GASTRONOMIC CODE OF LATGALE JEWS IN THE 1970s–1990s

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to demonstrate the specifics of the gastronomic code as a phenomenon of cultural model and as a particular element of the formation of Jewish identity during the Soviet period using the example of the situation of Jews in Latgale. The study is part of a research project focusing on the Jewish text in Latgale, a region in south-eastern Latvia, during the 1970s–1990s. Within the project, a field study – semi-structured interviews – was carried out. The informants interviewed were representatives of Jewish ethnicity, born in the 1960s–1970s, who currently reside in Latvia and Israel.

During the research, the key components of the gastronomic code were identified: remarkable dishes, awareness of the ethnic tradition, understanding of religion, model of knowledge transmission from generation to generation.

Considering the specifics of the field study material, the following conclusion has been drawn. The gastronomic code of the Jewish community in Latgale during the Soviet period reflects a blend of Ashkenazi Jewish traditions and the norms of Soviet household practices.

Keywords: *Gastronomic code, Jews, memory, food*.

Culture Crossroads
Volume 26, 2024, *doi* https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol26.484

ISSN: 2500-9974

CULTURE CROSSROADS

Introduction

The gastronomic code is an integral part of any cultural model. Moreover, it is the gastronomic code that has a symbolic bidirectionality: on the one hand, it is a crucial component of the internal cultural model, which allows discussing its influence on the formation of cultural, ethnic, and national identity; on the other hand, it is the gastronomic code that is included in the process of presenting a certain cultural model to other cultures – often individuals become acquainted with another culture exactly through its gastronomic code (hence the rising popularity of gastronomic tourism in the contemporary world). The presence of an ethnic marker of the gastronomic code implies the inclusion of a comparative or evaluative characteristic. Consequently, the gastronomic code has long been an object of cultural analysis [Certeau and Giard 2008]. Being part of everyday culture, the gastronomic code encompasses several aspects: the culture of cooking, the culture of food consumption and perceptions related to culinary practices [Ermolaev 2022: 36].

In the Jewish tradition, the gastronomic code takes on particular significance, since Judaism does not highlight the culture of everyday life as a separate sphere – the whole life of a Jew is a fact of service to the Almighty. The *Kashrut*[1] laws are a multifaceted set of prohibitions based on the rules defined in the Torah. These rules concern food products that are considered appropriate for consumption, the principles of their preparation and consumption. The set of these rules is based on the position of Judaism that the Almighty wants His people to be in a state of holiness and purity.

The present study focuses on the gastronomic code of the Jews residing in Latgale during the Soviet period. Thus, the study addresses several aspects: 1) the gastronomic code as a component of the cultural model; 2) the particularities of Jewish gastronomy, its impact on religious and secular consciousness, and its role in shaping ethnic identity; 3) the specifics of the existence of the Jewish cultural model and the formation of ethnic identity during the Soviet period.

The novelty of this study lies in the chosen historical period, which is least considered in works devoted to the Jews of Latvia and Latgale in particular. This study enables a discussion on the specifics of the gastronomic code within Jewish culture while also considering the context of everyday life during the Soviet era.

Methodology and research design

This study is part of a research project focused on the Jewish text in Latgale during the period of the 1970s–1990s. The definition of the "Jewish text" is based

[1] The Kashrut – the Jewish dietary laws, regulating foods allowed for consumption, their compatibility, and rules of preparation.

on a semiotic understanding of the text as an original, structured system of signs, characterized by a complete structure, including numerous individual relationships that engage in dialogic interactions. The concept of the "Jewish text" is extensively explored in E. Vasiljeva's monograph "*Ebreju teksts latviešu literatūrā*" [Vasiljeva 2018].

