

Keeping to the Sober Truth: A Jewish Lutheran White Russian in San Francisco

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Abstract

Intrepid Russian American journalist Nadia Shapiro (1897-1989) explored aspects of Russian identity in the interwar American context, and was particularly salient with respect to the acculturation processes facing Russian émigrés arriving in San Francisco from China from 1918 forward. This article explores Shapiro's experiences, contributions and, specifically, her writings, which also addressed issues of ethnicity and race within the American nativist environment. Her observations, both about the émigré community, as well as the experiences of Russian Americans in Alaska and California, spoke to the processes of Eastern Europeans and Slavs attaining a "state of whiteness" within the American hierarchical racial paradigm.

Keeping to the Sober Truth: A Jewish Lutheran White Russian in San Francisco¹

Nina Bogdan

Nadia Shapiro arrived in the United States in August of 1922, one of approximately 500 prospective students assisted by a committee rendering aid to Russian young people residing in Harbin, China, where many had fled as a consequence of the Russian Civil War (1918-1922). A substantial Russian community had existed in the city of Harbin since its construction in 1899 but the Civil War forced hundreds of thousands of Russians to cross the border into China, many settling temporarily in Harbin while others fanned out to other locations in China and the Far East. The students who applied to come to America did so for the purposes of obtaining or completing a university education in order to help rebuild their Russian homeland, destroyed by years of war and revolution.² In any case, that was the common narrative. Whether communicating with Americans or amongst themselves, students consistently referenced a return to their Russian homeland at some future nebulous point in time, reinforcing the notion that they were sojourners in America.³

Shapiro, like virtually all the students who came to San Francisco, never returned to Russia, however, and her life as a “White” Russian in the United States informed her work as a journalist.⁴ Critically, despite the fact that she was

1. “As a newspaper gal, I had the d--dest time keeping to the sober truth”: Nadia Shapiro in letter to George Putnam, November 11, 1940: Nadia L. Shapiro papers, Box 3:29, Hoover Institution Archives (HIA).

2. From 1920 to 1925, Russian organizations in Harbin and the last Russian ambassador to the United States, Boris Bakhmeteff, with some involvement of the Y.M.C.A., worked to assist Russian refugees in Harbin to go to the United States and enroll in universities, primarily on the West Coast. See Maria Sakovich, “Angel Island Immigration Station Reconsidered: Non-Asian Encounters with the Immigration Laws, 1910-1940” (master’s thesis, Sonoma State University, 2002), Chapter VI; Erika Lee and Judy Yung, *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 231; Boris Raymond and David R. Jones, *The Russian Diaspora: 1917-1941*. Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2000), 77; detailed information in Nikolay V. Borzov Papers, particularly Boxes 4,5,9,10, 11, HIA.

Note: All translations of Russian language sources into English by author. This article is an excerpt from Chapter 2 of author’s dissertation: “Between Dreams and Reality: The Russian Diaspora in San Francisco, 1917-1957” (PhD diss., University of Arizona, 2021).

3. Correspondence and Russian National Student Association Bulletins, Borzov Papers, particularly Boxes 10-11, HIA.

4. “White” Russian in this context is a strictly political term as the group in the Russian Civil War who opposed the communist “Reds.” As such “White” Russian is capitalized in

not Russian Orthodox, as were most émigrés who left Russia in the interwar period, her nostalgic reminiscences of her homeland informed her identity. Shapiro's family was Lutheran: her grandfather, likely living in the Jewish Pale in what is now Belarus, had converted from Judaism some time in the nineteenth century. Though the Russian Orthodox Church played a critical part in White Russian émigré identity, particularly as the forming community coalesced in a politically hostile and nativist environment in the interwar United States, Russian émigrés of other confessions, like Shapiro, who shared experiences of trauma and loss upon fleeing their homeland, felt themselves no less White Russians. Both Shapiro's activities and her own self-identification as part of that specific group highlighted the fluidity of ethnic identity and the importance of culture in creating connections between people. The experience of Russian émigrés, in the process of acculturating to the American way of life in the interwar period, highlighted the fact that American spaces, both urban (San Francisco) and somewhat more remote (Alaska), though multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-cultural, nevertheless functioned under a hierarchical racial paradigm that reinforced division by implicitly and sometimes explicitly insisting that immigrants select some gradation of whiteness in order to fully incorporate into society. Shapiro's explorations of aspects of both American and Russian history and culture in her role as a reporter for an American newspaper demonstrated the shift in thinking about culture, race, and ethnicity among newcomers to the United States as they sought acceptance into American society.

