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Representations of Women in the Holocaust in Radio Reportages and Radio Plays of Polish Radio Between 1950 and 2022

Reprezentacje kobiet w czasach Zagłady w reportażach i słuchowiskach
Polskiego Radia w latach 1950-2022

Abstract

The goal of this article is to present the image of women in the Holocaust from a feminist perspective based on audio literature produced by Polish Radio between 1950 and 2022. My research included the Reportage and Documentary Studio and the Polish Radio Theater, as well as the regional radio station in Lublin. In the article, a qualitative method was employed involving content analysis, followed by comparative analysis. I sought answers to the following research questions: In what categories and to what extent was the tragic fate of Jews determined by gender? How do women remember the Holocaust? What thematic circles emerge from the narratives of and about women? What topics and issues are missing from the audio literature and what might be the reason for this? With full awareness, as well as poignancy, I hypothesize that the Holocaust lasted much longer than it is suggested by the dates recorded in the history books. The audio memoirs of the women – the protagonists of the analyzed broadcasts – preserve the testimony of the “era of the ovens,” and constitute a unique and emotionally moving commemoration of the genocide.

Keywords

radio reportages, radio plays, Holocaust, women, memory

Abstrakt

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie obrazu kobiet w Holokauście z perspektywy feministycznej na podstawie literatury dźwiękowej wyprodukowanej przez Polskie Radio w latach 1950-2022. Badaniami objęłam Studio Reportażu i Dokumentu oraz Teatr Polskiego Radia, a także rozgłośnię regionalną w Lublinie. W artykule zastosowałam metodę jakościową obejmującą analizę treści, a następnie analizę porównawczą. Poszukiwałam odpowiedzi na następujące pytania badawcze: W jakich kategoriach i w jakim stopniu tragiczny los Żydów był determinowany przez płeć? Jak kobiety pamiętają Holokaust? Jakie kręgi tematyczne wyłaniają się z narracji kobiet i o kobietach? Jakich tematów i zagadnień brakuje w literaturze audio i co może być tego przyczyną? Z pełną świadomością, a także z zaangażowaniem emocjonalnym, stawiam hipotezę, że Holokaust trwał znacznie dłużej, niż sugerują to daty zapisane w podręcznikach historii. Wspomnienia audio kobiet – bohaterki analizowanych audycji – zachowują świadectwo „epoki pieców” i stanowią wyjątkowe, poruszające emocjonalnie upamiętnienie ludobójstwa.

Słowa kluczowe

reportaże radiowe, słuchowiska, Holokaust, kobiety, pamięć

Consider if this is a woman,
 Without hair and without name
 P. Levi, *If This Is a Man* Abstract¹

I. Introduction

The goal of this article is to present the image of women in the Holocaust from a feminist perspective based on audio literature produced by Polish Radio between 1950 and 2022. From the rich collection of this literature, I have selected broadcasts featuring the theme of women. Media scholars include the following genres in audio literature, or radio artistic narratives: radio plays, reportages, and features (artistic reportage prepared with great attention to form and employment of sound media).

I was deeply interested in analyzing how the motif of women was present in the audio genres of fiction and non-fiction over a period of several decades (from the first broadcast found in the Polish Radio Archives), and in looking at it from the perspective of women studies. When I started examining audio literature about the Shoah (not just women's), I hoped that this literature, hitherto unexplored, would yield surprising new findings in the context of literary and cultural studies of the Holocaust. Meanwhile, in the audio literature produced in Poland, as in the printed literature, some universalist tendencies can be found. Furthermore, it is a reflection of social sentiments and what unfolded at specific times in the political sphere. Nevertheless, in terms of its content and, above all, the form of its broadcasts, it is an inspiring source of research. It reveals moments of greater interest in the subject (the post-war years, the beginning of the 1960s, and the end of the 1980s, which is linked to the socio-political situation in Poland), and points to radio artists who explored the Shoah as the leading subject of their work (Maria Brzezińska, Mariusz Kamiński, Alicja Maciejowska, Waldemar Modestowicz, Marta Rebzda, and Krzysztof Wyrzykowski, among others). As the theme of this article, I have chosen the motif of women, which is widely present in radio artistic narratives on the subject. My goal has been to consider its various representations, focusing more on the content of the broadcasts than on the semiotics of sound and interpretations of sound material, earmarking those for further research. The article is based on a study of two archives of Polish Radio, which is unique as it has been producing reportages and radio plays since its establishment. My research included the Reportage and Documentary Studio and the Polish Radio Theater, as well as the regional radio

¹ P. Levi, *If This Is a Man: Remembering Auschwitz*, Indiana State University 1986, p. 2. Państwowe Muzeum w Majdanku (2021). Available at www.majdanek.eu/pl/news/cykl_jutrobedzie-leepiej_-_radio_majdanek/1193# (accessed 10 July 2021).

station in Lublin. PR Lublin is at the forefront of radio arts production in Poland, has its own unit dedicated to it – the Lublin School of Reportage – and cooperates with other regional cultural centers keeping the memory of Jews alive (the “Grodzka Gateż – NN Theater” Center). The number of broadcasts studied in the survey totaled 145, including 52 reportages prepared at the Polish Radio Reportage and Documentary Studio (Warsaw), 45 radio plays recorded at the Polish Radio Theater (Warsaw), and 45 reportages and 3 radio plays produced at Polish Radio Lublin.

In the article, a qualitative method was employed involving content analysis, followed by comparative analysis. I sought answers to the following research questions: In what categories and to what extent was the tragic fate of Jews determined by gender? How do women remember the Holocaust? What thematic circles emerge from the narratives of and about women? What topics and issues are missing from the audio literature and what might be the reason for this? With full awareness, as well as poignancy, I hypothesize that the Holocaust lasted much longer than it is suggested by the dates recorded in the history books. The audio memoirs of the women – the protagonists of the analyzed broadcasts – preserve the testimony of the “era of the ovens,” and constitute a unique and emotionally moving commemoration of the genocide. Their recollections unveil immense trauma, the cruelty of the world, death, orphanhood, but also great and indomitable inner strength. The female perspective on the Holocaust is different from the male one. It is not about reconstructing the actions of the Nazis, numbers, and dates; these stories record emotions and offer testimony of significant details. Holocaust studies opening up to women’s studies helps accentuate female emotionality, the need to establish relationships, care for smaller and larger communities, and to create bonds, which is widely discussed in the radio broadcasts analyzed.

