CD-1021 Transcription

American Jewish Committee seminar-meeting [3]. 10 March 1980.

Marc Tanenbaum:

A dialogue called the four C's. It was sponsored by commentary, Christian Century, *Commonweal Magazine*, both above ground and underground, in Columbia University School of Journalism. I think in those days, with all of the thorny issues of church-state relationships, which as George has said, dominated our discussion at the time. We got some sense, for the first time, of what the possibilities might be for frank and honest conversation in a spirit of family, people really caring for one another. I think in many ways, the seeds that were laid then, for trying to overcome past misunderstanding and laying the foundation for not only future friendship, but future caring, support for one another, became evident.

It's not telling tales out of the school, [01:00] that in this work, -- and I've now been engaged in this for some 30 years. Actually, this coming year marks my thirtieth year of work; 20 years with AJC and 10 years before that, with a synagogue council. There are many positive developments which have taken place, much of which has been referred to today in a general way, but I think it's also evident, especially to the members of

this commission, many of you come from various parts of the country, that this has not been a case of linear growth, where we're moved onward and upward toward inevitable progress. It has been filled frequently with setbacks, and at times, I know my colleagues who are here and our chairman, Bob Jacobs, Jim Rudin, Inga [Gabell?] Judy [Banky?] and others, who have been part of our staff in the past, frequently have felt like Sisyphus. [02:00] We feel that we're making progress, pushing the rock up, understanding, up to the top of the mountain, thinking that somehow we are moving toward a break with a pass, which has been difficult and at worst tragic, to a whole new future, and then when you think, as my father, bless him, would say, [*ot-ot-ot*?], you know you have made it, suddenly something happens and you have a sense that the whole weight of what you've been involved in begins to topple down the side of the mountain. There are moments like that when the kind of work that spayed, digging work, in some ways pioneering kind of work, leaves one feeling lonely and at times even demoralized.

The episodes we've recently gone through, with the National Council of Churches, have been [03:00] -- I need not tell this group, sitting around the table with people who raise a question about the right of Israel to exist leave one feeling almost depressed, wondering whether it's possible to continue this

activity with some elements in the community. And I think the one thing that has sustained us, and I think my associates and others at AJC, at the point at which one may feel even despondency, is a recognition that through all of this period of turmoil and transition, there was always a Monsignor George Higgins, who has been there from the very beginning, stalwart, unflappable, always there, a word of healing, kindly advice, direction, and [04:00] the knowledge of a George Higgins, and by his side, Eugene Fisher and others in the Catholic community, and persons like them now increasingly, in most of the major cities of the United States. They've become our greatest consolation and our greatest support, and the knowledge that they who are there when you need them most, when you're hurting, suffering, feeling threatened, knowing that they are there and that there were none like them decades ago, to turn to, becomes the greatest encouragement to want to continue this work and know that somehow, some way, by God's grace and care for his people, somehow we'll blunder our way through to a better future, certainly a better future than the past has been.

I want to make just a brief point before I present Monsignor [05:00] Higgins, just the token of our deep affection and appreciation for everything he has meant to us. Just less than three weeks ago, I had both the privilege and the agony of

spending eight days in Thailand, and going to the border of Cambodia. We came together with groups of Americans, with the International Rescue Committee, and with a large number of Europeans, mainly Frenchmen, some 120 Frenchmen, some people from Italy, Germany, Belgium, other parts of Europe, leading a convoy of 20 truckloads of food and medicine that we had intended to try to bring into Cambodia, to bring [06:00] to that population, 60 percent of whom continue to be in a condition of starvation, even worse than that, who have now only 50 physicians left. There were 500 in 1975, there are 50 physicians left to care for some four million people who are surviving. We turned that convoy of 20 truckloads of food and medicine, over to the Red Cross of Thailand, and then with our delegation, which included people like [Liz Allman?] and Joan Baez and Bayard Rustin and Elie Wiesel, Winston Churchill III, and a number of French physicians or parliamentarians. We went back to the camps on the border of Thailand and Cambodia, Aranyaprathet, Khao-I-Dang, and [07:00] walking in the camp of Khao-I-Dang, I suddenly symbolically got the sense of everything that Monsignor Higgins was talking about this morning, when Jews and Catholics in particular, Jews and Christians generally, but Catholics and Jews at their best, taking their values, their ideals, in the biblical tradition and the democratic tradition most seriously, what a difference they make in the real world, because in the

camp of Khao-I-Dang, that had 110,000 refugees, most of them Cambodians, a large number of Vietnamese, a number of Thais.

