The Viennese Chicagoan
by Ernest Wolf

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...psychoanalysis, this new sun among the sciences of man, will shed its understanding warmth and its explaining light. (Kohut: 1973)

I.

I would like to begin these biographical comments with some disclaimers. To write about Heinz Kohut is both easy and exceedingly difficult. Perhaps this is true for any friend who undertakes to tell something of the story of another. It is easy to focus on one's own experiences and let what one knows first hand be the guide. With a reasonable degree of candor and serious attempts at objectivity one may achieve painting a lively picture that yet remains a very limited and personal view. Heinz Kohut loved to talk to his friends and students, expressing opinions about all sorts of things. At the same time he remained a very private, even secretive person, who hid his own past in a fog of generalities. To date no one has published a scholarly biography nor is the time ripe to reopen old wounds and rekindle the barely banked fires of controversy. The reader of this little essay, therefore, must be satisfied with a quickly passing glance at one of the major innovators of 20th century psychological science by someone who was perhaps stationed too close to be able to get a comprehensive overview. In keeping with the spirit of Kohutian self psychological psychoanalysis I will avoid categorical objective judgments in favor of letting the experiencing of evolving interactions prevail.

The first time I met Heinz Kohut I was waiting at an elevator on the upper of two floors occupied by the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis. The Institute was still at its old address, 664 North Michigan Avenue, I was still in analysis with Charles Kligerman, so it must have been in the late 1950's. A group of us, patients and candidates, were waiting to leave on the next elevator going down. A youngish man, slim, well dressed, of very serious mien, asked whether we were going to the next floor below or whether we were headed out of the building on the ground floor. He indicated it would be alright to use the elevator to go to the ground floor but to descend just a single floor one should walk via the stairway. I was taken aback. I had never met Heinz Kohut before but knew who he was and of his reputation as one of the best teachers at the Institute. "Who is he to tell us whether we can use the elevator or not?" I thought. I did not like this man who seemed so ascetic and disciplined, so Teutonic and commanding. At the time I
was deep into my second analysis but still recovering from the painful humiliations suffered at the words and silences of Maxwell Gitelson, my first analyst.

In retrospect, my initial response to Kohut was colored both by some residual transference to Gitelson and, being a refugee from Hitler's Reich, by a gut reaction of anxiety and hate vis-a-vis anything German. And that included Austrian. At the time I had not yet fully recovered from the experience of growing up as a Jew in Hitler-Germany and I was still neurotically afraid of anything German. I did not know then that Kohut's parents were both Jewish, albeit secular. Indeed, though Heinz and I later became good friends, especially after I joined the circle of admiring students of self psychology in the late 1960's, I did not learn about his Jewish ancestry until later. Over the years I got to know him very well but I never thought of him as Jewish. Jewish culture, Jewish food, Jewish jokes were alien to him. Growing up in a family that had been totally assimilated he did not think of himself as a Jew. But the Nazis did and that forced him to leave Austria. Even though my own Jewish identity has never been questioned by myself or by others, it has presented me with enough serious problems to make it quite easy for me to understand that one might not want to call attention to one's Jewish lineage.

When Kohut arrived in Chicago he already had a medical degree from the University of Vienna. At the University of Chicago Hospitals he began a residency in neurology under Richter who was the renowned chairman of the department. To be one of Richter's residents was a recognition of achievement and of great promise. It is understandable that some of Kohut's friends shook their heads in sad disappointment when he left this position to become a candidate at the Institute for Psychoanalysis.

