The Memory of Totalitarian Reality

A Child's Perspective of the Experience of Displacement From the Administrative Region of Łódź During the Second World War

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Abstract

The article presents the experience of children faced with the trauma of displacement from the so-called Łódź administrative region (known as the Kalisz administrative region in the years 1939–1941) during the Second World War. It is extremely important in this context to analyze the process of formation, recreation and obliteration of the memory of totalitarian reality in adulthood. From the beginning of the war, children were observers of German totalitarianism, which manifested itself in the utter subjugation of Polish society to the German Reich, and in the implementation of total warfare. Crucially, those who found themselves in the Polish territories incorporated into the Third Reich very quickly became not only witnesses to the war, but also its participants. The young people clearly saw that individuals who did not want to submit to a state foreign to them, were swiftly expelled therefrom. Particularly traumatized were the children who had to part with their existing world – their favorite toys, bed, home, garden, pets – and accompany their parents on a journey into the unknown, according to the dictates of Nazi policy, which they did not de facto understand. Their first taste of the "unknown" were the resettlement camps, followed by the townships lying along the railroad line connecting Łódź with the cities of the General Government in the south.

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At the turn of the 20th century, there were many predictions about the future of the world. Under the influence of the Swedish author Ellen Key, it was anticipated that the 20th century would be the best in history and would become "the century of the child". Key hoped for a rebirth of humanity resulting from changes in human nature (Key, 1904, p. 16–17). Her assumptions, however, proved to be misplaced; she did not foresee the advent of forces that would claim control of all areas of human life. The situation of children grew considerably worse during the world wars, as total warfare was aimed at complete annihilation of the enemy state, and moral principles were blatantly disregarded. The Second World War saw young people deported, Germanized, separated from their parents and deprived of their homes, used for forced labor and placed in concentration camps – all on an unprecedented scale. The war brought them face to face with the brutal realities of violence, isolation, lack of security and death. The youth were often exposed to situations for which they did not have adequate coping mechanisms. As a result, the experiences were accumulated in their memory, and then either amplified or consciously repressed in adult life. The present article explores a child's perspective of the experience of displacement from the administrative region of Łódź (known as the Kalisz administrative region in the years 1939–1941) during the Second World War. It is an interdisciplinary study, drawing on history, psychology and social research.

The research material comprises memoirs, accounts and testimonies of people who in their early years found themselves in German resettlement camps in Łódź during the Second World War. The testimonies were selected during archival queries in the files of a prosecutorial investigation conducted by the Łódź District Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes Against the Polish Nation of the Institute of National Remembrance (formerly the District Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes). Owing to the ongoing investigation and the sensitive nature of the testimonies, they have been anonymized (the first name of the witness and their surname's initial are provided). Some of the accounts contain memories evoked in interviews that I conducted in 2023. An invaluable source for research on the experiences of displaced persons was the website of the "Forced Labor 1939–1945. Memory and History" project launched jointly by the "Remembrance, Responsibility and Future" Foundation, Freie Universität Berlin and the German Historical Museum (https://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de).

The resettlement camps in the administrative region of Łódź have been discussed in numerous works, including: *Obozy przejściowe i przesiedleńcze* by Sławomir Abramowicz (1998), *Obozy przesiedleńcze w Łodzi przy ulicach: Łąkowej, Kopernika, 28. Pułku Strzelców Kaniowskich i Żeligowskiego* by Artur Ossowski (2010), *Wysiedlenie mieszkańców osiedla im. Montwiłła-Mireckiego w Łodzi* by Joanna Żelazko (2010), and *Dzieci czeskie z Lidic w obozie przy ul. Żeligowskiego w Łodzi* by Michał Trębacz

(2010), but only the last addressed the trauma of displacement experienced by the children. As there is no surviving German camp documentation, the scholars have to rely on other primary data. The only relevant document produced by the German apparatus is the list of representatives of the Łódź intelligentsia who were earmarked for resettlement from Warthegau to the General Government in 1939, which I discovered in 2023 in the State Archives in Łódź. The document had been previously unknown because it was placed in a file titled "Namentliches Verzeichnis der aus Lager Glowno nach Litzmannstadt abtransportiren Personen (1939)" – the list of names of people who were transferred from the Główna camp to Łódź, which was held in the fonds of the Central Office for Emigration in Poznań, Branch Office in Łódź (*Umwanderezentrallstelle Posen Dienststelle Litzmannstadt*). The list contains the names, addresses and professions of the displaced residents of Łódź. Unfortunately, there are no surviving official German documents pertaining to the displaced children. The discovered document and memoirs served as the foundational source for my article about the resettlement camp in Radogoszcz titled *Obóz przesiedleńczy w Radogoszczu (1939–1940) w zeznaniach i wspomnieniach wysiedlanej łódzkiej inteligencji* (Majewska, 2023).

The need to rely on memoirs which cannot be verified against official documents is not an optimal research situation. Autobiographical memory as a source has its limitations, such as memory gaps, the fleetingness or fallibility of memories, susceptibility to suggestion or deliberate falsification aimed at achieving material gains or image-building (Ledwójcik, 2019; Ziółkowska, 2006). During many years of researching the Second World War and in particular human experiences in boundary situations, I have observed that the likelihood that the witness correctly remembers the events increases when the description of their experiences in based on emotions. The emotional perspective helps to embed the events in memory, especially with regard to what triggered those emotions. I have noticed that a vivid experience does not undergo transformation – it does not change into another memory; trauma caused by a specific stimulus remains unaltered. When reminiscing years later about a situation in which they suffered pain, a person will talk about that exact feeling. It will never translate into another feeling, e.g. of joy. Although a flashbulb memory can be susceptible to suggestion, the emotions are genuine and cannot be falsified, as they stem from the individual's psychological makeup and their defense mechanisms at a given moment. The paper focuses on memories of vivid childhood experiences, taking into account a whole range of feelings that could have faded from memory over the years. Due to their nature, the children's memories do not tell the whole story of resettlements from the administrative region of Łódź, nor are they presented as being capable of doing so. The aim is to explore a child's perspective of these events.