The theoretical framework is based on Yuri Lotman's theory [Lotman 1990] of the notion of text within the framework of semiotics. Lotman outlines the main functions of the text as communicative (transmission of information) and conceptual (creation of new meanings). In Lotman's theory, reconstruction is proposed as an analytical method: the process of understanding involves the reconstruction of codes according to some (verbal or visual) text. Umberto Eco defines a code as a system in which a set of signs and their meanings, along with rules for combinations of signs, are specified (that is, agreed upon by prior agreement) [Eco 1978]. Evidence of the existence of Jewish culture can be found in various historical sources such as maps, memoirs, memories, documents. The analysis of the signs and codes present in these texts enables the reconstruction of the picture of the past. Lotman's theory has served as a methodological foundation in numerous studies addressing the gastronomic code and the symbolic significance of food within cultural models. Semiotics of food aims to develop and validate a social theory of food, examining it as a primary modelling system. In cultural contexts, different types of food, culinary techniques, eating events, and rituals are "signs and texts that are part of culture's overarching network of meanings" [Danesi 2006: 533]. Fabio Parasecoli explores the semiotics of food within the realm of intercultural communication, where the markers of "another culture are traditional dishes of national cuisine" [Parasecoli 2011].

The empirical material was primarily derived from the field study. Semi-structured interviews were used as a method of data collection. From a methodological perspective, field study involves the researchers immersing themselves in the environment of a particular culture [Burgess 1982]. Furthermore, the temporal context of the fieldwork enables researchers to become integrated into the cultural model under study, facilitating the interpretation of narratives. The analysis of the data collected from the interviews was conducted through a combination of thematic analysis, as proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clark, and narrative analysis discussed by Michael Murray. Thematic analysis allows for the examination of the entire data set to identify recurring patterns of meaning, as well as the analysis of specific aspects within an individual interview [Braun, Clark 2006]. This approach provides a framework for isolating elements related to identity models:

> *"The telling of narratives is closely intertwined with the shaping and maintenance of personal identity. We tell stories to ourselves and others about our lives. In this way our lives are represented in narrative form"* [Murray 2003: 100].

The groups of informants interviewed comprised representatives of Jewish ethnicity, born in the 1960s–1970s, currently living in Latvia and Israel. The interview questions were designed to distinguish groups of individual memories: the distinction of Jewish culture among other cultures, and the nurturing of traditions in the family. The interviewing process focused on defining core concepts, which allowed for the assessment of ingroup identity and individual parameters of identity congruence or incongruence with the ingroup. Gender balance was maintained in the selection of informants, who were chosen to represent diverse attitudes towards the Jewish world: individuals from Jewish and mixed families, those who remained in Latvia and those who migrated to Israel, and individuals with varying levels of observance of gender sensitization. The field study was conducted between 2022 and 2024, during which a total of 39 interviews were collected and transcribed (21 women, 18 men). The interviews were conducted in Russian. All interviews assumed anonymity; accordingly, the names of the interviewees were coded in Latin letters. In the text, quotes from the structured interviews are presented in italics, accompanied by the code letter, the time of the interview and the mode of personal communication – an interview.

Contents of the gastronomic code: dishes, preparation, meals

In the model of Jewish culture that existed in the Soviet times, the cuisine and the gastronomic code occupied a special place. It is by means of the gastronomic code that a distinct world is recreated in memories, portraying the Jewish family as a separate world that differs from the outside world. However, there is no single concept of "Jewish cuisine":

> "*The phrase "Jewish cuisine", strictly speaking, is meaningless. In fact, the only thing that unites all this incredible variety of recipes is the Kashrut, a set of rules that divide food into permitted (kosher) food and the one that is prohibited for consumption. The cuisines of Jews from different parts of the world are more similar to the cuisines of the surrounding local population than to each other. Another thing is the cuisine of the Ashkenazi Jews, a subethnic group of Jews who in the Middle Ages lived in the territory of medieval Germany and later settled in various territories of Eastern Europe"* [Vedenyapina 2018: 322].

Several field studies have highlighted the distinctive features of Jewish cuisine in Latgale [Vedenyapina 2016]. However, Jewish cuisine is a universal and comprehensive code. Even those who do not strictly adhere to the rules, the Jewish tradition, and even the *Kashrut*, emphasize the presence of traditional Jewish dishes, the process of their preparation, and their presence at festive meals. The second generation of parents is faced with the problem of defining their relationship to the Jewish tradition, yet they are familiar with and capable of cooking Jewish dishes.

I learned about the holidays through food. But we never prayed, etc. Stuffed fish, tzimmes, forshmak, something from horseradish. Grandfather baked wonderful buns of different shapes (L, 2022, interview).