Kohut seemed a strange mixture of aloof aristocratic and almost puritanical austerity in a warmly responsive and considerate person. He was a very private person and was careful how he let himself appear in public. I never saw him sloppily dressed and I know that he corrected and edited his writings again and again before he was satisfied to release them for publication. He was properly discreet about his health and few of his friends knew that during the last decade of his life he was suffering from a chronic leukemia in remission. Long before the contemporary popularity of exercise and jogging, Kohut ran, not jogged, his prescribed miles several times a week. He ate sparingly to maintain a trim figure. Yet dinners at the home of Heinz and Betty were grand celebrations of gourmet cuisine. Heinz was a connoisseur of fine wines. The evening usually began with some special Mosel while chatting before dinner, sometimes by a crackling fire in the living room. Dinner itself was graced by a vintage Burgundy or Bordeaux that fit the occasion. For dessert he might serve a vintage Sauterne or a Spätlese Rhein or Mosel. Betty was famous for her delicious Sacher Torte prepared according to a secret recipe which she never divulged. However, the wines were what mattered most to Heinz. He taught me to be careful when pouring into a
wineglass, not too much, just about half full. He proudly showed me a letter from his good friend Heinz Hartmann, in fact, Hartmann's last letter to Kohut shortly before Hartmann died. In this letter Hartmann laments the discomforts of aging but then points out that there are pleasant compensations when growing old: the wines one drinks get better and better. Kohut's ardent appreciation of wine helped, also, in making me feel more at home when a guest at Heinz and Betty's. Having grown up in the Rheinland I was used to a glass of good Rhein or Mosel on most festive occasions at home. Even as children we were allowed a little sip, the taste of which we really did not like but which made us children feel part of the whole warm family ambience.

Dinners at the Kohut's were a little like that. Heinz had collected around himself a group of younger colleagues with whom he met regularly for discussion of his work in progress and sometimes for dinner. In part the formation of this group, was a reaction to Kohut's experience of being cold-shouldered by his former friends and colleagues, especially the leadership of the American Psychoanalytic Association, as he began to talk about and publish his ideas about narcissism and the self. He mentioned to me some colleagues who knew him well but who ignored him now when he met them walking through the hotel lobby at some national meeting. Old friends suddenly looked past him or answered his greetings only coldly and curtly when crossing his path. He felt hurt and angry. Kohut had been a President of the American Psychoanalytic Association and a Vice-President of the International Psychoanalytic Association. He had been part of the circle around Anna Freud and Heinz Hartmann and for a time he was expected to be the next President of the International. Among the candidates at the Chicago Institute he was highly respected for teaching the best theory course and writing the most interesting papers. I recall, when I was still a candidate, hearing him discuss with our class his recently published 'Forms and Transformations of Narcissism' (1966) which opened new psychoanalytic vistas for many of us. Almost all candidates thought that he was one of the best teachers at the Institute. His course in psychoanalytic theory was conducted by him at the most sophisticated level. We had our reading assignments and he would start by asking us a few questions about our understanding of what we had read. A few questions back and forth between Kohut and the class and then "he would be off on a lengthy discussion of some point that had just been raised. We then sat there, listening, all ears, as the intricate theoretical mysteries of psychoanalysis were revealed to us. Once started on such a topic he could go on and on, maybe for half an hour or more and he would not like to be interrupted. I was both fascinated and astounded by his tremendous knowledge. In short, he was thought by all of us as the intellectual leader of modern psychoanalysis, as Mr. Psychoanalysis.

All that respect and admiration changed rather suddenly with the emergence of self psychology. For example, after a scientific meeting at which Kohut had emphasized Breuer's and Anna O's great contribution to the creation of psychoanalysis by Freud, he was condemned for not being properly laudatory of
Freud, and, within a few weeks, he was removed from the Psychoanalytic
Education Council of the Chicago Institute by a vote of his colleagues! He began
to feel professionally isolated. Psychologically he needed an affirming
responsiveness. Earlier, after he had begun writing his first book, The Analysis of
the Self, he started to meet with a number of interested young analysts to
discuss the emerging book chapter by chapter. I believe that initially the group
consisted of Michael Basch, John Gedo, Arnold Goldberg, David Marcus, Paul
Tolpin, and, from Cincinnati, Paul Ornstein. Later, I was asked to join in, and then
also Marian Tolpin and Anna Ornstein.