The witnesses who remembered pre-war times admitted that they were not aware of the impending danger that was to shatter their perception of the world. For many Polish children, September 1939 was to be the first month of school in their life. Genowefa Barańska remembers the preparations she made as a seven-year-old girl to enroll at the school in Parzyce near Ozorków, where she lived at the time. She washed her feet and dressed neatly, for such a great event required some ceremony. When she was going back home, the teacher's wife joyfully threw apples to the children. Genowefa was happy to receive the fruit, but most of all she rejoiced that she was about to start learning. The German invasion made that impossible. The greatest battle of the Defensive War of 1939 – the Battle of the Bzura – was fought close to her home. She remembered the sight of wounded soldiers, dead horses and her burned farmstead. One day, her village ceased to be Parzyce and became the strange-sounding Parschitz. It also turned out that Genowefa could not stay there (Barańska, 2023).

Following the invasion of Poland, the totalitarian German state established the Reichsgau Wartheland, which covered some of the Polish territories incorporated into the Third Reich. The occupation authorities required all residents, including small children, to fully comply with their administrative decisions. The Germans wanted to make the Reich an all-German state that would be racially and nationally homogeneous. They used social engineering to achieve their goal, aiming to introduce permanent changes into the national makeup of the newly-annexed territories. The changes were to be implemented through the arrest, extermination and deportation of the Polish and Jewish populace outside the Reich. The vacated lands were to be settled with Germans from the east of Europe. Only those who passed the racial purity test – i.e., could prove their generational affiliation with the so-called Nordic race ("master race"), on which the German state founded its ethnic identity – were considered full citizens of the Reich. The Polish and Jewish populace was to be concentrated in the General Government. The Reichsgau Wartheland was intended to become a testing ground for German ethnic policies, and the success of the experiment was to prove that the Nazi state was ready to implement them on a mass scale (Siepracka, Wróbel, 2008, p. 237; Rudawski, 2023, pp. 9–10).

According to the German plans, the first to be deported were all Poles who served as senior civil servants. This de facto meant members of the intelligentsia. The resettlements were closely linked with extermination, as many people earmarked for deportation during the first months of the war were the relatives of Poles and Jews who had been arrested

as part of the Intelligenzaktion Litzmannstadt.[1] Subsequently, representatives of other social strata of the non-German population were also to be resettled, but not in their entirety – Polish workers necessary for the proper functioning of agriculture and industry could remain in place, though they were only assigned to unskilled labor. The fate of children depended on that of their parents. Genowefa Barańska was to be deported. Due to his German origin, her father could sign the Germans People's List (the Volksliste), but since he did not identify mentally with Germaneness, he refused the offer. Together with her parents and siblings, Genowefa was transferred to resettlement camps in Łódź and then deported to the General Government (Barańska, 2023).

The resettlement operations from the Reichsgau Wartheland to the General Government began with the onset of the war. The first unofficial resettlements were carried out by the local authorities and the native German communities, but these were isolated incidents arising from economic motivation. Mass displacements from the region of Łódź began on 30 October 1939 with the decree of Heinrich Himmler, the Reich Commissioner for the Consolidation of German Nationhood. In March 1940, the Central Bureau for Resettlement (*Umwandererzentralstelle*, UWZ) was established in Poznań. The resettlements from the administrative regions of the Reichsgau Wartheland were carried out systematically: in 1939, the first short-term plan (*1. Nahplan*) was implemented; in 1940, a provisional plan and the second short-term plan (*Zwischenplan* and *2. Nahplan*) were implemented; in 1941, the third short-term plan (*3. Nahplan*) was implemented; and the years 1942–1943 saw the implementation of an extended third short-term plan (*Erweiterter 3. Nahplan*). In 1944, the displacement operations were curtailed due to the situation on the frontlines (Rudawski, 2023, pp. 11–14; Wardzyńska, 2017, p. 13; Ingrao, 2022, pp. 88–89; Majewska, 2023, p. 36).

In the National Socialist ethnic policy, Łódź (called Litzmannstadt from April 1940) served as an important rallying point for the resettled population, as it was situated close to the border with the General Government (approx. 15 km). In order to facilitate the mass displacement of Poles to the General Government, the Germans established a branch of Poznań's Central Office for Emigration at 133 Piotrkowska Street in Łódź, which quickly became an independent body. Four resettlement camps were

1 The arrestees were representatives of the intelligentsia who, before the outbreak of the war, were either members of various Polish political and social organizations or served as senior civil servants. They were considered a threat to the security of the Reich and as such were tried and sentenced to death (Sziling, 1992, p. 7). The strong link between displacement and extermination as part of the Intelligenzaktion Litzmannstadt is further corroborated by the establishment of resettlement and transit camps in the same or adjacent buildings. Moreover, the families of the victims were thrown out of their homes and forcibly displaced.

opened in the city: at 4 Wiesenstrasse (Łąkowa Street), 53/55 Friedrich-Gosser-Strassse (Kopernika Street), 32 Luisenstrasse (28. Pułku Strzelców Kaniowskich Street) and 41/43 Gneisenaustrasse (Żeligowskiego Street). Further camps were established outside Łódź, in Radogoszcz, Konstantynów Łódzki, Ruda Pabianicka and Kutno (Felchner, Jeśman, 1979, pp. 73–75; Galiński, Waszczyński, Fijałek, Kasznicki, 1982, p. 32).

Artifacts of the Children's World in Totalitarian Reality

The preserved accounts and memoirs of children concerning resettlement from the administrative region of Łódź were written down ex-post, i.e., many years after the war. The recalling of traumatic experiences was instigated by the District Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Łódź, which was conducting an investigation into the crimes committed by the Germans against the displaced persons. There is also another group of texts, created out of the personal need of the witnesses to these events, often when they reached an advanced age. It is worth noting that the postwar accounts of people who were children during the war differ from the testimonies of adults, especially as regards the perception of surrounding realities. These memories developed differently in displaced adults and children, as they paid attention to those aspects of the situation that mattered to them at the time. The adults most acutely felt the loss of their property, furniture and household appliances that were taken away by the Germans. Their accounts also contain numerous technical details such as the names of the displaced families, street names, names of the Germans, and descriptions of inadequate camp conditions (lack of: food, milk for children, drinking water, washing water) (M. Minich, 1963, pp. 114–118; Ziemowit S., 1980, p. 60; Wacław S., 1973, p. 427). For children, the world consisted of favorite toys and pets, which did not feature in the adults' accounts, as they were considered unimportant. It is worth emphasizing that a child's perception was also shaped by their height. One of the girls whose name is unknown said she did not remember the faces of the Germans who came to her house. They were too high for her to see, and none of them bent over. What she remembered in detail were their shining shoes, coats, the dogs' thick leashes and snouts, for these were at her eye-level (Tokarz, 1979, p. 15). Tadeusz P. was the only one to remember death's heads on the Germans' epaulettes and caps. He paid attention to it because he had overheard the adults discussing which military units the Germans came from (Tadeusz P., 1980, p. 33).

