarded Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2012 for her contribution to children's literature and Holocaust education.[19] However, one unacknowledged factor that makes this novel unique is that it can be read alongside the child's verbal and pictorial texts crafted in the years in which the novel is set. When read in tandem, it becomes evident that Kerr began constructing the story of her family's exile in childhood. As this chapter has shown, Kerr drew on her reading of *Emil and the Detectives* so that, *with* paper, pencil and pen she

[19] Judith Kerr did not receive the OBE for this novel alone; she is the author-illustrator of 37 books, including the much-loved *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* (1968) and the series of *Mog* picturebooks (1970 – 2015).

could, in one way, remain connected with her parents when they could not be together. Many years later, Kerr picked up pencil, pen and *Emil*'s train as model again, this time to put her parents *on* paper and in this way forge a connection with them. The adult-authored and illustrated text is altered and revised, but it shares intergenerational solidaristic practice and concerns with the juvenilia. Marah Gubar draws attention to the fact that when children's literature is defined as literature *by* adults *for* children, where adults are characterized as "active, creative producers and children as passive, inert receivers, we set into motion […] types of aetonormative amnesia. Children's participation in the production of youth culture is forgotten—and so, too, are the insights of adults who helped to enable that participation" ("Seen and Heard" 47). This chapter is one attempt to stall this amnesia by demonstrating how *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* was the product of an active child reader, writer and artist who became an adult author-illustrator who passed on the train building blocks from her childhood to new generations of child readers.

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