
Early Zionism in Brazil: The Founding Years, 1913—1922

Nachman Falbel

The first stirrings of Zionism in Brazil appeared at the beginning of the century, in the northern city of Belem do Para, a center of immigration for Jews from Morocco and Algeria. Certain Zionists there corresponded with Zionists from Europe, among them Max Nordau, who, as a humanist philosopher, carried great weight with the non-Jewish Brazilian intelligentsia of the time. There is also evidence that Mauricio Klabin, a pioneer of the paper industry in Brazil, organized a group of Jews in São Paulo to encourage Jewish colonization in Palestine. But there are no records to attest to Klabin's activity in São Paulo until February 1914, when his name was mentioned in a memorandum by Bruno Rabinowitz, of the Jewish National Fund in Germany.¹ Rabinowitz maintained contact with Brazilian Zionists, instructing them in organizational and fund-raising matters. This same memorandum also mentions contact with the first Zionist organization in Brazil, founded in Rio de Janeiro in 1913 by Jacob Schneider and others. Schneider's *Memoirs* provide an excellent source of information.²

Tiferet Zion

The first attempt to record the history of Zionism in Brazil was made by Eduardo Horowitz in November 1924. Horowitz published an article in *Dos Idishe Vocheblat* ("The Jewish Weekly"), "On Zionism in Brazil," in which he identifies Klabin as founder of the movement. The date he mentions ("about thirty years back") would place the founding of the movement in 1894—before the First Zionist Congress. Since there is no corroborative evidence, we must assume that the author refers to the date of Klabin's arrival in Brazil. The same article also mentions that twelve years previously, i.e., in 1912 or 1913, Jacob Schneider, assisted by Julio Stolzenberg, gave the movement a more defined organizational form. It is strange that although

אהבתי את ארץ ישראל ואת כל
 אשר בה ואת כל אשר יצא ממנה
 ואת כל אשר יבנה בה ואת כל
 אשר יעשה בה ואת כל אשר
 יתקן בה ואת כל אשר יתקן
 בה ואת כל אשר יתקן בה
 ואת כל אשר יתקן בה

Maurice F. Klabin

Starco Brazil

2677/6

Maurice F. Klabin.
 c/o. Brazilian Consulate
 London

N3/6

Maurice F. Klabin
 Kensington Palace Mansions Hotel
 De Vere Building London

Maurice Klabin's Letter to the World Zionist Organization,
 October, 1920

(Courtesy of the Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem).

Hensington Palace Mansions Hotel
de Vere Gardens London
22 October 1920

To The Zionist Organisation
Bureau 7, Russell St.
London

Recd. 11/10
4902

Dear Sirs

Handwritten text in Hebrew script, appearing to be a letter or document. The text is dense and somewhat difficult to decipher due to the cursive style and some overlapping lines. It appears to be a formal communication, possibly related to the Zionist Organization mentioned in the address above. The text is written in dark ink on a light-colored paper.

Schneider's *Memoirs* refer to the first Zionist association, Tiferet Zion, they make absolutely no mention of Stolzenberg, who was to play a significant role in the movement. Schneider describes the beginning thusly:

In 1913, in the month of March, three young men appeared at my shop, asking whether I was Jewish and, if so, also a Zionist (they had seen the shop's Zion House sign: "*Casa Zion*." One of them was Rabinovitch, a young Viennese Zionist; another was Margulies, who had recently arrived in Brazil and was living in Belo Horizonte; the third was Rabinovitch's commercial agent in Rio. Since my answer was affirmative, as the name of my shop indicated, Rabinovitch proposed that we gather a group of young potential Zionists or Zionist sympathizers together, in order to establish an organization in Rio. That same evening I invited fifteen youngsters to my house and following Rabinovitch's opening remarks, we decided to found the first Zionist organization in Brazil, which we would call "Tiferet Zion." I was invited to be the first chairman, but could not accept because of my demanding work in Ahiezer.³ The first chairman was Sinai Feingold; secretary: Nachum Roitberg; treasurer: myself; voting members: Ben-Zion Snitcovski, Boris Tendler, S. Golper, B. Czorner and others.

We soon contacted the World Zionist Organization [WZO] in London and started to collect money for the Jewish National Fund. We organized several events in order to collect funds for Zionist purposes. As a result, Tiferet Zion became the first address for the WZO and for the Jewish National Fund in Brazil.