Gefilte fish[1] had a distinct status. Mentioning it in the narratives is almost always accompanied by the statement "of course". *Gefilte fish* was undoubtedly a dish for festive occasions, and all informants emphasize a special, laborious method of its cooking. In a modern standard (non-Jewish) banquet, stuffed fish is always present in the menu (in most cases it is stuffed pike), but it is prepared whole – the skin is removed and then filled with fish mince. However, in the preparation of Jewish *gefilte fish*, it is always emphasized that true Jewish fish is cooked in separate pieces, with the flesh near the bone removed and filled with fish mince.

The specifics of cooking *gefilte fish* in Daugavpils during the Soviet period deserves a special mention. The informants speak about *gefilte fish* as the most important holiday dish, but upon further inquiry, it turns out that this dish was not served very frequently. It mainly appeared on the Jewish New Year, which was associated with seasonal sales of products in stores. For the preparation of *gefilte fish*, carp was used, and carps were on sale at the end of September. There was a single but large fish store in the city, located on Sovetskaya Street (now *Ģimnāzijas* street). The store was a typical Soviet shop, where the assortment mainly consisted of canned food and thawed fish products. Fresh fish was a rarity, making the annual import of fresh carp an event of urban significance, with people lining up in lengthy queues to purchase carp. For Jewish housewives, the purchase of carp was mandatory. A certain everyday mythology developed in the city: if a queue lined up at the fish store in the morning, it meant that carp would be sold that day; and if carp was sold, it signalled the approach of the Jewish New Year.

In most narratives, the fish is mentioned as an obligatory holiday dish, aside from the September trade event, no one can recall where it was purchased. This might be an instance of memory interference, when a very bright (in this case, gastronomic) event leaves such an imprint in the memory that it acquires the status of a universal, often recurring event.

In all the interviews, the informants mention *teiglach*[2]. All informants name a fairly standard set of Jewish dishes, but *teiglach* is given a special place. This could be attributed to its delicious taste, which left a lasting impression on children's memories, or perhaps because the process of preparing this dish was considered the most demanding and painstaking one. In this regard, the informants describe

[1] Gefilte fish is a special version of stuffed fish, most often – a carp; Jewish stuffed fish differed from the traditional one in that separate pieces of fish (rather than the whole fish) were stuffed.

[2] Teiglach – a sweet dish, a version of cookies that were boiled in honey.

a certain ritualism surrounding the process of cooking *teiglach*: during the preparation of the dough, children are necessarily sent out of the kitchen, and lifting the lid during cooking is strictly prohibited. Additionally, opening doors or windows is forbidden:

> *It is forbidden to open the door. It is forbidden to take off the pot lid. It is an entire ritual. If you open the lid at the wrong time, the dough will fall. That's it. That's the end. Doors, windows, everything affects the dough. There is only soda. There is no yeast. It will fall and that's it! All you have will be just a load of tosh* (R, 2023, interview).

Despite the laboriousness of preparing *teiglach*, detailed recipes have not been preserved. The housewives who knew how to cook it wrote down the recipe approximately and cooked more by intuition. It should be noted that *teiglach* today is one of the most exotic dishes that is rarely cooked and not everyone is able to cook it, as if that mythology of childhood is in effect.

> *My grandmother cooked teiglach. This is a dish that I'm unable to repeat* (B, 2023, interview).

The significance of sweets in childhood memories is logical, making homemade Jewish sweets an integral part of the gastronomic code. Sweets frequently emerge in the narratives as a collective image associated either with the holidays (sweets for *Hanukkah*) or simply as a means for grandmothers to indulge their grandchildren. If the preparation of *teiglach* is presented as an exceptional process, then *lekach*[1] was baked more frequently:

> *We always baked lekach. Mom's lekach was like a gingerbread, but my dad's cousin – what lekach she baked! It was something wonderful. Just, I remember now – I have a recipe for lekach, which I have chosen from many, that is something! I've been looking for it for a very long time* (R, 2023, interview).

Mentions of *imberlach* are less frequent[2]. It appears either as part of general enumerations, or belongs to the category of those dishes that were not very popular among children:

> *I ate it, of course, my grandmother kept saying that those were carrot candies. But I cannot say I liked them very much. They looked beautiful – such orange diamonds, but their taste still was not that of candies* (E, 2023, interview).

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[1] Lekach – a sweet dish, a version of a gingerbread or cake.