At this point I would like to clarify that in my research I am not glorifying women or belittling the comportment of men in this genocide. The Holocaust affected the entire Jewish people unimaginably, not just the female gender. Hitler’s goal was unequivocal and was based on race, not gender. Everyone was to meet the same end. But each group – women, men, and children – experienced their victim status differently. The assumption that the Holocaust was not gender-neutral is clearly prevalent in radio documentaries and dramas. S. Lilian Kremer emphasizes that biological annihilation, the destruction of the race, was closely linked to the killing of Jewish women who gave life to the next generation. Women did not suffer on the margins of this war; in a way, they became a strategic target for the Nazis. As Monika Vrzgulova emphasizes, Jewish women were repressed twofold: for their gender and for their ethnicity.

I adopt a feminist perspective to present the analyses and conclusions emerging from the study of radio reportages and radio plays. Considering the Holocaust through a feminist lens, of course, is not new. The first to address the topic of

women's experience of the Holocaust was the feminist historian Joan Ringelheim, the originator of the conference on women and the Holocaust. In 1983, she organized a landmark conference in New York to discuss women and the Holocaust, and the merging of Holocaust studies with feminist theory. Ringelheim's research is essentially a starting point for incorporating the memories of female survivors into Holocaust discourse. Referring to the work of the initiator of "Women Surviving: the Holocaust," Aleksandra Ubertowska writes that Ringelheim, problematizing the feminist perspective towards Shoah studies, pointed to:

[...] the difficulty of integrating the private stories of women survivors with the "model and normative narrative of the Holocaust"; she even speaks of the erasure and effacement of the female perspective in the history of the Shoah, of writing about the Holocaust from a "universal perspective of Evil." Even if a certain "ideological excess" or emphases are noticeable in these statements, it is difficult to ignore the suggestions made therein, especially when they reveal the conventionality of the category of the "canon" of Holocaust testimonies.

Ubertowska also stresses that the frequency with which a certain arbitrary norm of the Holocaust narrative is invoked exposes the hierarchies implicit in it. The perpetuated image of the Shoah was dominated by seemingly neutral testimonies, which concealed and subliminally operated on the category of gender, while being, in fact, a record of the male experience. "The mainstream and the image of the Holocaust," the researcher notes, "were shaped by the memoirs of Tadeusz Borowski and Primo Levi, and not by Charlotte Delbo or Seweryna Szmaglewska; by Marek Edelman and Adam Czerniakow, and not by Cywia Lubetkin or Władka Meed".

Ringelheim never claimed the superiority of female experience over male experience, nor did she usurp the right to subject testimonies to axiological hierarchization. At the same time, however, she proved that a peculiar but often unspoken hierarchization sustained the status quo: Holocaust literature and historiography placed men's experiences at its center. Carol Ritter and John K. Roth used the metaphor of the "suppressed female voice to describe the uprooting of women's experiences and memories from the discourse or moving them off-center.

Before analyzing the issue, I had studied a number of publications – international and domestic (Polish) – that frame the subject from the theoretical side and include testimonies of survivors. The key ones include *Different Voices. Women and the Holocaust* edited by Carol Ritter and John K. Roth, *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust. The Voices of Eyewitness*, edited by Vera Laska, S. Lilian Kremer's *Women's Holocaust Writing: Memory and Imagination*, Joanna Stöcker-Sobelman's *Women of the Holocaust. A Feminist Perspective in the Study of the Shoah. The Case of Auschwitz-Birkenau*, the monograph *Women and the Holocaust: New Perspectives and Challenges*, edited by Andrea Peto, Louise Hecht, and Karolina

Krasuska, Aleksandra Ubertowska's articles: "Kobiece 'strategie przetrwania' w piśmiennictwie o Holocauście (z perspektywy literaturoznawcy)" [Women's 'survival strategies' in Holocaust writing (from the perspective of a literary scholar (2010) and "'Niewidzialne świadectwa.' Perspektywa feministyczna w badaniach nad literaturą Holocaustu" ['Invisible testimonies.' A feminist perspective in the research on Holocaust literature]. The female gender issues raised in scholarly literature became a signpost that allows one to find their traces in audio literature.

II. Analysis

The individual analytical passages are preceded with charts illustrating the results of findings from content analysis and comparative analysis.

1. Gender in audio literature about the Holocaust

I would like to begin the presentation of the results with the issue of women's gender that influenced numerous aspects of their lives during the war. The following themes related to sexuality dominate the audio artistic discourse: the selection into men and women who were then transported by trains to the camp, motherhood as a direct threat to life, menstrual poverty in the ghettos and camps, and pseudo-medical experiments on women reducing their fertility.

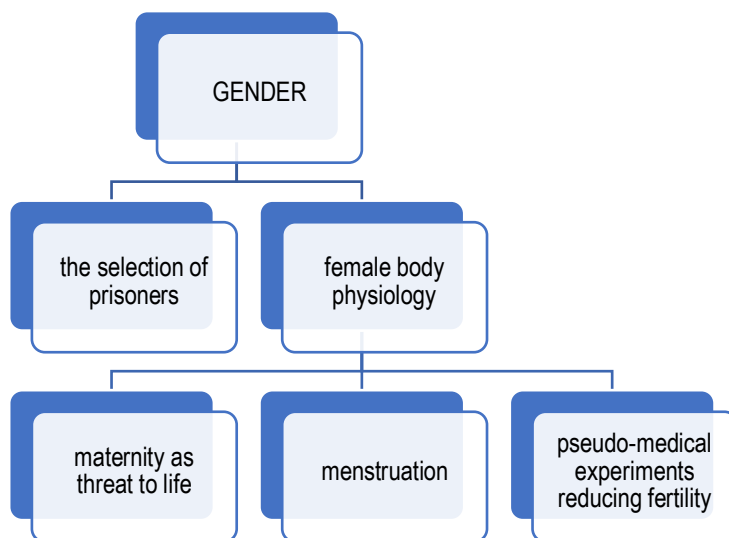


Fig. 1. The chart presents the motif of women in audio literature about the Holocaust – gender determinism.