Side-by-side, in the camp, were two structures and tents. One was a tent erected by the Catholic Relief Service, that had a center called [08:00] intensive feeding center, and in that center there were several hundred children and their mothers. Children who had come in so starved, it was a question as to whether they would live through the week, the month. And to see Catholic doctors, Catholic nuns, Catholic young people, literally emptying themselves in a sacrificial way in service, to same the lives of people who were not Catholic, many of them, some of them were. Buddhists, Hindus, God knows what, but serving them because they’re human beings who bear the stamp of the sanctity of life, the dignity of every human person, and literally resurrecting people from the border of death and right next to that, another clinic in which there were a group of six Israeli physicians, most of whom had [09:00] served in the Sinai, taking care of Arab Bedouins, whom they had learned to save and heal, under the most impossible conditions, joined by something I had not known before and never seen before; dozens of young American Jewish doctors and nurses, who came from the Berkeley Group in California, who pulled themselves together, volunteered, dropped out of their medical practices for three

months, four months. Young Jewish nurses, and they came over because they heard I was a rabbi. Joan Jaffe became chief nurse of the clinic and that whole Israeli medical team and young Jewish doctors and nurses, together with the number of Christians who were present, literally, by virtue of their devotion, both as Americans and as Jews, controlled a rampant epidemic of malaria and tuberculosis in that clinic, [10:00] to the point where it virtually snapped out the whole epidemic in that camp. Both of them have become legend; Catholic Relief Service and the Israeli doctors and nurses and others, have become legendary in that community. So it's that sense of when we turn ourselves out toward concern for others and service to others, that George Higgins has symbolized for more than three decades to us, and as an expression of our gratitude, appreciation, and our deepest love, that we'd like to present, to Monsignor Higgins, this Bible, which is the deepest bridge that brings us together in terms of its ideals and values. George, I'd like to present this to you with this inscription, "To Monsignor George Higgins, [11:00] God's own gentleman, whose life and work have been inspired reflections of the Prophet Isaiah's message, 'justice shalt thou pursue.' In admiration and grateful appreciation of the Interreligious Affairs Commission of the American-Jewish Committee."

George Higgins:

Thank you very much. Can I just have one word? I won't keep you. I merely want to thank Marc and all of you very sincerely and close on a note that Gene Fisher mentioned and I meant to pursue and failed to do so, and that is the providential opportunity that Catholics and Jews in the United States have in this field. Half of the Jewish people in the world live in the United States. Fifty-five, 57 million Catholics, in a country which, [12:00] more than any other major country in the world, has a tradition of freedom and pluralism that is not understood even in Western Europe, the way it is here. So that I feel some responsibility as a Catholic, to put pressure on the Vatican, to let them learn from our experience, which they do not understand, and I would ask you, in that connection, when Father Mejia comes to the United States in April, to attend the workshop in Dallas. He's the head of the Catholic-Jewish Office at the Vatican. To take advantage of every opportunity that presents itself to you, to help him to understand what it is that's distinctive about the American contribution and why we have such a responsibility and why we should be heard more than we're heard around the rest of the world. I can say off the record, about Father Mejia, who is a very dear friend, that I do not think he fully understands the distinctiveness of the

American experience [13:00] in the sense that we do, and anything that you can help him to do that will be for the good of the common cause.

One final word. As you get older, you spend most of your time burying friends. I go to more funerals now than I used to, that's true of all of us as we get older, and you begin to count your friends. I would say among the three or four closest friends that I've ever made in my life, there's one that I -- whom I wish you would give my greetings to; I'm sure Marc will be talking to him on the phone, and that's my dear friend Zach Shuster. I can't tell you what great times we've had together in Europe and in the United States. I could give you some hilarious stories about our various dinner meetings with Malachi Martin, but I'll just give one little brief story, and you'll excuse me for imitating Zach's accent, because it is distinctive.