[2] Imberlach – a sweet dish made from carrots and ginger.

The frequent preparation of *imberlach* was most likely related to the availability of carrots, the main ingredient. For the same reason, in Jewish families *tzimmes* was often cooked as a side dish for dinner. The emphasis is on the availability and affordability of the ingredients:

> *Tzimmes was often cooked. Those were just carrots. Tzimmes – Simple, thick and dull!* (L, 2023, interview).

It is characteristic that in the informants' memories there does not appear sweet *tzimmes* with dried fruits; instead, the informants mention *tzimmes* with dumplings, although it is sweet *tzimmes* – a dessert-like dish – that is considered a traditional dish of Jewish cuisine. The informants emphasize that it was an unloved dish and they were forced to eat it (due to its perceived health benefits), but they did not like it:

> *But what I didn't like was the tzimmes, I couldn't eat it. Boiled carrots caused me to ... That was a disaster. They forced me to eat it, I picked out that dumpling, tried to wash it off everything that was there* (B, 2023, interview).

At the same time, among the delicious, favourite dishes in the Jewish children's gastronomic code, there often appear dishes that children traditionally do not enjoy. For example, liver dishes are commonly rejected by children in public catering today (parents often talk about this observation, it appears in the reports of preschool and school institutions). Nevertheless, one of the favourite Jewish dishes of childhood is the liver pâté:

> *She (my grandmother) made some incredible chicken pâté!* (B, 2023, interview).

It is the pâté that turns out to be a frequent dish on the traditional festive tables, not necessarily Jewish ones. As a similar dish is also present in European cuisine, non-Jews are often treated to pâté. In the memories, the delight of non-Jewish friends who tried the pâté prepared by the grandmother is often mentioned:

> *My cousin (a non-Jew) came to visit us, my grandmother, as always, fed us everything. There was a pâté there, I don't remember whether it was made specially or it happened to be made before. So, he then returned to his home and told everyone: "There, Baba Vera cooked such delicious crap"* (E, 2023, interview).

In addition to pâté, savoury dishes and those deemed healthy for children but unpopular among them, there appear soups. These include various modifications of chicken soup as dishes prepared from chicken are common in Jewish cuisine, suggesting a predominance of chicken meat in their diet. The most frequently

mentioned soup is chicken soup with *kneidlach*[1] – dumplings made from *matzah*[2] flour, typically prepared during the *Pesach*[3] *(Passover)* and serving as one of the main dishes of the Easter week, acting as a gastronomic marker of the *Pesach* celebration in the family. Furthermore, in children's perception, in addition to being associated with *Pesach*, it is also seen as a snack. It is often referred to as biscuits, and the informants recall "crunching it" or crumbling it into chicken broth instead of croutons. Additionally, although less frequently mentioned, soups with flour dumplings are also noted:

> *And grandma's soup. From chicken. She called it triphalah. Those were boiled dumplings (dumplings from choux pastry). It was flour, water, and an egg. The dough was rather thick, like sour cream and boiling broth. That was the dish I loved* (B, 2023, interview).

Among savoury Jewish dishes, a special delicacy appears to be stuffed chicken neck – the skin of a chicken neck stuffed with flour fried with chicken cracklings. Children often observed the process, sometimes assisting in sewing or taking out the thread. Perhaps this is why the recipe for preparing neck is one that was passed down through generations: the neck, like many other dishes, is part of the grandmother's cuisine, but it is also cooked by mothers, fathers, and the informants themselves, who then pass on the recipe to their children, thus ensuring its continuity. For those currently living in Latvia, cooking the neck is associated with one challenge – buying a sufficient amount of chicken fat. The informants recall that at that time, it was essential to have a jar of rendered chicken fat in the refrigerator, because it was that type of fat that was indispensable for cooking dishes of Jewish cuisine; it had to be prepared in advance and kept in a certain supply.

Context of the gastronomic code: food shortages, the Kashrut

During the Soviet period, one of the defining aspects of the gastronomic landscape was food shortages: the absence of certain products in free sale, the challenges in obtaining them, and the issue of long queues. These shortages significantly standardized the diet and gastronomic code of the era. In the 1970s, the situation was no longer critical, however, certain products were available only during specific season,

[1] Kneidlach – dumplings, which were prepared from special matzah flour and chicken fat, mainly served with soup.