This account is corroborated by a March 12, 1914, letter to Bruno Rabinowitz from the head office of the Zionist Organization in Berlin. It discloses that, in addition to ties with Argentina, the WZO also maintained contact with Tiferet Zion in Rio de Janeiro.⁴ The letter notes that the remittance of propaganda material was very expensive for the head office. Tiferet Zion had by this time become active, according to a report by its new chairman, Jaime Horowitz, and secretary, Yitzhak Rotberg.⁵ They reported that they were directing their efforts to the sale of *shekalim*, a popular name for membership in the Zionist movement, although at the time of writing they had not yet received any. With regard to publicity material, they noted that "there is no Jewish printer here," and so they depended entirely on material sent from abroad. Another difficulty was the instability of the Jewish population. As noted in the report, most of the immigrants who could

not adapt to the new country returned to their countries of origin ("we have lost many of our best elements due to their return").⁶

A few years after Tiferet Zion was founded in Rio de Janeiro, Julio Stolzenberg and several local activists started a similar organization in Curitiba.⁷ According to the same Horowitz article mentioned above, by the beginning of the World War I, "the Brazilian Zionist movement was already well developed," and active on behalf of the Jewish National Fund. The war upset Jewish life everywhere, however, and in Brazil, as in most nations, much of the public effort was given over to assisting the Jews in devastated Europe.

The Palestinian Aid Controversy

It was precisely at this time that the Zionists in Brazil were faced with their first community crisis. In February 1916, the Brazilian Committee to Aid Jewish War Victims was founded. It included several community organizations and the various *landsmanschaften*. Among its officers were leaders of the Tiferet Zion Association. March 26, 1916, was designed as Jewish Flag Day on behalf of the war victims, and even the non-Jewish press reported the success of the campaign. But when it was proposed afterwards that money be sent to the victims in Palestine as well, a rift occurred. In Jacob Schneider's *Memoirs*, the events are described as follows:

At that time we had our first disagreement in Rio on a Zionist issue. We had received a letter from the Zionist Organization of America informing us that the newly founded American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the Joint) was anti-Zionist, and would not help the victims of the war in Palestine. They requested us, therefore, to make a separate campaign. After several meetings of Tiferet Zion where it was clear that we did not want to make trouble or hinder the work of the existing Aid Committee, we decided to propose that part of the collected money be sent to Palestine. But the anti-Zionist majority was opposed to this. I insisted, promising that were they to accept this proposal, I personally would try to collect more than the amount they would send to Palestine, but they still refused. Thus, the success of our special campaign (aid for war victims including those in Palestine) became a real challenge and required an unusual approach. There was a Zionist teacher called Saadia Lozinski among us. I asked him to assemble the schoolchildren at Praca Onze for a parade, complete with flags. I also invited the parents. The joint committee members tried to stop the parade and the picnic scheduled to follow it, but to no avail. The youngsters marched from Praca Onze to the Quinta da Boa Vista, and many of the specta-

tors joined in. This was the first public Zionist demonstration in Brazil. We were very successful, and collected approximately 1,500 reis [Brazilian currency at the time].

That same evening the committee held an extraordinary meeting to protest the Zionist action. I took the floor and declared that Tiferet Zion still intended to cooperate with the Aid Committee. But they refused. I continued: "I am willing to cooperate with you, on condition that part of the money we collect is earmarked for the Land of Israel. Otherwise, tomorrow morning we will organize a committee for this specific purpose and then we will cross swords." The answer was still negative. The next day I left my shop to mobilize members for the new campaign, and nobody refused. . . . Thus, we won the first battle for Zionism in Rio, and we were successful both financially and morally. . . . Similar committees were established in Bahia and São Paulo on behalf of all the war victims.