In Rome, a few years ago, we met and he wanted to take me to dinner and he said, "You pick the restaurant." So I picked the restaurant, [14:00] and so help me, we were three quarters through the meal when Zach said, "George, do you like it here?" I said, "I'm eating it." "You don't like it, we go somewhere else." And that was Zach, "We go somewhere else." Zach has been

one of my dearest friends and I hope you'll give him my kindest regards. Thank you very much.

Francis Mugavero:

Monsignor Higgins and Dr. Fisher, we thank both of you for joining us this morning and for sharing your ideas with us, and your thoughts. For those of you who have checked into the hotel, let me remind you, that one o'clock is checkout time, so you might want to make arrangements to check out now if you haven't done so. Inga, what's next on the physical agenda? Where do we go?

Inga:

First, let me just add that if you're checking out and you want to leave your things, there is a checkroom upstairs in the lobby where you check out, where you can leave your things. We go next door for drinks and lunch.

Francis Mugavero:

We go next door for drinks and lunch. See you there shortly.

George Higgins:

Thank you very much. [15:00] Nice to meet another Chicagoan. I'm sorry I wasn't better prepared, but I've been terribly busy.

Francis Mugavero:

You were. No, no, no, thank you. Well, you're joining us for lunch right now.

George Higgins:

No. I have a lunch but I'll join you for a drink. I have an appointment at one-fifteen downtown, with an old friend of mine.

(break in audio)

Francis Mugavero:

Blessed are you, oh Lord our God, king of the universe, who has brought us together in peace and in harmony. Who has brought us together out of a history of tragedy, out of many troubles, out of many trials, but who brings us together today in this country, in this place, who brings Christians and Jews together, who brings this afternoon, I understand, Christians, Muslims and Jews together. Who gives us a sense [16:00] of hope in the darkness, a sense of light, who gives us a sense that it is possible to keep working together for the future, for our children. Amen.

The program now, even though dessert hasn’t been served, the Senator is under a very tight time schedule and he’s been very gracious in spending this time with us and staying on to comment and give his views to us. I think out of courtesy to him, we should begin the program now. We will have dessert and I hope it will be quiet while he is speaking. [17:00]

The American Jewish Committee has long been concerned with the problems of refugees. Obviously, we ourselves were the boat people 40 years ago and as such, while we are concerned with Jewish problems, we are equally concerned with problems that affect all communities throughout the world. We’ve had a deep care and an interest in this. Marc Tanenbaum has been personally, vitally concerned with it, and our speaker this afternoon, Senator Danforth, has been very much involved in this subject. The senator is a fifth-generation Missourian. He received his bachelor’s degree from Princeton. He then received both a bachelor of divinity and a bachelor of law degree from Yale, and I must say is a graduate of Harvard Law School. I trust that Princeton and Yale are not a fatal flaw in your character. He was elected attorney general of Missouri in 1968 and served in that position for eight years. He’s been [18:00] the senator from Missouri since 1976. He serves on the Finance

and the Commerce and Governmental Affairs committees. He is an ordained member of the clergy of the Episcopal Church, married, and has five children.

He recently headed the congressional delegation which went to study the problems of providing food and medical supplies to Cambodian refugees, a concern which we share with him. I've read his statements and I hope that you have too. I would like to say, after reading them, that he has a Jewish heart, but in reality, I think it's better to say he has a godly heart. I present to you, Senator Danforth.

John Danforth:

Thank you very much. Did you say Harvard has a law school? I don't know what you've been talking about [19:00] today. I think you've been talking about Cambodia this morning. Is that right? Oh, you have not. Because I was looking. I got here at about noon and I looked in this room and only saw a bar set up, and when I saw the bar set up, I concluded I was at the right place but where is everybody else. And then I looked into the next room and I saw Marc Tanenbaum making a speech and I knew that I was in the right place, but I didn't know what the subject matter was. I think that we have people who are with us, who are more current on this situation than I am. Marc, I know was with

a group last month, which went over to Thailand, and I think he could bring us -- bring you, after I leave, up-to-date on [20:00] exactly what the situation is today, but I thought I'd give you at least some impressions of what happened and what I saw and what the background was.