The children's internal world – the world of childhood – had initially served to protect them from the ubiquitous totalitarian reality. It was founded on artifacts such as toys, pets and books, and also on impressions. In their accounts, people who were displaced in their youth discuss their feelings at considerable length, although rarely putting a name

to them. The artifacts of the children's world were toys and small objects that fit in a tiny hand. When the Germans entered the apartments with displacement orders, the children wanted to take a part of their world with them. Krystyna Latuszewska admitted that her greatest childhood treasure was a fair-haired doll with big blue movable eyes. As a little girl, Krystyna always had her doll nearby. When the Germans stormed into the apartment, one of the police functionaries tore the doll from her hands, explaining that she would not need the toy after resettlement. The doll was to become the property of the new German owner of their house. Urszula Pietraszek heard the same arguments from a German functionary when she wanted to take her teddy bear (Fornalska, 2018, pp. 107–108). Andrzej Szletyński took his cowboys and Indians figurines with him only because the Germans did not notice him do it – he placed the figurines in a small varnished bread-box from his kindergarten days (Szletyński, 2022, p. 71).

The children vividly remembered their pets from the time of the resettlement. They later tenderly reminisced about the dogs that were considered members of their families. Bożenna Niemierowska-Szczepańczyk took particular pride in the behavior of her pet dog Reks. The Alsatian hid from the German police, thus avoiding death. On the next day, he came to the nearby church and started barking, alarming the celebrant who was offering mass. The priest knew the dog and let him into the sexton's apartment. There, Reks found a suitcase with liturgical vessels hidden in the mezzanine. Niemierowska-Szczepańczyk stressed that thanks to her dog, the liturgical items were saved from destruction, for it was highly probable that the new Evangelical residents would destroy sacred objects of another faith upon taking the apartment from the Poles. Although the woman did not witness this event herself as a child, she made it an important part of her memories (Niemierowska-Szczepańczyk, 1992, p. 22).

Positive memories concerned only the dogs that were well-known to the children. The Germans' animals were another story. They inspired terrible fear in the youngest children, an emotion that stayed with them for many years after the war. Genowefa Barańska remembered that when she was placed with her family in the camp at 4 Wiesenstrasse in Litzmannstadt, all the children were very much afraid of a dog that accompanied a German in high boots. The animal moved freely among the people lying on the ground, reaching places which his master could not access on his own (Barańska, 2023). Marianna Rybicka, who was four years old when she was displaced, remembered the following scene:

> One image is particularly etched in my childhood memory: there was a huge building crowded with people and there were malevolent armed Germans with dangerous dogs. I was horribly afraid of those soldiers and always strove to stand motionless in their presence (Rybicka, 2022, p. 59).

Małgorzata Kubik also had a bad experience. She was walking along a road from the village when she saw some Germans with dogs. She started running, but the animals caught up with her and knocked her to the ground. She was helpless and frightened. It was only after some time that the Germans called the dogs (Kubik, 2004, p. 10).

Many people who were displaced at a young age retained memories of happenings that they found strange and deviating from the norm. Cyryla Krzyżyńska vividly remembered her father leaving the house in a butcher's apron and wooden shoes, her mother wearing a shop assistant's apron, and herself and her two brothers wearing slippers (Krzyżyńska, 2010).

The displacement was invariably associated with chaos. The children were pushed, squeezed between others, passed from hands to hands or completely disregarded. Barbara Morga remembered that her grandmother fought very hard to pull her out of the crowd in Żychlin. But the crowd was too dense and the girl could not be saved from transport to a resettlement camp in Łódź (Wrzesińska, 2023, p. 149). Barbara's grandmother was not an exception. Many women sought to save their children from displacement. Fearing for their lives, they asked neighbors to take care of them, but the younger children – unaware of the situation – would return to their mothers in tears (Górczak, 1998, p. 82).

The Polish children also watched the German children move into their homes. The German functionaries told them the new young residents would soon start playing with the abandoned toys – Krystyna Latuszewska's doll or Urszula Pietraszek's teddy bear – which was very painful for the displaced Poles. The memoirs of one German woman, Aurelia Scheffel, imply that she also found the situation uncomfortable. As she reminisced about the move to a house previously owned by Poles:

> We filed an application for a larger apartment, which was immediately accepted. But it did not happen so "immediately" and we had to wait for a long time. [...] In January, we were notified that there was a house for us and that we could go and see it. If only we had known! We arrived there just as the Poles who owned this small house were moving out. We were speechless. They were being thrown out, and it was our fault! But it was all decided by then. They had to move with their three children to a small room three blocks away. At first, mother did not want to hear about moving in, but later we learned that all Poles had been displaced from that street and that it was to be settled exclusively by Germans. The Poles were furious and if looks could kill, they would have definitely slain us (Scheffel, 2008, pp. 87–88).

She remembered how she used to play with Polish children, but it all came to an end with the outbreak of the war. The totalitarian system

affected the previously coexisting communities: Polish parents forbade their children from playing with German children, for they came from a nation that had invaded Poland, while German parents did the same for fear of retribution. Totalitarianism extended even into the realm of childhood play (Scheffel, 2008, p. 88).

The properties taken from Poles and Jews were settled not only by local Germans, but mostly by Germans from the Reich (*Reichsdeutsche*) and those territories that found themselves under Soviet occupation: Polish Eastern Borderlands (*Wohlyniendeutsche*, *Galiziendeutsche*) and the Białystok region (*Narewdeutsche*), as well as from Romanian Bucovina, and towards the end of the war also by the Germans from the Black Sea Region: Bessarabia and Dobrudja (Radziszewska, 2010, p. 209; Brown, 2013, p. 226). One of the Bessarabian Germans was Albert Eberle, who settled with his family in the area of Pabianice. He remembered that his mother sat down on a suitcase in front of the house where they were about to move in and began to cry bitter tears. The beds in the building were still warm, and there was food on the stove. According to Eberle, his mother acutely felt the injustice of the situation, but she did not leave the farmstead. It has to be borne in mind that her family went through several resettlement camps before they were assigned a farm. Moreover, the Germans were under the influence of powerful propaganda, telling them that new properties and farms were a gift from the Führer, which should be paid for with hard labor (Baum, 2017, pp. 42–44).