"A Columna"

A write-up in the Zionist-oriented newspaper *A Columna*, dated July 1916, confirms Jacob Schneider's description, calling May 21 (the day of the parade) "a golden page" in the history of the Jewish community in Rio. *A Columna*, which was destined to become an important factor within the Jewish and non-Jewish communities, had been founded that same year by Professor David J. Perez.⁸ The first Zionist periodical in Brazil, *A Columna* owed its Zionist outlook not only to its founder but also to its co-director, Alvaro de Castilho, a devout Christian and humanist who fully identified with Zionist ideals. The first issues of this monthly journal—"an organ whose purpose is to defend the interests of the Israelites in Brazil regardless of point of view"—was published on January 14, 1916. It carried a photograph of Theodor Herzl and a long article by Perez on the Zionist leader and his objectives. Perez was also a great admirer of Max Nordau, and *A Columna* frequently referred to him as "our great mentor and guide," among other similar epithets. Nordau was apparently approached by Perez to offer advice and guidance to the new publication, which he did in a letter sent from Madrid, on February 18, 1916, and printed in the fourth issue of *A Columna*. Nordau congratulated the editor on the appearance of a journal "which intends to proclaim our high ideals, unchanged for 3,000 years, in the voice of the prophets . . . justice, law, peace, and brotherhood." He saw the journal as providing "an

intellectual home” for the Jews scattered “throughout the vast land of Brazil,” and he offered the following guidelines:

Since you have asked my advice, I would like to suggest that you relegate apologetics—that is, issues related to religion, to the remote past, to ancient martyrdom, to the Holy Scriptures—to a secondary place, or even omit them altogether, concentrating on the present condition of the Jew and matters related to this.

The Brazilian public should be made aware of the abominable tortures being inflicted by a barbarian government on the millions of Jews in Russia, the cruelty of the Rumanian government to its Jews, and Turkish persecution of our agricultural colonies in Palestine. You should also publicize the efforts being made everywhere, especially in the United States, to organize a representative delegation of Jews to the Peace Conference which, perforce, must follow the end of the war. It is incumbent upon you to strengthen Jewish solidarity among our Brazilian brethren.

During its two years of publication *A Columna* proved to be a fighting Zionist journal, as well as a chronicler of events in the Brazilian Jewish community. There is no doubt that David Perez contributed greatly to the dissemination of Zionist ideas in Brazil, both through the journal and through his position as a respected member of Brazilian intellectual society in general.

The Jewish Congress Proposal

The Balfour Declaration had a considerable impact on the development of Brazilian Zionism, as it did on the Zionist movement as a whole. A few months previously, on July 14, 1917, as reported in *A Columna*, several members of the Jewish community of Rio met to discuss the possibility of holding a convention of Brazilian Zionists to express solidarity with Zionists working all over the world for the restoration of the Jewish homeland in Palestine.

This meeting was held at the Sholem Aleichem Library, on the initiative of Jacob Schneider, Julio Lerner, Max Fineberg, Sinai Feingold, and others. Since David Perez was ill, *A Columna* was represented by Alvaro de Castilho, who, according to the journal, was acclaimed by the audience and elected as chairman of the meeting. In his opening remarks, Castilho discussed the international political situation, showing that the aspirations of Zionism were in conformity with the economic and strategic needs of both Germany and England, the two

chief belligerents. He went on to say that it was not enough, however, for Zionism to receive the support of the great powers and the world's statesmen; it was necessary for the masses to make themselves heard through their elected representatives. In short, he called for a mass meeting of Brazilian Jewry to express support for the ideas of Zionism. It was up to the present meeting to establish the organizational basis for the first congress of Brazilian Jewry.

Castilho's speech was enthusiastically received and, after the others spoke, he was elected chairman of the organizing committee for the Jewish congress. The congress never materialized, but the committee did generate support among the Jews of Brazil for the creation of an all-inclusive Zionist organization in the country. Meanwhile, it was able to report upon expressions of solidarity received from communities in Bahia, São Paulo (where the Zionist society, Ahavat Zion, had been founded a year earlier and where Klabin was active), Araraquara, Curitiba (where Julio Stolzenberg would formally found the Zionist Association of Shalom Zion a few months later), Pará, Amazonas, Pernambuco, Ceará, and others. The Brazilian press frequently noted the "imminent" convocation of a Jewish congress.