Last October, one Sunday night, I was reading a newspaper and I read a column by Mary McCrory, in the *Washington Star*, and it turned out, in retrospect, with more knowledge on my part, that that column was unfair, I think, and inaccurate. It was very critical of the president and it said, "Well, where is his Christianity that he talks to much about, when he has done nothing with respect to the situation in Cambodia." That comment, I think, was inaccurate and unfair, but I put the same question to myself [21:00] and on the next day, I talked to Senator Baker, who is the Republican leader in the senate, about the situation, and talked to him again Monday afternoon and again on Tuesday, at which time he suggested that I go over to Thailand and hopefully to Cambodia, to see the situation there. And on Tuesday afternoon, Senator Baker talked to the president and suggested that he designate somebody to represent him, and then by Wednesday, I was on the phone with Secretary Vance, and on Wednesday afternoon with Dick Holbrooke, who is the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs. By Thursday, it was

the intention of Holbrooke and myself, together with two staff people, [22:00] to fly commercial to Thailand, and by Thursday night, the group had expanded and by Friday, it really took off, and by Friday night, we left, not commercial, but at Andrews Air Force Base, in an Air Force jet, with about maybe a couple of dozen people, three Senators; Jim Sasser from Tennessee, Max Baucus from Montana, and myself, Holbrooke, a bunch of State Department people, a doctor, all kinds of people went. So it turned out to be kind of a Cecil B. DeMille production, whereas initially it was just to be a few people on a commercial flight.

We left at ten o’clock on Friday night. We flew to Alaska, got out of the airplane when the fuel was changed or fuel [23:00] was put in, and went to the Officers Club, and it was still nighttime, and they were having a dance at the Officers Club at the Air Force base in Alaska. Flew again to Japan, and it was still dark when we arrived in Japan. Holbrooke and I took a little walk under the stars, took off again and it was still dark and landed the next morning in Bangkok, except that the next morning was Sunday, not Saturday. Really, an eerie situation.

On Sunday afternoon, we met with a series of people at the American -- at the ambassador’s residence in Bangkok, including

representatives of world relief organizations. We were trying to do basically one thing; not to involve ourselves in the political situation, but to find out if there was some specific method [24:00] that could be used to improve the delivery of food and the delivery of medical supplies to the people inside Cambodia, and the people with whom we met were of one mind, they said yes, there is such a way, and that is by truck, and there's no reason at all, that within three to five days, trucks could be moving along Highways 5 and 6, from Thailand, into Cambodia, that ample rice was available in Thailand. Rice to Thailand is like wheat to the United States. They try to export it, they want to export it, the trucks were available in Thailand. All they needed was permission of the Vietnamese and of the Cambodians and the trucks could be rolling. So that was our effort, to identify the best means of distributing food inside Cambodia, and then to publicize that means with [25:00] the view to getting permission from the Cambodians and from the Vietnamese, to allow the trucks to go into that country.

On Monday, we went to the border of Thailand, and at that time, refugees were literally coming over the border, we saw them come over. And I might just give you a word of background as to why they were coming over and who they were. In 1975, the then regime of Lon Nol, was overthrown by a new group, run by a man

named Pol Pot, very radical Chinese-backed communist operation, very ideological, [26:00] agrarian, anti-urban, anti-western, anti-technology, anti-civilization. And the theory of Pol Pot was to destroy the remnants of urban life, civilization, western life, education, and that's what they proceeded to do. Among other things, the population of Phnom Penh, once the capital city, was marched out into the countryside to die. Much the same would happen if the population of Washington were marched out of Washington, into the countryside, to die. People with educations were killed, people with relationships with the past regime were killed. An estimated 90% of the medical doctors of Cambodia were killed, [27:00] and the people who came to power were rural, doctrinaire. The army was very young, 13-, 14-, 15-year-old boys, and very, very bloodthirsty, so that many, many people were killed. Nobody knows exactly how many, but estimates of the population of Cambodia today are just all over the place; all the way from about four million to about six million, whereas once there were between seven and eight million. So there was just massive killing.