Intrusion of the Other: Image of the Germans

All accounts paint the Germans as "Others" who did not belong to the witnesses' world. They intruded into the houses, interrupting daily activities such as playing, visiting friends, eating dinner, learning and sleeping. The displacement was such a harrowing experience that almost all the children could give the exact date when it happened – it never faded from their memory. It was also etched in the memory of the displaced adults.

The children usually watched the Germans surreptitiously. Cyryla Krzyżyńska saw one for the first time when he placed a gun against her mother's head (Krzyżyńska, 2010). Sabina W. remembered that on the day when the Germans invaded her childhood world she was at school and then went to visit her friend Danusia. When the neighbors told her that there were Germans in her house, she hurried home in great fear. She saw two policemen and her crying mother, who was hastily packing their belongings. The sight caused her to panic and the girl temporarily lost contact with reality (Sabina W., 1994, p. 827; Majewska, 2023, p. 29). As an adult woman, Alicja Wasilewska still remembered her reaction

at the sight of the Germans: her hands and legs had trembled uncontrollably (Wasilewska, 2016, p. 32).

Polish children viewed the Germans as malevolent creatures hostile to the displaced population, as terrifying and decidedly evil people. They were indistinguishable from one another, completely subordinate to their state and focused on inflicting constant suffering on their victims. Edmund Smulski remembered the following situation:

> German camp guards continuously sounded alerts, organized roll-calls, conducted frequent searches and harassed the inmates (hurling insults and abuse, beating, pushing them down the stairs etc.). Hungry and cold, we felt constant tension and greatly feared for our future (Smulski, 1996, pp. 1–2).

The Germans strictly prevented any contact with the outside world. When the train stopped at a station during a transport of the displaced people to the General Government in December 1939, local residents and railroad employees rushed to the cars with buckets of warm drinking water. When the Germans saw that these people were trying to help their compatriots, they ordered that the train immediately leave the station (Sabina W., 1994, p. 827).

As described above, the witnesses remembered the Germans as the ones who took over their family homes. Janina Sadowska from Kotliny saw how her grandmother was ordered to pack up and quickly leave her farm by the German functionaries, as the German Felkier family was already waiting to move in. According to Janina's grandmother, the Felkiers were a farming family that owned a small farm in the village of Cisowo near Rokiciny. Taking advantage of their German origin, they took over a larger property, and Janina's family was displaced as a result (Sadowska, 2015). The same fate befell Lechosław Siejka, who believed for the rest of his life that he was sent wandering because his German neighbors sought to take over a bigger property than their own (Siejka, 2020).

Among the many accounts there is only one in which the witness had something positive to say about a German national. This person, however, was previously known to the witness. Cyryla Krzyżyńska retained good memories of Herta, a domestic servant at her family home. When a policeman tore Cyryla's beloved doll from her hands during the displacement, Herta made use of her German origin to take the toy from him and return it to the girl on the following day along with other family items. For Krzyżyńska, the German woman was a familiar member of the prewar multiethnic Łódź, so she did not associate her with the Others and their totalitarian actions (Krzyżyńska, 2010).

The resettlement camps feature prominently in the authors' memory, coming right after initial encounters with Germans. The witnesses did not record the most important events in camp life, but those fragments of reality that were of significance for them as children. The accounts do not give the functionaries' descriptions or names, the estimated number of inmates, the details of the camp's functioning or the names of famous figures of Polish cultural life who were held there. From an outsider's perspective, these accounts may seem vague, and for this reason they are often omitted in research on the camp's history. Nevertheless, the children's perceptions of the surrounding realities complement the picture of resettlements as a tool of German totalitarian policies.

The children were much more helpless than the adults – they could not make decisions concerning their lives and did not have any say even in such trivial matters as taking or leaving their own toys. Together with their parents, they were escorted to rallying points by German functionaries and then transported by tram to selected resettlement camps. Regardless of their age, the displaced persons did not know what the Germans intended to do and thus feared that they might be shot in a forest or deported to concentration camps. Nobody explained to the children why they were being displaced, what it meant and what would happen next. They listened to the conversations between the adults and drew their own conclusions. The adults experienced fear, which they imparted to their children. Teenagers knew that in May 1940, there were mass arrests of secondary school students, and they were apprehensive of sharing their fate. Jerzy Górczak remembered that for this very reason, he felt despair and helplessness, and then fell into apathy and indifference (Górczak, 1998, p. 82).

The memoirs and accounts devote a lot of attention to the suffering of the displaced persons. The children placed in the camps noticed the pain of the people around them, as well as their own, for it was a feeling they had not previously experienced. Jan A. witnessed the Germans take out baskets full of banknotes, furs and collars from a room, which was accompanied by the screaming of beaten women from whom these items had been stolen during a search. Jan himself was punched in the face by the German who searched him and found a bar of soap (Jan A., 1994, p. 796). Barbara L. had a gold earring ripped out. She remembered that her ear hurt a lot and she saw blood drip out of it. The tear mark was still visible when she was testifying before the commission (Barbara L., 1994, p. 790). It was not an isolated incident – many people had similar memories. Cyryla Krzyżyńska watched in horror as blood dripped from her friend Mira's ears, staining her white blouse (Krzyżyńska, 2010). After the registration and the search, the children were washed as part of quarantine regulations. Stanisław Dębkowski remembered that they were

standing naked in a crowded washroom surrounded by both their family members and complete strangers (Dębkowski, 2005, p. 9). Johannes-Dieter Steinert cites the case of a Polish teenage girl from Łódź who felt shame and humiliation for many years after the event. During disinfection before forced labor in Neuhaus, the Germans ordered this girl to walk naked across the room, with soldiers watching her (Steinert, 2020, p. 172).

Małgorzata Kubik from Wola Buczkowska remembered an elderly man who lost his senses after being robbed of his entire property. He would wake up every now and then, greatly alarmed, and nervously search for his cap. His little granddaughter had to remind him constantly that he was wearing the cap on his head (Kubik, 2004, p. 10). Kazimiera K., though she had experienced a lot in life, claimed that the resettlement camp was hell on earth. She remembered that all the displaced persons slept together on extremely muddy ground and in cramped conditions. At night, when the door was closed, water condensed on the walls of the room and then fell to the ground, making the mud even worse. One night, the girl was frightened out of sleep by a yell. It was given by the Germans, who wanted to hurry the people out of the building (Kazimiera K., 2005).