The chart was prepared based on content analysis and comparative analysis of reportages and radio plays produced in 1950–2022 by the Polish Radio Reportage and Documentary Studio, the Polish Radio Theater (Warsaw), and the regional radio station – Polish Radio Lublin. My own compilation

The first of the primary gender-based consequences that affected Jews transported to the camps was the division into men and women. Bożena Karwowska notes (2015: 67–68): “For the people coming to Auschwitz, it was the state of the body that conditioned their fate in the camp – the young and healthy had a chance to survive when those with old and sickly appearances were selected to die immediately. The process of ‘selection’ for immediate extermination was repeated in the camp from time to time, and it was the state (or appearance) of the body that was used as criteria. One may argue, however, that gender also played a role during the selection, since mothers of young children were exterminated immediately regardless of the state of their bodies”. In view of this, the very fact of having a young child was a death sentence for the woman. The motif of separating women from men is present in many artistic audio stories. In Krystyna Sznerr’s radio play based on the memoirs of Szymon Lasek, *Gry oświęcimskie* [Oświęcim Games] (Warsaw 1987), the protagonist reminisces about the forcible separation of Jewish men from Jewish women; for many, this was the last time they would see their women (or, for that matter – any women). The selection was thus a liminal moment, forcing the prisoners into unknown realities. This is the case in the story of Jerzy Bielecki and Cyla Cybulska, featured in the radio reportage *Rozłączeni* [Separated] by Joanna Szwedowska and Katarzyna Nowak (Warsaw 2015). After the first selection, when the women were separated from the men, Bielecki did not expect to see any of them in the camp. Meanwhile, it turned out that several of the women were confined next to the warehouses, where they were tasked with repairing grain bags. The fact that Jerzy and Cyla got to see each other stemmed from two basic reasons: the guards failed to notice that the prisoners had made contact with the women; and secondly, the handful of women were delegated to what was seen as typically female work, namely sewing. Under the inhumane conditions of the camps, women’s identity continued to be tied to gender stereotypes: it was women who were made to repair sacks.

In the reportage *Masz na imię Stella* [Your Name is Stella] (Warsaw 2018) by Olga Mickiewicz, the titular Stella Nikiforowa, who was sent to the camp as a four-year-old girl, recalls the division into men and women. Her mother, who was already expiring during the transport, died upon reaching the camp. The girl was cared for by camp (non)mothers. The theme of the fear of losing one’s life, due to the hard-to-control sounds made by a child, strongly influences the dramaturgy of the radio play *Drzazga* [Splinter] (Warsaw 1960) by Stanisław Długocki, directed by Janusz Warnecki. The narrative is centered around the fate of Masza Chlawner, who was in hiding with her then three-year-old daughter Miriam. The protagonist’s child gets strangled for fear that the girls’ noises would compromise the hiding place and bring death both upon her and anyone hiding nearby. In a chapter discussing the danger factors associated with motherhood in the Holocaust, Zoë Waxman cited a quote

from Gerda Weissman Klein, who wrote: “I had learned to associate children with death”.

Although it was clear that childbirth may lead to death, not all Jewish women gave up motherhood. In Janusz Warnecki’s radio play *Najszczęśliwszy ze światów* [The Happiest of Worlds] (Warsaw 1957), the protagonist, a Jewish woman, is pregnant. She does everything to protect the fetus. Aware of the danger, she asks a friend to shoot her and the baby if they get captured by the Germans. This scene illustrates her deep understanding of the drama of the situation if the Nazis found the woman and the newborn. Knowing that she might die, she chooses a quick death for herself and the baby over possible torture. The story shows what dangers were associated with being a woman and how they intensified when a woman was (or tried to become) a mother.

The audio memoirs of the women – the protagonists of the analyzed broadcasts – preserve the testimony of the “era of the ovens,” and constitute a unique and emotionally moving commemoration of the genocide. Their recollections unveil immense trauma, the cruelty of the world, death, orphanhood, but also great and indomitable inner strength. The female perspective on the Holocaust is different from the male one.

A consequence of female anatomy, which involved a number of hardships, was menstruation. In the ghettos and camps, the problem of menstrual poverty affected almost every woman – hygienic products were unavailable. Karolina Sulej explains that initially, in what was considered the “model” women’s camp at Ravensbrück “there was even a person whose role was to dole out sanitary napkins, but – as with other arrangements regarding hygiene – the realities of war and camp life quickly dispensed with such luxuries.” Permanent stress, malnutrition, and hypothermia often made women’s menstruation disappear, which was a sign of deteriorating health, but could be seen as “beneficial,” in the sense that it freed a woman from the need to acquire makeshift hygiene supplies. In artistic radio reportage and sound theater, the topic of menstruation and its associated consequences for women’s fate is marginally present. A reportage that addresses this issue is *Mój Auschwitz* [My Auschwitz] (Warsaw 2019) by Magdalena Skawińska. The protagonists are two women: one is a former prisoner of the camp, and the other is Agnieszka Kłos, presenting the point of view of the generation that recorded

testimonies. The survivor says that the Holocaust is also “a story about the body, about shaving hair, and about menstruation”. She also recalls the hindered access to water and basic hygiene products, the suffering associated with the ubiquitous lice, and the disappearance of menstruation. The former prisoner makes it clear that women’s carnality conditioned their fate during the Holocaust and delineated their camp hardships, in addition to those that affected the prisoners as a whole. Compared to most of the broadcasts analyzed, Magdalena Skawińska’s reportage is a manifestation of a non-traditional approach to women during the Holocaust. It is undoubtedly an important voice in the audio discourse on the Shoah.

Women’s carnality had extremely dangerous and dehumanizing implications, as the Nazis subjected female prisoners to experiments. Of course, experiments were not conducted exclusively on women, but it was against them that the actions were intensified because of their ability to give birth. Women’s bodies were experimented on to increase the efficiency of mass sterilization. The theme of experimentation on women is present in audio stories and generally, if it appears, it is one of the key moments in the narrative. One example is a journalistic broadcast with elements of reportage *Obóz nad jeziorem Ravensbrück* [The Camp at the Ravensbrück Lake] (Lublin 2017) by Magda Grydniewska. The recording is dedicated to the victims and survivors of the Ravensbrück women’s camp, where out of 130,000 prisoners, around 90,000 died. Former prisoners confirm that many of the women became “guinea pigs” on whom cruel pseudo-medical methods were tested. It was extremely rare for victims of horrific experiments to survive. Another phonic story, where using women as “guinea pigs” is a key component, is Mariusz Kamiński’s reportage *I trzeba było żyć* [You Had to Survive] (Lublin 2010). The conversation about experiments on female prisoners was combined with a narrative about how difficult it was to return to a normal life after the liberation of the camp. The problem involved both purely practical issues, such as the lack of housing, but above all – unimaginable trauma and the recurring memory of the torture experienced. Prisoners talk about the fact that a significant number of them would not discuss their experiences at all; they tried to repress them, to forget. For many of them, a conversation was a possibility only when they met a survivor who had shared that experience. Imprisoned women helped each other. They especially tried to look after those who had been subjected to experiments, so the only good that survivors witnessed at the time was the care of other women scarred by the same experience.