I was both awed and excited by the privilege of being present during the creative
spurts of a genius. I thought of Heinz Kohut as the new Freud and of our
meetings as worthy successors to the Wednesday night meetings of the early
Vienna group in Freud’s house. Looking around the room I would fantasy that so-
and-so was the contemporary Abraham, the other was Ferenczi, and so on. John
Gedo was a leading spirit among us and he also seemed closest to Kohut. After
the publication of The Analysis of the Self in 1971 there had not been a public
lecture by Kohut for sometime and John and I wondered about an appropriate
forum for a lecture-presentation for him. Kohut would be 60 years old in another
year and, in my naivete, I assumed that the psychoanalytic community would
wish to honor him by celebrating the event. Fools rush in where angels fear to
tread. At the time I happened to be on Program Committee of the Chicago
Psychoanalytic Society. When the Committee met I therefore proposed that the
Society sponsor a scientific meeting to honor our renowned colleague Heinz
Kohut on his sixtieth birthday. This was not received with great enthusiasm but
decided to be brought up at a regular meeting of the whole Society. Colleague
after colleague got up to denounce my proposal. Indeed, there was no precedent
for anyone’s birthday being honored by the Society and my initiative was soundly
and, as I now see, rightfully rejected. Even in retrospect I do not clearly
understand what made me expect the members of the Society to wish to honor
someone whom they envied and whose ideas threatened them in their
comfortable certainties.

However, I was not ready to give up and I felt righteoused outraged at the
shortsightedness of my fellow Society members. Carried forward by my
enthusiastic idolization I decided to organize with my friends a scientific meeting
to honor Heinz Kohut. Together with Paul Tolpin and George Pollock, who as
Director of the Institute gave us his blessings, we formed a committee (well
assisted by my wife Ina) to arrange the Birthday Conference. Since we needed
seed money to get started I personally importuned a dozen or so friends for a
loan of about $150.00 each with the promise that, if possible, they would be
repaid after the Conference. We engaged space for scientific presentations and
for a banquet at a local hotel. We planned a high level scientific program with
speakers from Europe as well as America. Heinz took an active part in planning
the program. I cannot remember all the invitees nor their topics but among them
were the historian Carl Schorske from Princeton University who spoke about
Freud's Vienna; Paul Parin, psychoanalyst and anthropologist from Switzerland; Lawrence Friedman from New York about psychoanalytic theory; Mary Gedo on art and psychoanalysis; Alexander Mitscherlich, leader in the postwar revival of psychoanalysis in Germany, from Frankfurt. John Gedo gave the laudation at the banquet. The Kohut Birthday Conference was a great success scientifically and personally. Nearly 600 people, friends and colleagues, from all over the world attended. René Spitz came from Denver. Anna Freud who was unable to attend sent a warm letter of congratulations from London. She was among the honorary sponsors who included also the Mayor of Chicago, Richard Daley. Even after repaying the seed money loans, the Conference had a surplus that was donated to the Institute.

The Kohuts had a warm ongoing friendship with Anna Freud. When visiting Chicago Anna Freud would stay with Heinz and Betty as their house guest. On one of these occasions Betty Kohut admired an amber necklace worn by Anna Freud. On the last day of her visit, just before leaving the Kohuts, Miss Freud took off her necklace and put it around Betty’s neck as a gift. Later, when Heinz had sent a copy of the manuscript of *The Analysis of the Self* to her in London, he received a somewhat equivocal but encouraging reply. The friendship survived the strains introduced by Kohut's theoretical innovations as did the friendship with K.R. Eissler. There were frequent exchanges of gifts around birthdays and holidays but as time went on there was no longer any mention of psychoanalysis or Heinz’s newer contributions. His work had become taboo among his closest friends.

Some decades earlier when the Eisslers were still in Chicago, Heinz had been in analysis with Ruth Eissler. His first analysis, in Vienna, had been with August Aichhorn. He always spoke warmly about Aichhorn. After I published one of my early self psychologically influenced papers 'Ambience and Abstinence' in 1976, I was rewarded by Heinz with the gift of a photograph of a very young Heinz Kohut sitting at a desk with Aichhorn looking at a manuscript together. The inscription on the photo's back reads 'With Aichhorn in 1937 - lots of ambience and little abstinence. For Ernie from Heinz, October, 1976.' Aichhorn, the author of *Wayward Youth*, was one of the very first analysts who was able to understand and therefore to deal successfully with the delinquency of adolescents. When treating young people he fostered their idealization of himself and then used this intense idealizing transference as a lever for exerting psychotherapeutic influence. I have always wondered whether Kohut derived some of his own ideas about the importance of the idealizing transference from his contact with Aichhorn, though, of course, Kohut did not manipulate the idealizing transference, he analyzed it. He told one anecdote from his own treatment with Aichhorn. Apparently Heinz was a very well behaved 'good boy' as a youngster and in his analysis his 'goodness' somehow drove Aichhorn into impatient irritation until he finally burst out "Heinz, I wish I could inject some delinquent's serum into you!" Though Kohut never mentioned her to me, another patient of Aichhorn, Margaret Mahler, also became a leader and innovator in psychoanalysis.
When Kohut heard that Freud was leaving Vienna he went to the train station to wave good-bye and he was rewarded by Freud tipping his hat to him. I think that was the only time Kohut saw Freud but he loved to tell the story. I believe he felt in Freud's gesture a symbolic passing of the torch. Some time in 1938, after Freud's leaving, Kohut also left Vienna. After a year in Britain Kohut came to Chicago, encouraged by his good friend Siegmund Levarié, the music scholar, who was then at the University of Chicago. Kohut greatly enjoyed music and was a regular at the Chicago Symphony as well as the Opera. His father had been a fine pianist who had contemplated a concert career until military service during World War I put an end to his musical ambitions. Heinz's fondness for and involvement with music was well known to us. On one occasion, we, the group of his younger colleagues, gave Heinz a set of the complete recordings of the Bach Cantatas which he then listened to, one by one, a Cantata every evening.