The Balfour Declaration

On November 11, 1917, Tiferet Zion in Rio de Janeiro received a telegram from Nahum Sokolow and Chaim Weizmann, informing them of the publication of the Balfour Declaration and the tenor of its import, and urging them to publicize the information throughout the country. Sinai Feingold, who had replaced Julio Stolzenberg as chairman of Tiferet Zion in 1916, summoned a conference of Zionist leaders and activists. It was presided over by David Perez. The conference decided that a message of thanks was to be conveyed to King George V of England through the British minister to Brazil. The message stated:

To the Minister of His Royal Highness in Brazil: Under the impact of the powerful emotions aroused by the official communication transmitted to us by the Zionist leaders, which contains the promise of that great hope which has sustained the Jewish people for long years, we, the Israelites of this capital, on behalf of all Brazilian Israelites, would like to express our most sincere grati-

tude and assure the government of His Royal Highness of our feelings of solidarity . . . [which have] long been assured since it has always been the defender of oppressed peoples. It is well known that after the return of the Jews to England, under the auspices of Manasse Ben Israel, in Cromwell's Government, your country has never ceased to protect us and to use its power to minimize the injuries we suffered in other countries, when it was not possible to eliminate them. Now it has crowned its policy, which is at present that of the majority of the Allies, by assuring us of the restoration of ancient Zion.

The Jewish community of Brazil is not as large or as strong as its sister-community in the United States, but it feels the same enthusiasm and gratefully presents to the Magnanimous King responsible for the destiny of Great Britain, its humble and affectionate devotion.

Hopefully Your Excellency will transmit to His Majesty and to the British Government the expression of our gratitude. . . .

The message was signed by the chairman of the proposed Zionist congress, by the Organizing Committee of the First Jewish Congress in Brazil, and a host of other Jewish communal, social, and cultural organizations.

In his *Memoirs*, Jacob Schneider recorded the impact of the news of the Balfour Declaration:

The telegram caused us a great joy. We saw in it the beginning of the fulfillment of the Jewish dream, Herzl's prophecy. The non-Zionists were also party to our joy. We prepared a memorandum containing the signatures of fifteen institutions (we wanted to convey the idea of a large community) requesting an audience with the English ambassador. He asked for the names of the fifteen, but agreed to receive only two: Dr. Perez and myself. When we arrived we were received by the ambassador himself. During the long visit he mentioned the names of important British Jews: Disraeli, Montefiore and others, and, mentioning the Balfour Declaration, affirmed that the British were friends of the Jews. We expressed our satisfaction at having such good friends as the British and handed him a memorandum addressed to the King. We also released a copy of the memorandum to an American news agency which published it in the most important newspapers in the country.

That same day, a member of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, Mauricio Lacerda, spoke of the Balfour Declaration in a long speech to the Chamber, and was applauded at length and fervently by all the deputies.

Support for the Jewish Legion

When the British Army, under the command of General Allenby, entered Palestine, with a Jewish Legion accompanying the troops, Lacerda proposed that the Chamber of Deputies congratulate England for the victory of Allenby and for the Balfour Declaration. The proposal was unanimously accepted, representing a great political triumph for Brazilian Jewry. There was much comment in the Argentinian press about this, and criticism was leveled at the leaders of the Argentinian Jewish communities for lagging behind the Jews of Brazil, whose numbers were far less.

The Jewish volunteers who formed the Jewish Legion of the British Army came from all over the world, and among them were youngsters from Argentina. When their ship, the S.S. *Demerara*, stopped at Rio de Janeiro on the morning of October 9, 1918, they were received by the Jewish community there in a large demonstration organized by Tiferet Zion. It was a highlight in the history of Brazilian Jewry. The following day, *Gazeta de Noticias* reported the "impressive celebration of the Israelite community, in honor of their brethren going off to the war." A total of fifty-two volunteers were on their way to join the Allied armies, "presently fighting for the cause of civilization and law."

One of the members of the Jewish Legion, M. Krel, published his *Memoirs of the Jewish Legion* in Montevideo in 1938, and there one may read a description of the Argentinian volunteers' arrival at the Brazilian capital.

We were enthusiastic when, upon arrival in Rio de Janeiro, we were greeted by an orchestra and by many Jews. They took us by car to march in a military parade along the main boulevard. The parade made a strong impression. At that time Brazil had declared war on Germany and anti-German sentiment was very strong. The local population crowded the sidewalks and people said to one another: "These are soldiers of the Jewish Army, come from all over the world to conquer Palestine."