2. Artifacts of women in the Holocaust in the audio literature

Female artifacts related to their physical appearance, but also to their sense of identity and preservation of humanity, are given a great deal of attention in artistic narratives about the Shoah. The index of concepts characteristic of representations of

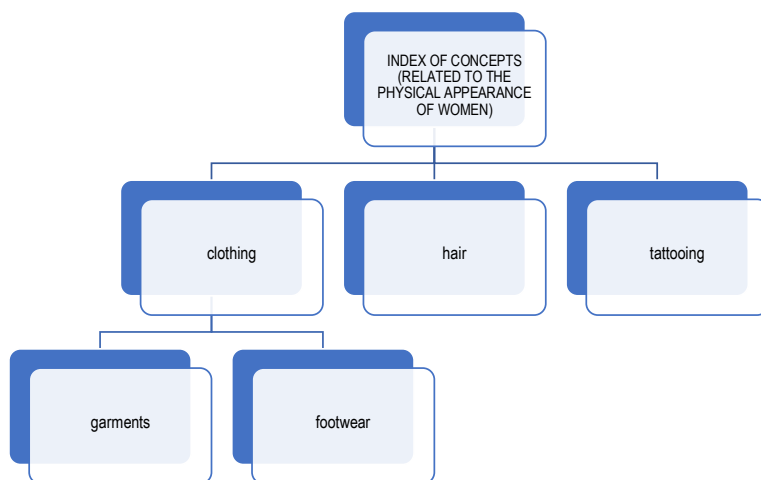


Fig. 2. The chart presents the motif of women in audio literature about the Holocaust – concepts related to the physical appearance of a woman. The chart was prepared based on content analysis and comparative analysis of reportages and radio plays produced in 1950–2022 by the Polish Radio Reportage and Documentary Studio, the Polish Radio Theater (Warsaw), and the regional radio station – Polish Radio Lublin. My own compilation

women in audio literature includes appearance, tattooing, and the symbol of hair and shoes.

It is worth adding that antisemites equated Jewishness with filth. To them, even if a Jewish woman had a “good” appearance – light hair and eyes, a well-groomed appearance and beauty – her origin, once revealed, made her impure. This theme is present in the reportage *Zamordowane dzieciństwo* [Murdered Childhood] (Warsaw 2002) by Marcin Biały. The protagonist recalls that as a child, she would play with Polish children, until suddenly something changed and some of them began repeating hurtful and violent words overheard at home. Once, while playing together, she heard: “You filthy Jew!!!”. She did not comprehend why she suddenly became filthy. In the Holocaust broadcasts, the issue of “good and bad” appearance and what it implied resounds clearly. For example, in Marek Wortman and Marek Harny’s radio play *Hotel polski 1943* [Polish Hotel 1943] (Warsaw 2012), the character Hana says that she and her mother had good looks, while her father “had a terrible appearance. We could walk freely in the streets, whereas he couldn’t even stick his nose out on the staircase. If someone had seen him, he would have brought disaster on the whole tenement.” In Marta Rebzda’s radio play *Kto się nie schowa, ten kryje* [Ready or Not, Here I Come] (Warsaw 2019), directed by Waldemar Modestowicz, it turned out that the rescued infant, once washed, was a blue-eyed girl with blond hair, which gave her a chance to survive. In Jewish women, the physical signs of bad looks were dark hair, while the characteristics of good looks overlapped with the Aryan

appearance: light complexion, blue eyes, and blond hair. These provided relative security and served as a kind of camouflage. Even during the occupation, Jewish women dyed their hair a light color and changed their hairstyles: “‘Slavic’ braids and the crown hairstyle, so popular among German women, were all part of a disguise”. It should be remembered, however, that bad looks was not just about visual features. It was “also something intangible,” wrote Sławomir Buryła, “those ‘sad and frightened eyes.’ These features disqualified anyone wanting to get out of the ghetto to the Aryan side.” In *Pasażerka z kabiny 45* [Passenger from Cabin 45] (Warsaw 2010) by Zofia Posmysz, directed by Janusz Kukuła, Annelise – a former SS woman and a supervisor from the Auschwitz camp – provoked by a mysterious ship passenger from the first class in whom she recognized a former prisoner, reminisces about the wartime past. Annelise emphasizes that she had spared the Jewish woman’s life and offered her a job in the camp because the latter did not lose her dignity and, even though she was on the brink of becoming a *Muselman*, instead of fear, her eyes showed temerity.

Tattooing, which is recalled by a former prisoner and the protagonist of Magdalena Skawińska’s reportage *Mój Auschwitz* (Warsaw 2019), left a traumatic mark in the memory of numerous survivors. For women, it was a symbol of humiliation, defilement, and debasement, especially since tattooing the body is forbidden in Judaism. It is also worth noting that in Auschwitz-Birkenau, women and men were tattooed with a number in a different place, as Karolina Sulej writes:

Tattooing was practiced at Auschwitz-Birkenau from 1942 to 1944, and everyone, except Aryan Germans, was subjected to it. Men were marked on the outside of the forearm, women on the inside. Roma were additionally marked with the letter Z, while from May 1944, Jews were marked with the letter A or B.

In *Pasażerka z kabiny 45*, the protagonist, a former prisoner, is the only person on the ship who, despite the high temperatures, wears a long-sleeved dress to cover her tattooed number and hide her past from others.