[2] Matzah is an unleavened flatbread, an obligatory attribute of the Passover holiday, when all leavened goods were removed from the house for the entire period of the holiday, and matzah was consumed instead.

[3] The Pesach is one of the most important holidays of the Jewish calendar, dedicated to the release of Jews from the Egyptian slavery, chronologically compatible with Christian Passover.

with limited access to fruits, vegetables, and meat products. In addition, one should remember the separation of store (state) and market (private) trade. The reconstruction of the Jewish model of the world during the Soviet period underscores the central importance of the gastronomic code: holidays – it means that there is always a meal, at the heart of grandmother's care for her grandchildren is the understanding of a satiated, well-fed child. In the interviews, the mentions of the shortages in Soviet trade include a narrative that indicates that in a Jewish family a lot of attention was paid to the gastronomic component – the informants remember a lot about food, meals, certain products:

> *We always had food at home. We always had everything prepared, everything was cooked. I even managed to feed children in the yard* (R, 2023, interview).

Having food at home means cooking it. In the mind of a Jewish grandmother, the purchase of semi-manufactured products or ready-to-cook products is evidence of the absence of a dedicated housewife in the household. If a grandmother lived with the family, then she was the one who cooked; if she lived separately, she helped with cooking, brought treats, or regularly invited her grandchildren for meals. Memories of how and where the food was obtained are fragmentary. For instance, one informant (L, 2022) recounts a story about buying chickens in the market, and in these memories the process of plucking chickens is often mentioned. Another informant mentions relatives who worked in trade and helped to get food products, yet another recalls a relative, a war veteran, who bought goods in a specialized store, and his wife helped with the products.

On considering the Jewish life in the city, special attention is drawn to certain catering establishments associated with Jewish tradition. In a number of memories, when speaking about celebrating dates related to a human life cycle, the informants mention the canteen "Riga", located in the Gayok micro-district near the city centre. It was there that most Jewish weddings were celebrated. Additionally, the premises of the sports school, which had housed the city's choral synagogue before World War II, were often rented for events. For such occasions, special Jewish cooks, specializing in Yiddish cuisine, were hired to prepare meals. It is noteworthy that ordering dishes for family holidays was very rare; in fact, only one informant (D, 2023, interview) told during the interview that after her grandmother had left for Israel (the informant was seven years old at that time), her mother ceased cooking and instead ordered Jewish dishes from women who were practicing that. In stories about city cooks, the image of Aunt Sonya (Sonya Kit) is mentioned most frequently. She cooked special Jewish dishes and particularly specialized in cooking sweets. Aunt Sonya had been a legendary figure in the Jewish world of the city for many years, and stories about her baking pretzels for eight hours overnight, dozing at the kitchen table, became part of the city's Jewish folklore.

The presence of product shortages undoubtedly influenced the fundamental component of the Jewish tradition – the observance of the *Kashrut* laws. The common atheistic ideology of the Soviet era undoubtedly had an impact on the Jewish tradition – most families positioned themselves as non-religious. This trend was particularly pronounced among families where parents had higher education or held leadership positions. It particularly referred to the category of teachers and doctors. Those were people of an older generation who attended the synagogue and observed, as far as possible, the traditions. In most families, the *Kashrut* laws were not observed.

> *Oh no, of course not. Although my mom, according to her recollections, my grandfather was a very pious person, he prayed all the time, and of course he observed the Kashrut laws. And my grandmother kept Kashrut* (R, 2023, interview).

The non-observance of the *Kashrut* traditions by the younger generation became universal in the space of the Soviet Union and was documented in numerous field studies, including the series of expeditions conducted by the "Sefer" Center in Latgale in 2011–2012: "*Here we can see that along with the traditional Jewish dish, such as tsimes, which consists generally of cooked vegetables, the older generation of Jews tried to preserve the purity of the tradition at least during certain sacred calendar periods: on Saturdays, pork was thrown out of the refrigerator. The tsimes is mentioned here as a marker of the true Jewishness of the informant's mother as well as her practice to clean the house from the forbidden products on holidays*" [Kaspina 2024: 53]. In fact, the older generation could only adhere to the basic *Kashrut* laws, such as avoiding pork and refraining from mixing dairy with meat. The laws of *shechita*[1] were rarely observed and concerned only the preparation of poultry. In the 1970s, a *shohet*[2] worked at the synagogue. His place of work was located on the street in the backyard of the synagogue. Modern Jewish folklore includes stories of how representatives of the sanitary and epidemiological service regularly visited the synagogue, every time they stated absolutely unsanitary conditions there, then the service workers were given a bribe, it was promised that everything would be tidied up, and that repeated several times a year.