Hunger and disease were widespread in the resettlement camps. Małgorzata Kubik slept together with other children, all huddled together for lack of space. Inadequate sanitary conditions facilitated the spread of disease and the children, crammed like sardines, easily infected one another. The girl soon witnessed the death of her companions (Kubik, 2004, p. 10). The children had neither the time nor the opportunity to come to terms with their grief. Death invaded their world in the form of a German who entered the rooms at night and read out the names of the dead. It was in this manner that Krystyna Józefiak learned about the passing of her five friends (Józefiak, 1998, p. 62). It was only many years later that the witnesses realized that they could have died in the camps as well. Stanisław Dębkowski, who was suffering from meningitis, recalled:

> At first I experienced a strong headache, and then I lost consciousness. [...] It seemed to me that I regained it in the ambulance. I did not feel any pain, it was as if a state of wonderful bliss had taken over me – it is hard to describe the feeling. I had the impression that I found myself in some beautiful place shrouded in greenery (Dębkowski, 2005, p. 10).

All the children experienced hunger. Tadeusz P. remembered that he would get a morsel of moldy black bread every morning and evening, and for dinner there was watery soup with a few leaves of rutabaga, beetroot and cabbage (Tadeusz P., 1980, p. 33). Janina K. observed worrying bodily responses: "What I remember best from the camp is the feeling of constant hunger. For a long time after leaving the camp, I would eat bread quickly and stealthily" (Janina K., 1983, p. 518).

The teenagers were sensitive to the suffering of other displaced persons, especially those who were younger than them. Since the adults were mostly passive, the teenagers came up with initiatives to help the ailing children. They organized concerts, the proceeds of which were to go towards purchasing necessary medicines. The performers played violin and harmonica and sang humorous songs to give people a new perspective on the surrounding realities. The listeners identified with the lyrics and were thus more open-handed. These initiatives helped save the lives of the most gravely ill children (*Wygnańcy – wspomnienia z obozu wysiedleńców Edwarda Mariana Wróblewskiego*, n.d., p. 3).

The families spent anywhere from a dozen hours to as much as a few months in the resettlement camps, which seemed like an eternity for the children. Prolonged stay at the camp helped foster relations between the young internees. As Henryka Jackowska observed, there were many children in the Łódź camps, and they enjoyed playing near the former factories whenever they were allowed to do so (Wrzesińska, 2023, p. 260). Due to the lack of toys, they invented games that they would have otherwise never thought of: they played with blood, excrement and lice. One such game was known as "a dollop of blood" and was "enjoyed" during freezing temperatures. The children would stick their wet fingers or tongues to the barbed wire and then tear them off to produce blood – the more the better. Another "game" consisted in testing lice's resistance to cold and drowning them (Grabara, 1998, p. 91).

Children's Resistance to Totalitarian Reality

The accounts and memoirs show that despite their helplessness, the children voiced their protest against totalitarian reality in their own ways during the displacement operations. Sometimes they did very risky things. This, however, did not result from their inner desire to resist; they were either instructed by their parents or did something by accident. It was only after they grew up that they realized the danger they were in, but many also felt joy and pride in connection with the experience. During their stay in the camps, the children were guided by their sense of rightness. Among those who were proud of their childhood selves was Marianna Rybicka, whose mother hid some jewelry in the girl's sock during a search, hoping that the camp administration would abstain from checking clothes. Marianna's task was to pass the Germans unnoticed, which she did. She did not realize what could have happened had she been caught and searched. She stressed that she admired herself for her feat:

> I did not tell anyone about what happened. Scared and anxious, I kept my secret throughout the entire occupation and considered myself an unsung hero. Later, I modeled

> my behavior on this act of courage when I had to maintain secrecy about my parents' underground activities (Rybicka, 2022, p. 61).

Janina Sadowska and her brother took part in another secret operation after they had spent half a year in the camp at 4 Wiesenstrasse Street. They suffered from purulent tonsillitis, and further stay at the camp could have worsened their condition. The girl's godfather decided to try and take the children out of the camp. In order to mislead the functionaries, he pretended that he had come to the camp on a visit with his wife and daughter. The woman and her child left the camp almost immediately, while he stayed for the prescribed time. Then he put his daughter's hat on Janina's head and took her out of the camp. Next he did the same with Janina's brother. The siblings had to make sure not to betray themselves or the adults. They were both proud that they rose to the occasion and did not start crying or otherwise attract the attention of the German guards (Sadowska, 2015).

Rafał Minich was also immensely proud of himself, for he saved his younger sister. He wanted to escape from the hospital, so he sneaked into the morgue to take some sheets, tie them together and climb down the window. While inside, he noticed a bundle of sheets. It was his younger sister Agnieszka, who was so gravely ill that the guards thought she had already died. The boy got scared and started screaming. His screams brought the doctors to the morgue; they examined the girl and saved her life (R. Minich, 1994, p. 20; Minich-Scholz, 2023).

The fourteen-year-old Janusz Drążkiewicz would risk his life and health to sneak out of the camp at night to obtain food, jumping across tenement roofs. He did not cease his excursions even when the Germans scattered broken glass across the rooftops. Drążkiewicz, however, did not write down his experiences; the memory of his daring lived on in the recollections of other children who admired him (Józefiak, 1998, p. 63).

Those who resisted German manipulation also had a reason to be pleased with themselves. Camp functionaries sought to take advantage of the children's naivety and interrogated them without their parents, hoping that when questioned alone the children would reveal information concerning their parents' activities. The Germans were particularly interested in political activities and membership of the Polish Western Union (Tadeusz P., 1980, p. 35).