The symbol of hair, including lice, is widely represented in audio literature and connotes diverse meanings, not only literal ones. Karolina Sulej expounds:

Hair is both a biological tissue – a product of the human body made of hard, cohesive keratin – and a cultural one: its appearance, that is, its length, style, and sometimes its color, results from the negotiation between organic material, individual taste, and cultural context. It is also a borderline creation: it belongs to the body, but can be detached from it: cut or shaved. The hair of the camp victims displayed in the case at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum has the status of material evidence, while constituting the remains of the human body. It is an object – looted possession detached from the body, but also a sign – a metonymy – of the

person to whom it once belonged, the last remnant of the body's physical presence, a scrap of its "fleshiness," still bearing traces of the lethal substance used for the murder. Residues of hydrogen cyanide on the hair left behind by the fleeing Germans indirectly confirm the gassing. The hair is therefore historical.

One of the protagonists – a former prisoner of the aforementioned *Mój Auschwitz* reportage talks about shaving heads, which was perceived by the women as a deprivation of dignity. In other broadcasts, survivors often say that without hair they felt like "subhumans."

The clothing could break women psychologically and rob them of their humanity. However, many of them did not give in and resisted the enemy – although it was not an armed struggle – proving that they were not cowards. They tried – to the extent that they could – to alter their clothes so they would fit them better, to get a hold of underwear outside the camp rules, and used every item that was suitable as a piece of clothing. An exemplification of radio theater of imagination, in which the motif of clothing, or in fact – the suffering caused by its absence – is strongly emphasized, is *Z otchłani* [From the Abyss] (Warsaw 2008) by Janusz Kukuła. The lack of clothing appears here as a direct threat to life. It is not surprising, therefore, that one tried to get clothes at all costs, and having obtained anything that resembled (or with the right effort, could resemble) clothes, women did everything to save their body with clothing, and through its refinement, cleaning, and fitting – their spirit.

Footwear complemented the clothing, and at the same time, it was the basis of prisoner attire. The radio narratives most often feature the victims' shoes, which are worn down, damaged, falling apart and undergoing continuous repairs. This aspect is described, for instance, by a young girl, the protagonist of the afore-cited *Mój Auschwitz* reportage, who for a time worked at the museum in the restoration of exhibits – specifically, shoes. This is a symbol that can be interpreted on many levels, and is probably one of the most recognizable Holocaust artifacts, associated not only with women. On the one hand, there were the beautifully polished, shiny jackboots of the Nazis, on the other – the battered shoes of prisoners. After the war, these shoes formed huge piles – metonymies of the murdered. "A pile of shoes," noted Iwona Kurz, "demonstrates the scale of the extermination process; at the same time, each shoe is somehow different, belonged to someone specific, and carries strong, culturally established associations with the universality of human fate and the unique nature of individual existence." Prisoners often had mismatched shoes, usually clogs that were too big, but there were times when women were allocated slippers or other elegant shoes, completely inappropriate for the place where they were forced to stay.

3. Rituals through which women saved the culture and themselves

Rituals find their use in situations of danger and unrest, and help cope with anxiety. They maintain the cohesion of groups and communities, and enable interaction within a certain framework that is familiar and safe for the ritual participants. First, rituality in audio literature will be seen in the attempt to maintain hygiene, second – in the culture of the written word, and third – in the culture of the oral word.

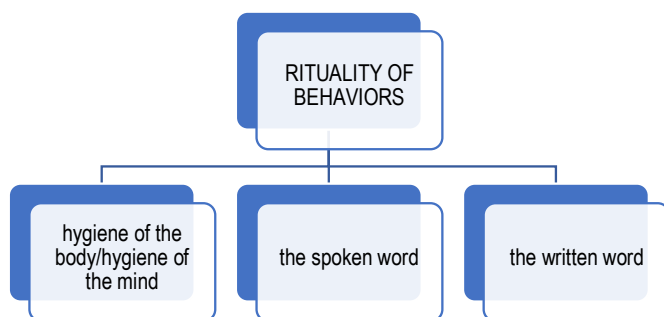


Fig. 3. The chart presents the motif of women in audio literature about the Holocaust – ritual behaviors. The chart was prepared based on content analysis and comparative analysis of reportages and radio plays produced in 1950–2022 by the Polish Radio Reportage and Documentary Studio, the Polish Radio Theater (Warsaw), and the regional radio station – Polish Radio Lublin. My own compilation

Bodily cleanliness became, in a sense, an expression of moral cleanliness and the prisoners' inner strength. Joanna Stöcker-Sobelman writes that: “despite the horrendous conditions, women tried to wash up – at least their faces – in the morning tea in order to look better at the morning roll call. They also tried to clean around themselves, scraping off dirt and killing insects.” In Maria Brzezińska’s reportage *Halina Birenbaum – głos ocalonej* [Halina Birenbaum – the Voice of a Survivor] (Lublin 1997), Halina Birenbaum recalls that while still in the ghetto, her mother made efforts to preserve the remnants of a normal life until the last moments. In the ghetto, for example, she would not allow a comb to be placed on the table, lest a hair should fall into the food. Audio literature shows that the strategy women adopted in the camp – taking care of their appearance and clothing, and practicing daily rituals – gave them a chance to preserve their identity, while being a form of rebellion against the Nazi enemy.

Personal documents are central to many Holocaust audio stories that are based on women’s narratives. Dairies, journals, and scraps of papers with noted-down experiences, were, above all, records of everyday life, comprising the cultural life of the “era of the ovens.” Holocaust literary historian Lawrence Langer characterizes women’s writing about the Holocaust as elliptical, indirect, and employing silences.

Aleksandra Ubertowska adds that the wartime formula of autobiographical writing relegated egocentrism to the background, “while bringing out the tendency, inscribed in the female social role, to ‘treat other people’s needs with greater seriousness than their own.’” This kind of writing, aside from being a cultural element, had therapeutic value.

Two examples of artistic radio broadcasts for which written experiences and memories were fundamental are the radio play *Pamiętnik Anny Frank* [Anne Frank’s Diary] (Warsaw 1957) by Jan Świdorski and *Przerwane życie. Pamiętnik Etty Hillesum* [A Life Interrupted. Etta Hillesum’s Memoir] (Warsaw 2001), directed by Waldemar Modestowicz. Although Anne Frank was only a girl at the time of the occupation, her writing experience grew with each page of her diary, and the extraordinary value of her texts contributed to the realization of a mature and emotionally rich story.