Despite the cold rejection of Kohut's ideas by most of his generation of psychoanalysts there was a beginning burgeoning of interest in self psychology among younger psychoanalysts and among analytically oriented psychotherapists. Kohut believed that his theoretical writings, though amply provided with case vignettes, needed to be supported by a collection of extensive illustrative case histories. All of us in the circle of colleagues around him were accumulating clinical experience. Under the leadership of John Gedo we organized ourselves into writing a book consisting of case histories and their full discussion within the new frame of self psychology. We met at regular intervals at the Institute with Kohut and discussed our cases with his participation. It was a unique and most valuable learning experience for everyone of us, truly a masterclass at the feet of the master. Each case was discussed at length to decide about possible inclusion into the forthcoming casebook. Being scrutinized by one's closest colleagues is not a pleasant experience and it led to some tensions within the group. Usually these tension were dissipated by Kohut's summarizing comments but in one instance there was no possibility of resolution and, as a consequence, John Gedo withdrew from the group. The casebook project was continued under Arnold Goldberg's energetic leadership and published under the title *The Psychology of the Self: A Casebook* (1978).

The last decade of his life was characterized by both professional satisfaction and the anguish of personal affliction. The first Annual Self Psychology Conference in Chicago in 1978 was well attended by over 500 registrants. It set a pattern for an unbroken series of annual Self Psychology Conferences with high level scientific programs. At the time of this writing I am looking forward to the 18th Annual Conference to be held in San Francisco this October of 1995. Heinz was an active participant until his death at age 68 in 1981. He died in Chicago just three days after he gave his final address to the Fourth Self Psychology Conference at Berkeley.
In retrospect one wonders about the wellspring of Kohut’s originality and its final focus on narcissism. I would speculate that his creativeness was a compensatory response to some early deprivations that had threatened the cohesiveness of his budding self. One major deprivation was the absence of his father during World War I. I do not know the exact dates for the father’s military service but the war lasted 4 years from 1914 to 1918; Kohut had been born in May 1913. For Kohut’s father the war had been a catastrophic interruption of his career as a concert pianist and he was unable to pursue his musical aims after he returned. One can easily imagine the father’s depression and the son’s disillusionment in the now returned father who must have been a distantly admired hero during his military service. But the father’s musical interest was reflected many decades later in some of the most original essays on music written by Kohut together with his friend Siegmund Levarie.

Little Heinz was close to his mother and he remained so for many years. Yet certain remarks that he made at times left me with the impression that his mother was a somewhat distant woman who was overly involved with her social life, leaving Heinz in the care of servants and tutors. I speculate that his parents must have had some social aspirations that included melding into the upper bourgeoisie. We know now that the Wittgensteins and others had accomplished assimilation into the dominant culture with remarkable success and I wonder whether the Kohuts had similar aims. (It may be that the remarkable flowering of individual creativeness within the newly assimilated group may well be a self assertion, that is, an expression of the individual’s roots, ambitions and ideals, to compensate for having had to give up self-sustaining aspects of their prior identity as belonging to the old pre-assimilated group.)