Separation From and Loss of Loved Ones

Throughout their stay at the resettlement camps, the children feared separation from their parents, and that emotion featured prominently in their memories (Krzyżyńska, 2010). Władysław G. claimed that he went

through some terrible times at the camp in Łódź, but he was glad that the entire family was there together (Władysław G., 1978, p. 329). Nevertheless, this was not always the case. Some children did not even have the opportunity to say goodbye to their parents and siblings. People were dying in fever, in infirmaries and hospitals, far from their loved ones; accordingly, those who survived devoted a large part of their recollections to the people from whom they had been separated. Jadwiga B. could only approach the place where her younger brother Kazimierz had been buried an hour before, but she had no opportunity to say her goodbyes (Jadwiga B., 1983, p. 508). The last time Tadeusz P. saw his mother was when she was loaded onto a truck by police officers. The boy searched for her grave after the war, but all he found were unmarked burial sites (Tadeusz P., 1980, p. 34). The father of Mieczysława G. was beaten by the Germans in a resettlement camp and never returned to his daughter (Mieczysława G., 1978, p. 344).

Separation from their loved ones made the children feel very lonely, and even after the war nothing could fill that void. Tadeusz Koniarek was placed in a camp together with other children when he was a teenager. He noticed a bird sitting on a sill outside the window. He then realized that the bird would fly away, while he had to stay in the camp completely on his own, away from his parents and his family home. Then tears started flowing down his cheeks (Wrzesińska, 2023, p. 84). When Teresa Tomczak fell ill, she was transferred from the camp to a hospital in Radogoszcz. She remembered how her mother helped her cope with their separation:

> I soon fell ill and was taken to Radogoszcz. [...] My mom could obtain a pass and come visit, but she could only approach the window of the hospital room. [...] When I got well enough to climb out of my bed and go to the window, my mom would kiss her finger, I would kiss mine and we would place them against the glass (Fornalska, 2018, p. 126).

The Czech children from Lidice lost their parents in the most tragic manner. They fell victim to the pacification of the village carried out by the Germans on 10 June 1942 in retaliation for the activities of the Czech resistance. The fathers were murdered and the mothers were deported to KL Ravensbrück. Marie Hanfová remembered a long journey to Łódź. She was very hungry, for she received little food. The younger children were crying and calling for their mothers. When the girl sought to comfort them, she was berated by German female guards (Šupikova, 1982, pp. 74–75; Trębacz, 2010, pp. 135–144). Janina J. clearly remembered the sight of the Czech children when she recalled the tragic events many years later. The scared, dirty and hungry youngsters were crying, holding hands and begging for food. Two weeks later, the Germans carried out a selection, choosing six girls and a boy out of 95 children. These children

were earmarked for Germanization, while the rest were murdered in the death camp of SS-Sonderkommando Kulmhof in Chełmno nad Nerem (Witkowski, 1970).

Selections and Germanization

Selections like the one experienced by Hanfová were a frequent occurrence in resettlement camps. In the process, children with Nordic features such as bright eyes, fair hair and complexion, were excluded from further stages of displacement. The Germans separated them from their parents and subjected them to Germanization, complete with a change of environment and surname (Tokarz, 1979, p. 19).

For Cyryla Krzyżyńska, waiting for medical examination was one of the most traumatic experiences: "We were sitting in a row on a long bench. On the side there was a table with various medical appliances. A man in a lab coat measured our heads and noses and looked us in the eyes. [...] We were shocked and paralyzed with fear, for we were all blondes with blue eyes" (Krzyżyńska, 2010). Genowefa Barańska remembered a long table from the selection, with the Germans sitting there watching the Poles. She heard the adults whisper that the camp administration was looking for small children with blonde hair and blue eyes to take them away from their parents (Barańska, 2023). The selection was preceded by a photo session: the camp personnel took full-face, profile and three-quarter police photographs of the children. As the Germans were examining physical features, the children had to strip naked in front of their peers. The children who best fulfilled the criteria were separated from their parents and placed in orphanages at 46 Friedrich-Gossler-Straße and 66 Mark-Meissen-Straße, as well as in the Rassenlager RuSHA (racial camp of the SS Race and Settlement Main Office) at 73 Landsknechtstraße. Later the children were sent to German families applying for adoption (Galiński, Waszczyński, Fijałek, Kasznicki, 1982, p. 337). The displaced persons referred to these selections as "race examinations". The father of Agnieszka Minich-Scholz, fearing that his daughter might be Germanized, taught the three and a half years old child when she was born and where she and her family lived. He would wake her up in the middle of the night and ask her questions, even about the address of the Polish embassy in Paris (Minich-Scholz, 2023).

The children adopted by German families were raised in German culture and language, forgetting their Polish roots (Górczak, 1998, p. 82). During the interview, Genowefa Barańska recounted what she heard from her older brother Janek:

> My brother worked for a German farmer. The woman had a Polish child – a girl. It was forbidden to address her in Polish.

> As long as she remembered her mother, she would cry and call "Mom! Mom!" or "Grandma!" But when the war ended, she did not want to return to Poland, for she had a German mother there (Barańska, 2023).

Forced Labor in the Reich

Following the invasion of the USSR, the war machine of the Third Reich required new workers in munitions and aircraft factories, as well as on farms, which meant that even children had to work. In 1941, the resettlement camps began to serve a different purpose. They were no longer tasked with resettling people to the east, to the General Government, but were now organizing deportations to the west, for work on farms and in armament factories, where the new laborers were to replace Germans sent to the Eastern Front. Children over the age of 12 were separated from their parents and deported to various workplaces in the Reich. The farm owners were brainwashed by Nazi propaganda into believing that the children had volunteered for work. The selection of underage "laborers" by their new "employers" resembled an ancient slave market (Wąsik, 1998, p. 120; Steinert, 2020, p. 174).

Among minors deported from the resettlement camps in Łódź for forced labor was Kazimiera K. from the village of Dęby near Aleksandrów Kujawski. The German farmer treated the girl in an abominable manner: he told her to sleep in the pigpen and repeatedly hit her in the face, knocking out her teeth. He treated her with great brutality because the thirteen-year-old girl could not perform the hardest farm work. A boy named Józef, who could not stand the farmer's bad treatment, attempted to escape, but without success. He was shot. Kazimiera did not have anyone with whom she could share her troubles (Kazimiera K. z Aleksandrowa Kujawskiego, 1977, p. 291).

Zenon Daros from Lutomiersk was separated from his mother and taken for forced labor at a farm in Skwierzyna. The work there was very hard. Like Kazimiera, Zenon was beaten by the farm owner. The boy missed his mother very much and decided to cut his middle finger during logging so that he would be sent home. Unfortunely, he cut through the upper part of his middle finger and two neighboring ones. He was taken to the hospital and had his middle finger amputated, for the wound would not heal. His dream about going home also did not come true, for he was ordered to return to the farm upon release from the hospital. He escaped some time later, but was captured and placed in a prison. A year later, he was once again sent to the same farmer, but this time managed to escape for good (Daros, 1976, pp. 111–112).