The issue of diaries and memoirs is also richly represented in reportages, for example, Adam Wielowieyski’s *Pamiętnik dla mojej córki* [A Memoir for My Daughter] (Warsaw 1996), and *Matka i córka* [Mother and Daughter] (Warsaw 2010) by Magdalena Skawińska, except the texts presented there were written down after the war. All of these records – noted “there and then,” as well as years later – sustain the memory of the victims and survivors, are a testimony to their lives, and evidence of the importance and meaning of words. At this point, let us turn to one of the most valuable cultural practices undertaken in the concentration camps from the point of view of radio studies – Radio Majdanek.

On February 13, on the initiative of Matylda Woliniewska, Radio Majdanek was established in the concentration camp just outside Lublin. The creators of the radio were women who had come to the camp in a January transport from Pawiak. Conditions at Majdanek were particularly horrendous. Initially, there were no sanitary facilities, heating or bunks in the camp. These were some of the reasons that produced a strong need among female prisoners to create the radio. The only tools available to the women to translate this idea into reality were the word and their imagination. The broadcasts were held every morning and ended with the slogan “Remember, there’s a better tomorrow,” while the evening programs of Radio Majdanek closed with the words: “Remember, every day brings us closer to freedom.” As Karolina Sulej writes,

it was talk radio, a theater for the listeners gathered in their bunks, meant to cheer them up and keep black thoughts at bay. [...] On Sundays there was a special holiday edition called “Afternoon Tea with the Microphone,” with no microphone and no afternoon tea.

The radio was devoid of all technological facilities – an antenna, speakers, or microphones. The originator of the camp’s radio station, Matylda Woliniewska, said this about her initiative: “You think you have deprived us of radio? Nothing of the

sort! You took only the boxes – what was inside stayed with us! We proved to you that without kilowatts and kilohertz, you can also broadcast a program”.

The creators of Radio Majdanek made the word their overarching and fundamental material. They used cultural practices, such as storytelling, reminiscences of the past, or so-called cooking memories (sharing recipes), as well as narratives of fashion, poetry, prose, and humor to nourish their spiritual life. An example of a program in which the theme of Radio Majdanek resonates is *Jak mówić o Auschwitz* [How to Talk about Auschwitz] (Lublin 2019) by Magdalena Grydniewska. A former prisoner recounts how crucial the radio was to the women in the barracks – the daily “rooster crowing” that woke women up, followed by a greeting, presentation of the order of the day, and a reminder that tomorrow would be better, and that each day brought them closer to freedom, provided them with a sense of meaning and community.

4. Narratives of mothers and about mothers, caregivers and about caregivers

Encapsulated in sound, the stories of women (and about women) are often narratives of mothers and about mothers, caregivers and about caregivers. It should be emphasized that the figure of the mother is one of extremely elaborate motifs and is certainly material for a separate study. In the audio literature, one can distinguish four thematic circles around which the image of the woman-mother is drawn. The first group is the *Yiddish mame*, the archetypal ideal mother – most often the biological mother (though not always), taking care of children before and during the war.

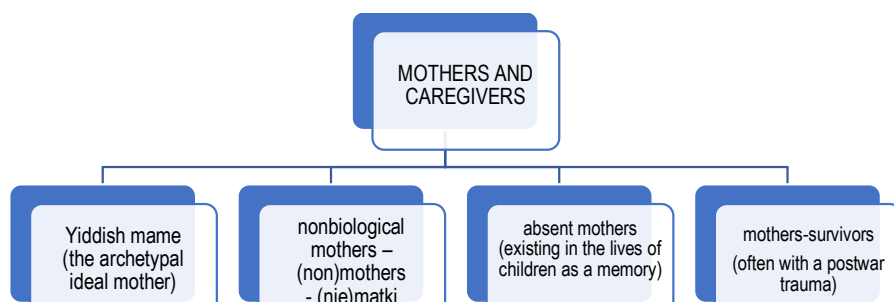


Fig. 4. The chart presents the motif of women in audio literature about the Holocaust – mothers and caregivers. chart was prepared based on content analysis and comparative analysis of reportages and radio plays produced in 1950–2022 by the Polish Radio Reportage and Documentary Studio, the Polish Radio Theater (Warsaw), and the regional radio station – Polish Radio Lublin. My own compilation

An important story is the documentary radio play *Przyjaciółki z Żelaznej ulicy* [Friends from Iron Street] (Lublin 2001) by Maria Brzezińska and Eugeniusz Rudnik, in which the *Yiddish mame* comes down to keeping the daughter’s spirits up at all costs. Anna Kaczkowska’s reportage *Kto ratuje jedno życie* [Whoever Saves One

Life] (Lublin 2007), on the other hand, may serve as a link between the collection of stories about the *Yiddish mame* and the second group – (non)mothers. It includes all women who took on the role of mothers for children deprived of their parents. One of the protagonists, then a child, did not understand her mother's behavior until she overheard her mother telling her father that she could not bear to see hungry children cry. She then comprehended that her mother was feeding Jewish children. Some time later, she also saw a board in her house move and heard a Jew ask her mother for anything to eat. She saw her give help. A mother cared not only for her offspring, but also for Jewish children who were in a dramatic situation. It should be emphasized that the work performed by (non)mothers was a pillar that sustained at least a minimum of normality in the ghetto and later in the camps, as can be seen in such reportages as *Matka* [Mother] (Warsaw 1979) by Krystyna Melion and *Raport z Żelechowa* [Report from Żelechów] (Warsaw 1968) by Witold Zadrowski. Women engaged in caring activities regardless of blood ties, as in Marta Rebzda's broadcasts *Powrót do domu* [Homecoming] (Warsaw 2015) and *Kto się nie schowa, ten kryje* (Warsaw 2019).

The survivor says that the Holocaust is also “a story about the body, about shaving hair, and about menstruation”. She also recalls the hindered access to water and basic hygiene products, the suffering associated with the ubiquitous lice, and the disappearance of menstruation.

The third thematic circle, undoubtedly connected to (non)mothers were absent mothers, who, having passed away at some stage, lived on in their children's memory. A major part of this group are women who died in the Holocaust. Also important are those mothers who made the decision to put their children in the care of other people, and those who abandoned their offspring for various reasons and, if their children were lucky enough – absent mothers were replaced by (non)mothers. Such an example can be found in the reportage *Smutek ocalonych* [Sadness of the Survivors] (Warsaw 1983) by Alina Słapczyńska. Furthermore, the poetic radio play *Z otchłani* (Warsaw 2008) by Janusz Kukuła shows how deeply the absence of a mother affected the survivors.