The Brazilian people were very friendly toward us and people felt honored to be able to offer us drinks and take us to visit the most beautiful spots of that wonderful city. The Jewish population treated us as something precious. At a time when intellectuals around the world were debating whether or not we were a people, we walked the streets of Brazil as part of the Jewish Army. Our departure from Argentina and from Brazil was exhilarating. It made the Jewish population proud and, certainly, it rendered Zionism a valuable service.

Postwar Developments

The end of World War I heralded new hopes of fulfillment for Jewish nationalist ideals, accelerated and intensified by the misery and the terrible experiences suffered by the Jewish population of Eastern Europe and czarist Russia. Zionist activity in Brazil increased as a result. In the north of Brazil, in Pará, a Zionist organization called Ahavat Zion (similar to the association in São Paulo) was founded by Major Eliezer Levy, and in December 1918, Levy published a short-lived, Zionist-oriented, Portuguese weekly called *Kol-Israel*.⁹

At the end of the war, the Zionist movement hoped to ensure support for the Zionist idea at the Peace Conference held in Paris. The head of Brazil's delegation to the Conference was Senator Epitacio da Silva Pessôa, and Schneider reports in his *Memoirs* on the meeting held with him.

We Zionists decided to call on [Pessôa] and present him with a memorandum requesting him to defend Jewish interests at the Conference, especially with regard to the Balfour Declaration. I called Mauricio Klabin in São Paulo, and asked this good Zionist and highly esteemed citizen of Brazil to join the delegation to the senator. He accepted the invitation and arrived in Rio the next day, joining Dr. Perez, Horowitz, and me. The senator promised that he would comply with our request—which was made in the name of the Jewish community—and he kept his word. We Brazilian Jews had the satisfaction of having done our duty in the international political arena for our people and our land.

According to a letter to Mauricio Klabin from the acting political secretary of the WZO, dated November 3, 1920, it is apparent that the Brazilian delegation was not as influential as Jacob Schneider imagined it to be.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the Zionist movement in Brazil (Tiferet Zion in Rio de Janeiro, Shalom Zion in Curitiba, Ahavat Zion in São Paulo, and Ahavat Zion in Pará) was assuming greater responsibility for Jewish community life. There is evidence that Shalom Zion in Curitiba (Paraná), led by Julio Stolzenberg and the writer Baruch Schulman, made an attempt to take over leadership of Brazilian Zionism. On January 26, 1920, they wrote to the WZO in London, which, in turn, reported to the Central Executive of the Jewish National Fund in The Hague, that, among other things, they wanted Shalom Zion to be

recognized as the mainstay of a Zionist Federation in Brazil, since "we are now the only Zionist organization in Brazil that works consistently and comprehensively for Zionism. . . . Tiferet Zion in Rio de Janeiro has become totally lethargic." The WZO tactfully tried to encourage harmonious relations between the different associations, especially with Tiferet Zion. It should be noted that in the second half of 1920, a Zionist organization in Porto Alegre also sprang up which maintained contact with the London office.¹¹

In 1921, the Brazilian Zionist movement took part for the first time in a Zionist Congress, the Twelfth, in Carlsbad. In a letter signed by Jacob Schneider and Eduardo Horowitz, dated August 10, 1921, and addressed to the head office of the Zionist Organization in London, they note that Julio Stolzenberg was appointed Brazilian delegate to the Congress, commensurate with the sale of one thousand *shekalim* (the remittance for which was delivered to Dr. Alexander Goldstein, who was passing through Rio de Janeiro).¹²

Yehuda Wilensky

Of great benefit to the development of the Zionist movement in Brazil was the arrival, in 1921, of Dr. Yehuda Wilensky, an emissary of the Keren Hayesod.¹³ Wilensky, a man of considerable charm and experience, had been a Zionist activist in Russia and was a member of the Central Committee of the WZO. Prior to his arrival, the Brazilian Zionists received a telegram to the effect that his first port of call would be the city of Recife, in Pernambuco. Jacob Schneider describes Wilensky's arrival as follows:

We were puzzled that they had chosen Recife as the first stop, since we knew that no Zionist organization existed there. Thus, an urgent meeting of the board was called and we decided that I myself should go to Recife. . . . I found a community of seventy Jews there which I assembled, ordering them rather peremptorily to organize an enthusiastic welcome for Dr. Wilensky. The next day, all of us—men, women, and children—met the ship in rowboats decorated with pennants. When Dr. Wilensky saw us, he was so moved he cried. He landed and we embraced and kissed and accompanied him to a comfortable hotel. He was very happy to meet me in Recife. He told me about the foundation of the Keren Hayesod and its high purposes, and insisted that every Jew should pay a tithe or

one-tenth of his possessions. The Jews of Recife "laughed." Sensing the atmosphere, I told them to have lunch first and then we would talk. During the meeting, I bargained with them and demanded that the first one contribute at least three *contos de reis*.