During the war, young people were deprived of the joys of childhood and prematurely had to take on adult responsibilities. They came into contact with the brutality of life too early for their age. Uprooted from their childhood worlds, they had to mature quickly and assume adult roles in order to survive, for they were not exempt from displacement and forced labor.

The boundary between childhood and adulthood was rather vague, depending on individual psychological characteristics and external stimuli such as the death of a parent. When the personal data of inmates were being taken down in one of the resettlement camps and a German heard the date of birth given by a boy in front of him, he asked whether the boy realized it was his birthday. Zenon Daros was perfectly aware that he was turning 14 that day, but he would gladly postpone the date – the Germans now treated him as an adult who could work as an adult. The boy was caught by a German named Kroll when he tried to escape from a roundup in Lutomiersk. Kroll pointed his gun at him, saying: "Stay where you are, you motherfucker, or I will shoot you like a dog!", and then proceeded to kick his victim (Daros, 1976, pp. 104–107). It can be inferred, therefore, that fear also played a part in accelerating maturity and enhancing the feeling of responsibility.

Cyryla Krzyżyńska suggested that in her case, accelerated maturity resulted from her being the oldest child. When her parents were taken for various works in and outside the camp, she watched over her two younger brothers and a sister:

> I was the oldest. My childhood came to an abrupt end. I had to be responsible. It was I who had to give up sleeping on my father's fur coat. I had to sleep directly on the concrete floor, and in this manner developed a blood condition resulting in boils all over my body, which persisted for a year after I had left the camp. It was I who had to watch Grzegorz so that he would not fall into the latrine pit, as the corpses of drowned children were often found there when the waste was being removed (Krzyżyńska, 2010).

The children who were separated from their parents were more resourceful. The thirteen-year-old Stanisław Sumiński did not have any document confirming his age upon entering the camp. During a stroll in the yard, he asked the guard to deliver a note to his parents, promising a "bribe" to be paid by them. Some time later, the guard brought Stanisław's birth certificate, which saved the boy from deportation for forced labor (Sumiński, 1998). Sabina W. recalled that she was only 11 years old when she returned to Łódź from the place of resettlement all by herself. She

began to earn her own living by doing housework for a German woman. She cleaned the house, watched the children, stoked the stoves, swept the street and even pumped out the septic tank (Sabina W., 1994, p. 826).

Nevertheless, the children were not adults, and undertaking certain tasks, especially beyond their capabilities, invited disaster. Two boys set themselves a goal of getting medication for their sick mother from outside the camp. It could not be obtained legally, for the Germans did not allow parcels and forbade the inmates from leaving the camp. Despite all this, the boys decided to help their mother and one night left the camp through gaps in the fence. When they returned with the medication, however, they were caught by the guards and brutally beaten, and their mother died when she learned about the incident (*Wygnańcy – wspomnienia z obozu wysiedleńców Edwarda Mariana Wróblewskiego*, n.d., p. 4).

Memories From the Transports

It is estimated that 300,000 children and young people were resettled from the Reichsgau Wartheland as part of the totalitarian activities (Pilichowski, 1982, p. 18). They were first transported to towns in the General Government, and later into the Third Reich.[2] The children experienced stress during the journey. Surrounded by darkness, crammed in between adults, hungry, thirsty and dirty, they did not know where the train would take them or how long the journey would be. The children could not learn anything from the adults, because they did not know their destination either. The landscapes glimpsed through cracks in the cars and overheard conversations suggested that the journey would be very long. The children watched other displaced people. They particularly remembered those who stood out, e.g. had some objects with them that were rarely seen in the camps or behaved differently, for instance due to some medical condition.

During the entire journey, the children experienced negative emotions, which became etched in their memories (Niemierowska-Szczepańczyk, 1992, p. 28). In particular, the images of dying peers and younger children left a lasting mental scar (Kazimiera K. z Aleksandrowa Kujawskiego, 1977, p. 291). Pilichowski established that during the transport of 7 January

2 Not only children from the Reichsgau Wartheland were resettled to the General Government, but also children from other administrative regions established in the territories annexed into the Reich. For instance as concerns the resettlement camp in Potulice, situated between Bydgoszcz and Nakło nad Notecią, the youngest children were resettled to the General Government, while older children had to work on the camp premises and were later deported for forced labor deep in the Reich. Extremely difficult living conditions were in the camp in Smukała near Bydgoszcz, which saw the death of 140 children below two years of age. Older children had to work there at logging and sorting timber. The camp in Toruń known as Szmalcówka also became a labor camp (Bernard T., 2005; Jastrzębski, 1967; Ciesielska, 1976; Wardzyńska, 2017).

1940, 26 children's bodies were discovered upon arrival in Kraków, and another 30 bodies of children who had frozen to death were found at the train station in Dębica (Pilichowski, 1982, p. 18).

Secondary Memory And Conscious Lack of Memory

The accounts concerning German totalitarian practices were also given by those displaced for whom the experience was not encoded in their long-term memory. This concerns children below three years of age. Jadwiga J., who was born on 17 March 1939, testified that she was unable to locate the events in time and give an accurate account of them based on her own knowledge, for she was too little to remember. The displacement, however, was an event of great importance and she repeatedly discussed it with her family. Her mother gave Jadwiga a detailed description of subsequent stages of the process: the reasons for displacement, the storming of the house by the Germans, placement in the camp and transport to the General Government. In this manner, Jadwiga's mother imparted her knowledge to her daughter (Jadwiga J., 1994, pp. 806–807).

Kazimierz Wesołowski also has only secondary memory. Giving his account in 2023, he stressed that he was born in the resettlement camp at 4 Wiesenstrasse in Łódź. His mother's perspective is clearly discernible in his memories. Helena Wesołowska was transported to Łódź by the Germans when she was nine months pregnant. She went into labor during her second day in the camp. The building was not adapted to serve as a hospital, and Helena had to give birth to her son in a crowded room. To give her some privacy, other women shielded her with their own blankets and helped her to deliver the baby. Years later, her son was immensely proud of his mother's heroism in taking care of him (Wesołowski, 2023, p. 1; Wykaz osób wysiedlonych..., 1939–1941a; Wykaz osób wysiedlonych..., 1939–1941b; Listy transportowe ewakuowanych osób..., 1939–1945, p. 40; Ewakuacje polskich rodzin rolniczych..., 1939–1945, p. 38).