The last group are mothers-survivors. It is often associated with the *Yiddish mame*, but this is not always the case, as this circle also includes women who gave birth to children only after the war. This is the case in the reportage *Córka i matka* (Warsaw 2010) by Magdalena Skawińska or in the radio play *Kawałek umarłego*

świata [A Piece of the Dead World] (Warsaw 2022) by Marta Rebzda. Both broadcasts tell the story of Adina Blady-Szwajgier, a doctor in the Warsaw ghetto, who wrote down her memories in a diary later passed on to her daughter. Alina Świdowska, who became an actress, says her role as a daughter is to carry her mother's memories. Not all mothers shared their memories with their children; for example, in Marta Rebzda's reportage *Życzenie taty* [Dad's Wish] (Warsaw 2012), a mother-survivor said she never talked to her children about the war. She wanted to create a safe home, and this, in her opinion, precluded reaching back to the "era of the ovens."

III. Discussion of the results and conclusion

What can be learned about the Holocaust by distinguishing gender in Holocaust audio literature? First, the tragic fate of Jewish men and Jewish women was characterized by differences conditioned by their gender, and the omission of this matter appears as an abuse of history, survivor testimonies, and the memory of the victims. Gender, as Adam Jones argues, becomes particularly important during wars and social turmoil². It is not an indifferent factor during history's most challenging moments, and as Raul Hilberg points out: "The Final Solution was intended by its creators to ensure the annihilation of all Jews [...]"³, but this goal – author indicates – was pursued with measures that targeted men as men and women as women. Thus, for the Nazis, Jewishness was the "worst" characteristic of the people they were trying to annihilate. However, it was immediately followed by a division into Jewish women and Jewish men that implied direct consequences for both sexes during the occupation, and which was reflected in artistic radio broadcasts. As the selected examples of the audio broadcasts show, the experimental torture of women exacerbated the enormity of the suffering faced by female prisoners. In the eyes of their torturers, they lost their subjectivity, and their bodies became material on which cruel tests were conducted. The Nazis were extremely determined to carry out the planned genocide in the most efficient way possible. The experiments served to facilitate extermination.

Second, for Jewish women, the conditions in the camp were an affront to dignity. It should be remembered that Jewish women were raised from an early age to respect aesthetics and cleanliness. As a result, the loss of all cleaning products, hygienic accessories and, above all, access to water caused them both

² See: A. Jones, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction*, London 2006; A. Jones, *Gender Inclusive: Essays on Violence, Men, and Feminist International Relations*, London 2009; A. Jones, *New Directions in Genocide Research*, London 2012; A. Jones, *The Scourge of Genocide: Essays and Reflections*, London 2013.

³ R. Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933–1945*, University of Michigan 1992, p. 126.

physical and psychological pain. Slovak researcher Monika Vrzigulova uses the term “dewomanizing”⁴. It refers to all those aspects of camp life that affected female prisoners, directly harming their sense of femininity: forced undressing, hair shaving, collective showers, filth, striped uniforms, and other clothing that in no way fitted their bodies. Furthermore, even if women managed to get a bit of water for washing, the activity was also devoid of the minimum intimacy. The inmates took care of their hygiene together, since cooperation was the only way to survive in the camp. The Nazis used dewomanizing as one method of humiliating women, thereby lowering their physical strength. Femininity, associated with cleanliness of the body, neatness of dress and hairstyle, was appropriated. However, many women were able to use the skills they had acquired before the war and, through cooperation and mutual support, worked out ways to reduce dewomanizing. While caring about aesthetics, they nurtured moral values.

Cutting the hair and shaving the body (when women were admitted to the camp, their hair was also removed from the intimate areas of the body and from under the armpits, which was also done under tragic, inhumane conditions) meant psychological torture. The protagonists of the radio documentaries speak in general terms about “the removal of hair from the entire body”; in their accounts, they do not distinguish between head hair and pubic hair, and they do not talk about the latter in detail. Hair shaving definitely affected women more than men. Hair is associated with femininity, the uniqueness of the sex. Men are less likely to have a problem with losing hair and perceive a haircut as a purely physical procedure. For women, it is violence of their bodies, humiliation, shame, a punishment for being alive. Primo Levi in his famous book asks metaphorically:

Consider if this is a woman,
Without hair and without name
With no more strength to remember,
Her eyes empty and her womb cold
Like a frog in winter.⁵

A reference to Jewish culture further reinforces the meaning of cutting hair. Orthodox Jewish women shaved their heads at marriage; making an oath to their husbands, they said goodbye to their girlhood and sensuality. In public, women

⁴ M. Vrzigulova, op. cit., p. 113.

⁵ P. Levy, op. cit., p. 2.

covered their heads, so additionally, depriving them of their hair meant stripping them of their personality, identity, and individuality⁶.

Third, the broadcasts reveal that the role of women as mothers and caregivers was severely undermined. The child ceased to be connected with new life, and instead, linked motherhood with danger and fear. Expecting a child implies fear, giving birth to one increases the threat many times over. Importantly, if women became pregnant, this fact significantly reduced their chances of survival, even if they were not sent to a concentration camp. The situation was doubly dramatic for women who dreamed of motherhood. Bożena Karwowska points out that “women were so frightened by the fact that they had forever lost the possibility of having a child that in some cases giving birth in the camp was a victory: ‘I can do it.’”⁷ Women in the camps lived in conditions so bad that the chance of an infant surviving was close to zero. At the same time, for many Jewish women, the thought that they might never become mothers again caused insurmountable pain, because it involved abandoning the model of the first mother, strongly rooted in Judaic culture and religion.

The singled-out models of Jewish women as mothers/caregivers (the *Yiddish mame*, (non)mothers, absent mothers, mothers-survivors) are conventional; their fluid boundaries intermingle, similarly to the changing roles of women caregivers in the harsh realities of war. Radio artists, creating portraits of mothers during the Holocaust, set their focus on the two basic constants: a woman’s protectiveness and the immense drama of the situation when it is put to the test. They do not shy away from themes that break taboos and go beyond the archetypal vision of the first mother – placing children in the care of others, leaving them on the doorsteps of Catholic homes, and extended suicide if the hiding place is compromised. Undoubtedly, women as mothers are portrayed largely on the basis of patriarchal models – they are primarily associated with nursing work, and daily care of the home, husband, and children. At the same time, however, audio literature often places women at the center along with their agency, shuttering the patriarchal image of the submissive and subservient woman. Mothers’ care is combined with their subjectivity and decisiveness also when it comes to the decisions that are most difficult for them. Radio art creators free women’s narratives, preserving their stories and experiences.