Then, in December of 1978, the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia, ousted Pol Pot, installed a puppet government run by a man named Heng Samrin, in Phnom Penh, pushed the Pol Pot [28:00] followers, the Khmer Rouge, out of Phnom Penh, into the

countryside, particularly into the mountainous areas in the western part of Cambodia. There was constant fighting going on during this period of time and during the fighting, the rice crop was not planted, much of what was planted was destroyed. The harvesting of what was planted and what did continue to grow was interrupted, so just a small fraction of the usual rice crop of Cambodia was actually produced. So the result of all this was that on top of a period of real bloodshed, when Pol Pot came to power, there was another period of bloodshed during the fighting between [29:00] the Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge. Plus, a very diminished rice crop, plus a major outbreak of disease, especially malaria, and in early October, the fighting began to break out again, in the western part of Cambodia, and with that, a tremendous surge of refugees came across the border from Cambodia, into Thailand, and that’s what we saw. We saw them coming across the border. They did not come across the border into camps. They came across the border and lay down on the ground. There weren’t any camps. There were just areas where people crossed, and we saw them crossing, and there they were, and they were there by the tens of thousands, [30:00] and there were people of all ages. We were told there weren’t any children; that’s not true, there were a lot of children. We saw babies dying. We saw people lying on the ground, dying. We saw

people dying by the thousands, everywhere you looked, people so weak that they could not get off the ground.

One of the things that was noticeable was the silence. Not just what we saw but what we heard or what we didn't hear. Can you imagine tens of thousands of people and still, you could hear a pin drop? People were so weakened, so exhausted, so sick, that there was a deadly, literally deadly silence. Children weren't playing, weren't laughing. Little babies [31:00] in the mothers' arms, emaciated, clearly dying, flies on people. Healthy people don't have flies on them; they can shake them off, they do shake them off. We saw flies crawling on people, they were too weak to shake them off, and that was the situation that we saw.

On Tuesday, we presented the notion of a so-called land bridge, that is the truck route from Thailand to Cambodia, to the Vietnamese Vice Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, a man named [Win Ko Tak?] at the Vietnamese Embassy in Bangkok. He was noncommittal on the notion of the land bridge, but he did give us permission to fly to Phnom Penh the next day. [32:00] So on Wednesday, we flew to Phnom Penh, and we were the first delegation of Americans to go to that city since 1975, and it was really eerie. Phnom Penh, obviously, in its heyday, was a beautiful city. It had broad, long avenues, tree-lined, kind of

a French tropical type of an architecture, and yet, it had gone to seed. The population, which was once 600,000, was maybe 20,000 when we were there. You could stand in the middle of these broad, tree-lined avenues with a camera, and take a picture all the way down and not see a single car. The buildings were going to seed, falling apart. They had either been [33:00] intentionally destroyed or during a period of five years, they had been vandalized or otherwise allowed to go to ruin, and therefore they were in shambles, and it was a ghost town. There were no stores, no restaurants, nothing. Some people were selling things on the street for rice. There is no currency. Rice is the means of exchange. The people there looked fairly well fed because Phnom Penh is clearly under the dominance of the Vietnamese and therefore, the food was getting in, they were allowing the food to get in.

Well that was the situation we saw in Phnom Penh. We met with the foreign minister, a man named Hun Sen. Interestingly enough, the foreign minister at the time we met him, was 27 years old, [34:00] indicating how thin the leadership is. We had something of a wrangle with a man who was taking us around, because we didn’t want to follow exactly the agenda that he gave us. He wanted us to see -- much as the people in Iran are doing now, all the horror stories. He wanted us to see where the executions

took place and the torture, and we said we don’t want that, it’s too political. We’re not here in a political mission, this is just a humanitarian mission. But when that man wanted to communicate with the foreign minister and tell him that we weren’t happy with the agenda, he couldn’t pick up the phone and say here’s what they’re telling us, because there wasn’t any phone system. So he had to drive in one of the few cars in Phnom Penh, over to see the foreign minister, and talk to him in person, that was the situation in Phnom Penh. [35:00] So we met with this 27 year-old foreign minister and we again presented him with the idea of the truck route, and he too was noncommittal. And then a couple of days later, a radio broadcast was intercepted, indicated that the notion of the land bridge, the truck route, had been turned down.