In the case of small children, the susceptibility of their autobiographical memory to parental suggestions resulted in the retention of certain details. Some children remembered the moment their parents told them about the displacements and these stories became part of their secondary memory. This, however, was not a neutral process. On the one hand, parental suggestions helped bridge gaps in individual memory, but on the other hand they made certain facts stand out at the expense of what was inconvenient or inconsequential from an adult's perspective. For instance, there are two accounts of the same events by a father and a son from the administrative region of Łódź. The son was five years old at the time, he was gravely ill and remembered very little. His father supplemented his testimony, and the son accepted these additions as hard facts. He also followed his father's lead in emphasizing

his poor health. This slanting of the narrative by the father could have been motivated by the pursuit of compensation. It resulted in narrowing down the whole experience to suffering (Lech T., 1975, p. 225; Teofil T., 1975, pp. 220–223).

Traces of Trauma in Adult Life, Conscious Lack of Memory

The scientists who studied children's psyche after the war emphasized that the degree of mental changes depended on the strength of the shock and the duration of the stimuli. Moreover, the experienced trauma was to be viewed as a dynamic process that was unfolding over time, not as a one-off event (Betancourt, Khan, 2008, p. 318).

One of the biggest problems facing many children after the war was the absence of parents. In Łódź, one in six babies, one in four kindergarten children, and one in three school children were left without either one or both parents. Researchers also noted anxiety, emotional disturbances and decreased concentration in children who had experienced air raids, executions, round-ups, displacement etc. The overall damage to the children's personal and physical development was dubbed the "war complex" (Theiss, 2012, pp. 80, 85–87). Nevertheless, some positive consequences were also observed, such as the strengthening of family ties, greater independence or better life skills, which were the psyche's response aimed at adapting to the existing realities. The children perceived the war as something outside of their control, which at the same time affected them deeply (Bandura, 2004, pp. 80, 87, 89). Years later, the underage victims of displacement spoke very badly about the Germans as perpetrators of their suffering. It is worth noting their language: they do not call their oppressors Hitlerites or Nazis, but refer to their nationality, thereby underscoring who was the torturer and who was the victim in the context of nationality-based persecution during the Second World War.

Another aspect of the recollection of displacement includes attempts at repressing memories, which can be observed in numerous witnesses. For many years, the victims deliberately kept silent about their wartime experiences, refusing to relive the pain on the one hand, and hoping to protect their loved ones from transgenerational trauma on the other. Such protection of family members, however, was counterproductive, for in this manner the period of war became a taboo subject. It was only after the truth had been revealed that the displaced persons and their families could heal after the harm they had suffered (Nowak, Łucka, 2014, p. 87). At the insistence of his children, Lechosław Siejka went to the site of the resettlement camp in Radogoszcz (now the Radogoszcz Martyrdom Branch of the Museum of Independence Traditions in Łódź) only a few years before his death. It was also his children who undertook the initiative to record his memories (Siejka, 2020).

The trauma of displacement became etched in the children's memory for the rest of their lives (in the form of flashbacks). Throughout her adult life, Doctor Marianna Rybicka was haunted by a vision of the dead wrapped in white sheets who were taken out of the resettlement camp in the morning hours. She remembered that as a four-year-old girl, she could not stand the sight and hid her face in her mother's skirt. In her later life, the memories of so-called white mummies were triggered by various objects and situations: "They appear before eyes in my professional setting when I have to do with death or a crowded emergency room, where I have to decide whom to see first" (Rybicka, 2022, p. 60). Dr Rybicka also experienced mental pain at the sight of pillars supporting ceilings in various rooms, for they resembled the columns from the camp halls (p. 63). Tadeusz P. testified before the Olsztyn District Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in 1980 that as a ten-year-old boy he witnessed the beating of other displaced persons. The sight of victims who were carried out to be "finished off" was particularly etched in his memory (Tadeusz P., 1980, p. 34). Some, like Lechosław Siejka, were afraid of German shepherds for the rest of their lives, as their sight immediately unlocked the memory of past experiences featuring these animals. They were identified with dogs that accompanied Germans during the war (Lech, 2023).

Józef Staszewski, who was forced by the Germans to work very hard as a child, made his own assessment of mental changes in traumatized young people. According to Staszewski, the war deprived them of childhood, a period during which personality is formed. The majority of children had no learning opportunities and were made to perform strenuous labor. As a result, they suffered the stigma of being delayed in their personal and intellectual development. Their further personal lives and careers were negatively impacted by their wartime experiences. Staszewski emphasized that "the war meant more than a lost childhood to us, as it also brought hard work, a fight for survival, and then a struggle to catch up with others; it was a severe trauma that will stay with us for the rest of our lives" (Wrzesińska, 2023, p. 250).

Conclusions

The German totalitarian state was founded on the concept of racial purity, and as such it sought to cleanse the territories annexed into the Reich of people who were not of the right (German) descent, earmarking them for displacement and loss of all property. The children associated the wartime realities with violence and terror, which are the structural elements of totalitarianism. All accounts discussed in this paper refer to the brutality of the Germans, who invaded the lives of the witnesses, causing them pain and inspiring fear of more suffering. German totalitarianism also found its expression in the biological extermination of the witnesses'

family members, which brought loneliness and hopelessness to the children. The breakup of the family proved to be the most difficult experience for the children to process. The displacement was a series of traumatic events from the moment the Germans entered the house, through involuntary placement in the resettlement camps, to the transport to the General Government or for forced labor in the Reich. The children had to cope with situations that surpassed their experience, thus accelerating their maturity. Their worlds were shattered into so many tiny fragments that they could not be put back together.

In many cases, the loss of childhood was definite – it could not be regained after the end of the Second World War with the return of the displaced persons to their homes. The apartments were empty, stripped of all furniture and appliances. The emptiness applied also to the psychological aspects. Many returning families were incomplete, some members either died or had been murdered. The majority of accounts given by people who were placed in resettlement camps in their young age end with feelings of regret concerning the irretrievably lost years.

(transl. by Aleksandra Arumińska)

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