Fourth, the phenomenon of ritual practices in Nazi forced labor, concentration and extermination camps was part of the struggle for survival. Undoubtedly, the prisoners’ culture-centered activities contained a ritualistic element. According to

⁶ See: K. Sulej, *Rzeczy osobiste...*, p. 32.

⁷ B. Karwowska, *Ciało. Seksualność. Obozy Zagłady*, Kraków 2009, p. 73.

Aleksandra Ubertowska (2009: 224), having an almost topical character, the stories about formulas, recipes and dishes perform

a compensatory function, alleviating the effects of camp starvation. However, in the women's "narratives about narratives," they gain a deeper meaning; as Goldenberg argues, they perform the function of "life-giving" stories, becoming a camp "counter-discourse," an emancipatory discourse, part of a survival strategy that went beyond mere physical survival.⁸

In *Doświadczenia graniczne. Studia o dwudziestowiecznych formach reprezentacji* (Eng. *Boundary experiences. Studies on twentieth-century forms of representation*), Jacek Leociak wrote about the importance of radio during the war. He pointed out that listening to the radio contained an element of festivity, gave hope, and allowed one not to lose fortitude. It had an informational value, but above all – a community value; it united its listeners. When radio as a medium was gone, female prisoners proved that the mainstay of radio was the word and imaginative space. Their involvement produced a radio that was founded in the body, in the voice. By freeing the word, the imprisoned women saved culture⁹. One of the organizers of Radio Majdanek explained the importance of the word to the prisoners' thirst for artistic experiences as follows: "A slice of bread is divisible, but can hardly go round, because how can a slice of bread go round many people? The word, on the other hand, a good word, is indivisible, but it can go round (...) It was the spreading of values. Values prevailed."¹⁰

Last but not least, the components constitutive of gender narratives that emerged from artistic radio forms about the Holocaust also prompted me to ask what elements of women's sexuality do not appear in radio broadcasts and why they are *terra incognita*. During the analyses of the collected material, I noticed thematic areas in audio documents and radio plays that were hardly present. Why are they absent from radio broadcasts? I fully realize that one cannot analyze something that is missing from the material under study, but the absence is often also a message. An issue that appears marginally in the analyzed collection of broadcasts is menstruation (it resounds only in the afore-cited reportage *Mój Auschwitz*). Sexual violence – harassment, rape, and forced sex work – comes to the forefront of topics that are shrouded in silence. Women are reluctant to talk about it in recordings, and if the topic surfaces at all, it happens in private conversations.

⁸ A. Ubertowska, „Niewidzialne świadectwa”..., p. 224.

⁹ See: J. Leociak, *Doświadczenia graniczne. Studia o dwudziestowiecznych formach reprezentacji*, Warszawa 2009, pp. 36-44.

¹⁰ www.majdanek.eu/pl/news/cykl_jutrobedzielepiej_-_radio_majdanek/1193#

Even Anne Frank, a rape survivor, did not describe it in her diary. In the radio plays in which her character appears, such as *Pamiętnik Anny Frank* (Warsaw 1957) by Jan Świdorski or *Wstręt do tulipanów* [Repulsion to Tulips] (Warsaw 2017) directed by Waldemar Modestowicz based on a script by Hanna Bielawska-Adamik, the theme of rape is not mentioned either. Probably the main reason is that these works are based on diaries written by Frank, and since the victim of violence chooses to withhold this tragic event from her notes, it is natural for the creator of the audio work to do the same. Forced sex work was also taboo. Women performing it were burdened with shame and stigma in their immediate environment. The decision of the makers of radio documentaries and radio dramas to not address themes such as sexual violence, forced sex work, and the physiology of the female body, which was a determining factor in the fate of Jewish women in the Shoah, can be attributed to several primary factors. The first is known as victim silencing, that is, being so overwhelmed by trauma and shame that overly incriminating events are omitted in testimony. Another factor that may determine the exclusion of the subject of sexual oppression in artistic broadcasts is that for years, these issues were strongly tabooed. Furthermore, the Holocaust in literature (including audio) was addressed from several basic perspectives (survivors, witnesses, victims, the cult of memory). Yet another important component may be the reluctance of survivors to share such memories: even if they admit to experiencing such trauma, they may refuse to share it with the author of the phonetic story and, later, with the listeners. When confronted with the person's reluctance or inability to talk about the most difficult parts of their memories, the author of the audio story can only respect the decision of their interlocutor or the person whose testimony inspired them to create a radio play or reportage. Radio creators who address the issues of the Holocaust are characterized by a deep sensitivity: their stories are thoughtfully crafted both dramaturgically and formally, but above all, special efforts are made to express the reliability of the testimony and respect for the testifier. At times, the fear of hearing about such great suffering arises in them, too. Even if the author of the broadcast is confronted with such a story, they are faced with another challenge: how, in what form, and in what language to present it in the most intimate medium, which is radio. The intimacy of the radio forms is both its opportunity and its risk, since it is a medium where many contents resound more strongly and emphatically. Stories in which testimony is spoken right into the ear of the listener, where the voice of the speaker comes out to meet them, directly activate imaginative processes; such narratives are full of emotion not only in their content, but also – in their reception. The survivor herself may resist the unmasking of her own inability, while the creator – crossing a certain boundary that would make the emotional weight of the story told through the most intimate of mediums unbearable.

The final question is about radio as an audio medium and its material. I must leave the issue of audibility and audioscenography of broadcasts for future exploration. I realize the power of communicating a message through music, phonic gestures, and silences, but in this article, I have focused primarily on the words and content found in radio artistic narratives as an element of broadcasts that compels focus and reflection, and develops sensitivity.

The research launched by Joan Ringelheim has led to a comprehensive view of the Shoah, broadening the knowledge about women's experiences in this genocide. It has directed attention to the fact that Jewish women were doubly at risk: because of their ethnicity but also because of their femininity. This is the crux of the feminist approach to the Shoah: men's and women's hardship and suffering were different, and gender mattered, as the radio narratives show. They also point to the message that the ways in which women experienced the Shoah should be studied so that this issue can take a proper place in the teaching about this genocide.

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