There is no definition of the *Kashrut* either in children's vocabulary, or in family conversations.

> *Jewish traditions – well, very, very minimally, because the family was not religious. As to food – no restrictions, oh, yes, that folk tradition – some teiglach, grandmother made it, some fish, forshmak. Ours was an absolutely Soviet family* (G, 2023, interview).

[1] Shechita – ritual slaughter.

[2] A specially trained individual who performs ritual slaughter.

There is a common attitude that grandmothers used to explain their behaviour – the Jews have to have it that way. There is only a contemporary understanding of the situation of the past. What concerns the process of cooking, the informants recall the process of salting the liver. Besides, there is a grandmother's explanation why she did not use pork liver:

> *Pork liver is bitter, it has to be soaked for a long time. But chicken liver is soft. I still live with the fact that pork liver is bitter* (B, 2023, interview).

The object world of the gastronomic code

The object world of a Soviet Jewish family did not bear ethnic markers. First of all, it was the absence of objects of ritual worship. On considering the gastronomic code and the concept of the *Kashrut*, the availability of specific tableware becomes relevant. In the object world of Soviet people, tableware was given a separate place. Despite general shortages, tableware was one of the most purchased and abundant goods. Dishes were given as presents, ordered, people queued for them (especially for porcelain and dinner sets), they were bought and stocked up. The Jewish household was no exception, featuring various items of tableware ranging from beautiful dishes that performed an aesthetic function, to absolutely functional, various kinds of jars kept in the kitchen. They were mentioned in the narratives of the majority of informants. Given the minimized religiosity, however, there were no separate utensils for cooking meat and dairy, there was no *Passover* tableware (Jewish tradition requires separate consumption of meat and dairy products, and different kitchen utensils were used for their preparation. In religious households, there had to be a separate (clean) set of utensils for preparing Passover dishes). Indeed, while there may not have been specific utensils designated for Jewish dishes, each housewife often had her favourite cookware for preparing certain dishes, such as a pan for *gefilte fish*, a pot for cooking *teiglach*, or particular utensils (most often a bowl) for making pâté:

> *There were no special utensils for Jewish dishes, but my mother had her favourite bowls and jars in which she cooked those dishes. That tableware was also used for other dishes, but my mother cooked pâté or fish only in particular cookware* (B, 2023, interview).

Taking into account all the conventions of the Jewish gastronomic code, this code is one of the foundations for understanding Jewish identity:

> *We have always had Jewish food* (L, 2023, interview).

It is the gastronomic code that is the key marker of Jewish holidays, which, in the form of special festive dishes, has passed also into the system of celebrating non-

Jewish secular holidays. And finally, in Jewish and mixed families alike, it has become part of everyday life culture – those were special dishes that appeared on holidays and weekdays.

Conclusions

The gastronomic code is an indivisible part of childhood memories. All the informants remember their childhood as indisputably happy time; and an obligatory component of that happy childhood is exactly the gastronomic code, in the narrative of all informants stated by a recurring phrase (in relation to different dishes) – the taste of childhood.

At the same time, it is the gastronomic code that becomes a sign of the lost, inherent only in the world of childhood. A very frequent is the narrative related to the fact that "I never succeed in cooking one or another dish as my mother (grandmother) did". In this regard, there are recipes that are lost or impossible to cook in one's already conscious Jewish present.

Connection with the secular model. In the presence of a division into festive and daily meals, the Jewish gastronomic tradition becomes one of the first markers of the ethnic identity. Taking into account the unconditional everyday anti-Semitism, especially in the school environment, Jewish dishes are perceived as something to be proud of. With the predominance of festivity (particularity) in the preparation of Jewish dishes, a general positive attitude appears in the awareness of the specifics of Jewish culture and one's belonging to this culture.

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