The wealthiest among them was prepared to contribute only half of this amount, but he finally came around and the others followed suit. Later, we went to visit other members of the community, those who had not been at the meeting. I worked with the emissary for two days, patiently talking to every Jew. In the end, we collected seventy *contos*. It was the first *Magbit* [Zionist fund-raising campaign] in Brazil.

From Recife, we went to Maceio, where there were nine Jews and where we collected fifteen *contos*. Then, we went to Salvador, Bahia, where we left with more than thirty *contos* and then we left for Rio. In Rio, a large boat crowded with Jews welcomed him, and, at the first meeting contributed a large amount. We formed several groups and went from door to door. . . . During those trips, we founded several Zionist associations and, thus, Dr. Wilensky's visit gave real momentum to the Zionist movement in Brazil. We both made contact with all the existing associations in Brazil and attracted new followers.

It was clear to Dr. Wilensky that his mission in Brazil was not limited to fund-raising for the Keren Hayesod; it was also intended to advance the local Zionist movement, especially through the creation of new associations. In Recife he established the Herzlia Zionist Association, in Maceio the Geula Association, and in Bahia, the Max Nordau Association. All of them maintained contact with the Zionist office in London and became active in initiating and carrying out Zionist campaigns in those areas. Wilensky's mission is still considered an important chapter in the history of Zionism in Brazil, and he, in fact, represented Brazil at the Zionist Congress of 1922.¹⁴

By 1922 the movement had sufficiently matured to require a more centralized organization of the various associations. Jacob Schneider and other members of Tiferet Zion began planning a nationwide Zionist Congress for November 15, 1922 (the day on which the Proclamation of the Republic of Brazil is celebrated) and, naturally, informed the WZO of the event.¹⁵ Thirty-nine delegates from thirteen Brazilian states represented fourteen Zionist associations throughout Brazil. Jacob Schneider, chairman of the Organizing Committee, made the keynote address, declaring the establishment of a Zionist Federation the major objective of the Congress. The Federation was established and its main offices located in Rio de Janeiro, and thus began a new phase in the history of Brazilian Zionism.¹⁶

Notes

The author wishes to express his gratitude to Rabbi Clifford M. Kulwin for his assistance in the preparation of this article.

1. Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem (hereafter CZA), Z3/785.
2. Jacob Schneider's *Memoirs*, housed in the Brazilian-Jewish Historical Archives, Rio de Janeiro, consist of a typewritten deposition. Originally in Yiddish, it was translated into Portuguese and its use authorized by the Brazilian-Jewish Historical Archives.
3. The Ahiezer Mutual Aid Association was founded in November 1912 in Rio de Janeiro, under the chairmanship of Jacob Schneider, and played an important role in the economic, social, and cultural absorption of immigrants.
4. CZA, Z3/785.
5. *Ibid.*, March 1914 (Yiddish, translated into German).
6. CZA, Z3/785.
7. *A Columna* 8 (August 1916); 24 (December 1917).
8. David Jose Perez Archives, Rio de Janeiro.
9. CZA, Z3/785; Z4/2350.
10. CZA, Z4/2350.
11. *Ibid.*, January 26, 1920 (Yiddish); March 17, 1920 (French); March 18, 1920 (Hebrew); July 17, 1920 (Hebrew); August 25, 1920.
12. *Ibid.*, August 10, 1921 (Hebrew); October 23, 1921 (Hebrew).
13. *Ibid.*, October 26, 1921 (Hebrew).
14. *Ibid.*, letters in Hebrew and Yiddish covering the period from January 1921 to October 1922.
15. *Ibid.*, cable in English, November 9, 1922.
16. For other officers, see Eduardo Horowitz, "On Zionism in Brazil, *Dos Idische Vochenblat*, November 1924.

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