When we returned to Washington, we met with the Soviet Ambassador, Mr. Dobrynin, and we said this to Dobrynin. We said, “Look, Cambodia is now under the domination of Vietnam, and Vietnam is clearly within the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union. Use your authority to allow the trucks to come in with the rice.” And Dobrynin’s comment was very telling. He said, “Well, the position of the Vietnamese [36:00] and the position of the Cambodians is that if rice were to be allowed to come in by truck, some of it might reach the Pol Pot followers.” So in

other words, food was being used as an instrument of policy, and withholding the food was used as an instrument of policy and therefore the trucks were not allowed in and have not been allowed in. Now what's the present situation? There have been some concessions with respect to those areas clearly under the domination of the Vietnamese. More flights have been allowed in to the airport at Phnom Penh, ships have been allowed to come up the river, the Mekong. A few more international relief personnel have been permitted in the country, to help with the distribution of food. There is a much better situation in Thailand now. [37:00] The people whom we saw have been moved away from the immediate border area, where they were just lying on the ground, further inland, to real camps, little cities, Marc saw them last month. The relief organization inside Thailand is doing a good job. A lot of food is available in Thailand. The kids there, I'm told, are beginning to laugh and to play. Far different from what we saw. And there is a land bridge now in that food is being carried back on people's backs or on bicycles, from Thailand, where it is readily available, back into Cambodia. Now a lot of that is being confiscated by the Vietnamese but at least some of it is getting back. [38:00]

So the situation is still not good. The situation is still not optimum at all. However, it's a great improvement from the sort

of desperate thing that we saw. Now, what's the long-term outlook and the long-term challenge? Cambodia is still politically, very unstable. The Vietnamese are still there in force. The Heng Samrin government, the puppet government, is still very weak. The leadership of Cambodia is still very thin. The Pol Pot remnants are still fighting on, not very many of them but there is still guerilla war going on. The so-called free Khmer [39:00] on the border, the anti-communist remnants of the Cambodian middle class, are badly fragmented, squabbling among themselves, located on the border. The government of Thailand, which was very supportive of the relief effort, was just within the last couple of weeks, overthrown. I shouldn't say overthrown, that did not happen. It happened in a democratic way, it fell, (inaudible) government. He has been replaced by a military leader named [Prem?]. It is said that Prem is not so receptive to the notion of being supportive of the refugees in Thailand as (inaudible) was. And in addition to that, we in the United States, [40:00] where we have pledged, what, a hundred and some odd million dollars to the relief of the Cambodians, have budgetary problems. The president is now meeting with his advisors, to determine where to hack away at the budget, and there is some possibility that refugee assistance might be one of the areas to go. So what does that mean? It means that American citizens, people in various kinds of organizations,

students, all kinds of Americans, are going to have to, over a long term, maintain their interest in the survival of the Khmer people. It means that financial assistance is going to have to be continued, not just for a few weeks or a few months, but over a very long period [41:00] of time, and it is helping, there is no doubt about it, and it is making possible, the survival of an entire race of people.

I might say this. What is at issue is not only the survival of the Khmer people, which is certainly important enough. What is at issue is the kind of value system that we represent, what we stand for, what we want to be as a people. One of the things that has been really heartening about this whole experience, has been the response of the American people to the situation in Cambodia. The response of my constituents in Missouri has been unbelievable. The efforts of kids in particular, [42:00] the greatest generation we've ever produced, and their response to the situation in Cambodia, where school kids have been raising money, they've been having little projects to raise money. I got a letter just before Thanksgiving, from fourth and fifth grade students at the St. Joseph Institute for the Death in St. Louis County. Deaf kids, fourth and fifth grade, they have problems of their own, and they sent a check for 23, 24 dollars, something like that, with this wonderful letter saying that at

Thanksgiving time they were counting their blessings, being Americans, and they were concerned about the situation in Cambodia and they wanted to help.

At the Litzsinger School, run by the special school district in St. Louis County, [43:00] handicapped children, some of them severely retarded, they had a bake sale and they raised money and sent it in for the Cambodians. Very, very touching. So what is at stake here is our system of values. It basically is a contrast between competing value systems. Cambodia today, is a monument to totalitarianism. It is the definition of totalitarianism; namely, that the political order comes first and that people are to be used and abused and cast aside and allowed to die for a political end. [44:00] And our value system is one which does not use and abuse human beings, but places them first and takes the position that the political order is designed to serve them, not to use them. That is what our country is all about. That is what our system is all about and therefore, the capacity of Americans to reach out to people halfway around the world, who speak a different language, who hold different beliefs, who have different ideology, which is not only different, but which is perverse. [45:00] The people we are helping defeat are the followers of Pol Pot, ruthless, blood --

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