Heinz was an only child and I have heard him complain that his isolation from other children his age robbed him of certain socializing experiences. He was not sent to public school but privately tutored at home. Therefore it was difficult for him to feel at ease in large groups even as an adult. I must add that he certainly seemed to me to be able to hide whatever uneasiness he was experiencing.

One can speculate on basic psychological traumas sustained during Heinz’s childhood. Add to that the trauma of suddenly being torn out of his circle of non-Jewish friends during late adolescence and young manhood as a result of the growing nazification of Austrian youth. He must have been a troubled young man when he saw August Aichhorn for his analysis.

Aside from all these factors that made him develop into the person we knew, what caused Kohut to break out of the mold of ‘Mr. Psychoanalysis’ into becoming the creator of psychoanalytic self psychology? He himself has written about analysands who taught him to stop making stereotyped oedipal interpretations and told him to really listen to what they were saying. Another precipitating factor was his experience as President of the American Psychoanalytic Association. Apparently he was exposed to the self-serving
political maneuvering of respected colleagues. It was an education in the
narcissism of politics and it set him searching for a better psychoanalytic
understanding of the unanalyzed remnants of narcissistic character disorder in
supposedly well analyzed analysts.

I believe the circle of younger analysts who formed around Kohut - Gedo,
Goldberg, Basch, Paul and Anna Ornstein, Paul and Marian Tolpin and myself -
had an impact upon his emerging thinking that is difficult to define but
nevertheless made itself felt. Let it be understood that Kohut did not get his ideas
from his followers. What he needed was a sounding board, preferably one with a
positive harmonious resonance. Thus it was a group selected by him personally
that had the privilege to listen to him read his writings as they came out of his
study, so to speak. Yet, inevitably, there was some discussion, as the group
responded, more enthusiastically to some ideas, less so to others. Some of us
were more clinically inclined in our responsiveness, others were more fascinated
by the audacious theoretical innovations. No one rejected his ideas outright, even
if they harbored some skepticism, because sitting at the feet of the master as he
displayed an astonishing erudition, brilliantly reinterpreting clinical data, and
boldly putting forth near heretical thoughts, was such a satisfying and exciting
experience for everyone of us. We were all recent graduates of the Chicago
Institute for Psychoanalysis, and, let me add without undue modesty, the best of
the lot. We admired him and we provided a good selfobject experience for Heinz
Kohut that enhanced his creativeness.

II.
How is one to evaluate the impact of such a giant as Heinz Kohut on
psychoanalysis and on oneself? Clearly, I am not unbiased nor do I need to be.
The heat of current controversies in psychoanalysis makes it probably impossible
to be evenhandedly free of prejudices. One of my biases comes out of the
medical tradition and my training as a physician: I value healing higher than
precise theoretical formulations. It is an important judgment of priorities that puts
me at odds with many colleagues and also with Freud. Freud disliked being a
physician and put the advancement of scientific knowledge, particularly the
knowledge gained by the psychoanalytic method, ahead of therapeutic ambitions.
When I first began to read Freud and became a candidate at the Chicago
Institute for Psychoanalysis I adopted Freud's value system, more or less
consciously. Yet I never was very happy with the therapeutic results obtained in
my analytic work. Most of my patients did get better, perhaps two-thirds or three-
fourths of them improved markedly. That is not a bad record and stands well in
comparison to other medical specialties. Still, I always thought it was too easy a
way out to blame the patient, i.e., 'resistances' and 'unanalyzability' when
patients failed to live up to what I thought were their potentials. Heinz Kohut did
not take such an easy way out. One of his patients, a clear case of oedipal
psychopathology, did not respond to his interpretations of her oedipal
transferences the way she was expected to. Again and again he made the
interpretation, and each time the patient rejected it. Resistance? Data and theory
fit each other well. Unanalyzable? Finally, Kohut decided to listen to what the patient was telling him, listen openly and empathically, listen for what this patient was experiencing inside herself. Thus was self psychology born. Eventually Kohut was able to formulate his value system: empathy values are higher than truth values. I was deeply shocked when I first heard him say this. It took me a long time to really understand what he meant. He was not devaluing truth, he was not neglecting the accomplishments of hundreds of years of science. Let me quote from Kohut's presentation at the banquet honoring him on his sixtieth birthday, May 1973:

But now I must leave generalities behind and reveal the specific change in the hierarchy of values that will, I believe, occur in psychoanalysis. The full integration of his ideals may allow the analyst of the coming generation to become the pacesetter for a change in the hierarchy of values of all the branches of science concerned with man, through a shift of emphasis from a truth-and-reality morality toward the idealization of empathy, from pride in clear vision and uncompromising rationality to pride in the scientifically controlled expansion of the self... scientific empathy, the broadening and strengthening of this bridge toward the other human being, will be the highest ideal. (Kohut 1973: 325-340)

"Psychoanalysis always has entailed this revolutionary program for the recasting of our moral priorities. Freud may or may not have seen clearly the pivotal role of empathy in defining psychoanalysis as a field delimited by its method of data collection, i.e., by empathy. He mentioned empathy not more than a dozen times in his whole opus yet he said, "A path leads from identification by way of imitation to empathy, that is, to the comprehension of the mechanism by means of which we are enabled to take up any attitude at all towards another mental life" (1921: 110f). In the original German the meaning is even clearer: without empathy there can be no opinion (Stellungnahme) about another's mental life. This footnote is the only explicit acknowledgment by Freud of what has become for Kohut the central focus of the psychoanalytic method. But even for Freud empathy is implicit in his inferences and his interpretations. Kohut's explicitly positing the participation of empathy in the collection of data as the sine qua non for making data psychoanalytic, leads, inevitably, to positing the self into the center of any theorizing about human inner life. That, in Kohut's view, is psychoanalysis and it advances the psychoanalytic revolution started by Freud. It is this explicitly empathic stance that made a most lasting impression on me and that has been the most important factor in making me a self psychologist.

"What about the impact of self psychology on psychoanalysis? In my view Kohut's thought and clinical practice corrected the mainly post-Freudian distortion of psychoanalysis that had transformed a humanly scientific endeavor into a mechanistic, non-human system, ego psychology which was no longer compatible with contemporaneous science and philosophy. If we confine our inquiry to the activity practiced by psychoanalysts who are recognized and certified as such by the American Psychoanalytic Association, then how can we
evaluate Kohut's influence on their technique? Perhaps most analysts no longer practice what was called the Standard Technique the way I and most of my contemporaries experienced it 30 and 40 years ago. The long periods of silence and the destructively unresponsive or hostile interventions of those days are, I believe, largely a thing of the past. The interpretation of selfobject transferences that were unknown then, like the mirror transference or the idealizing transference, has now become a part of the therapeutic armamentarium of most analysts. But a comprehensive understanding of self psychology remains an accomplishment for future generations of analysts. It is difficult to unlearn years of working within the frame of libido and instinctual drives, or to stop thinking automatically in terms of id, ego and super-ego. Most analysts have not yet grasped that the function of a verbal interpretation is not to convey information for purposes of providing insight but to evoke an experience with therapeutic potential within the analytic dyad. Such an experience may sometimes entail cognitive aspects that the analysand can conceptualize verbally. Yet we also know former analysands who by criteria of functioning were well analyzed without having learned the proper words to label the dynamic changes within. One might say that they have had a curative analysis without many conscious insights. Finally we know former patients who gained a great many insights and who can tell us in detail what they have learned during their treatment about their conscious and unconscious dynamics but whose mental functioning has not improved in spite of all their hard won knowledge. Shall we say about them also that they have been well analyzed?

I realize, of course, that colleagues working in the traditional mode would probably dismiss our work as not really being psychoanalysis but they might allow that maybe it is good psychotherapy. Or, perhaps, I have judged wrongly and my views of the traditional approaches are distorted by my fixation on a past that is long gone. What I understood to have been traditional practice may represent only a caricature of what really goes on in other analysts' consulting rooms nowadays. I do know how the ambience in my consulting room has changed over the last decades as a result of my exposure to Heinz Kohut and his ideas. Like Kohut I am very optimistic about the future of psychoanalysis. As reflected in registrations at self psychology conferences and seminars, both in the U.S. and overseas, there is a steadily increasing interest, knowledge and sophistication of those attending. There is reason to hope that the psychoanalyst of the future will be trained in and familiar with all the various mainstreams of psychoanalytic thought including self psychology and that psychoanalysis will become the basic science and language of all mental health professionals from all the various disciplines involved in the study of humankind.

Ernest S. Wolf, M.D.
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