Shapiro, at the age of 24, had been a likely student candidate—she was close to student age (some “students” were in their late 30s and a few in their 40s); she already spoke English, though she admitted the English she knew little resembled what she heard in America upon arrival; and was well-traveled. By her own account, she had crossed the entire country of Russia at least seven times on the Trans-Siberian Railway, spent time in Western Europe in childhood, and lived in China and Japan after fleeing Russia in the period of its Civil War.⁵ Nevertheless, U.S. authorities detained Shapiro, as they did all passengers traveling in steerage (third class), for questioning upon arrival. In fact, at the behest of a Bureau of Investigation agent, immigration officers detained Shapiro's entire group upon entry at Angel Island Immigration Station for examination due to suspicions about the “so-called” students attempting to enter the United States. Forced to act both as a subject of an interrogation and as an interpreter given the lack of Russian-speaking U.S. officials, Shapiro focused on the scholarly nature of the student group's intentions to the agent who, suspicious of their purposes, described them in his report as “not of a particularly intelligent type or kind.”⁶ To reporters

this discussion while the terms “white” and “whiteness” as a constructed racial category are not.

5. According to Shapiro's U.S. naturalization papers she was born October 20, 1897. “God's own country pleases Nadia but let her tell it,” *San Francisco Examiner*, April 1, 1923: Shapiro Papers, Box 5:10, HIA.

6. Report “In Re: ‘Harbin Committee Rendering Aid to Russian Students,’” by H.W. Hess, September 12, 1922: File 55605/130 INS Central Office Subject Correspondence

meeting the ship on the dock (who referred to her patronizingly as “little Nadia Shapiro”), Shapiro declared that she hoped to study journalism in the United States, emphasizing the temporary nature of the group’s stay, after which they would, in her words, “go back to Russia with our knowledge: there we shall teach our people how America does it.”⁷

Thousands of other White Russian émigrés arriving in San Francisco, by and large from the Far East in the 1920s and 1930s, shared, to a certain extent, the experiences of Asian immigrants arriving at Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco. They encountered a certain suspicion on the part of American immigration authorities, leading to detention, medical examinations, and, for the Russians, very occasionally, exclusion.⁸ Given that Russians were nominally “Europeans,” authorities were less likely to try to keep them out of the United States but established quotas in 1921 and reductions in those quotas after the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924 severely limited Eastern European immigration.⁹ The legalization of exclusion based both on race (with respect to Asian migrants) and what is now referred to as ethnicity (with respect to southern and eastern Europeans) played a major role in reinforcing the hierarchical racial paradigm in the United States, which affected both the process of immigration and the process of acculturation of migrants in America.¹⁰

Shapiro and her group were soon allowed to enter as they held valid visas and authorities had no basis to exclude them. Most of the arriving Russian students actually had to work at jobs as laborers or domestics initially as they did not speak English well enough to enroll in universities. The majority, however, were literate in Russian, thus making up a specific subset of immigrants to America who were educated in their own language and likely learned to read and understand

and Case Files, Entry 9, Records of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, RG 85, NARA, Washington, D.C.

7. “25 Students Held Here from Russia,” *San Francisco Daily News*, August 30, 1922.

8. See Lee and Yung, Chapter 6, and Sakovich, Ch. VI, for detailed discussion of procedures facing Asian and Russian immigrants at Angel Island in the interwar period. Taisiia Bazhenova, an émigré in San Francisco who worked as a correspondent for émigré newspapers, described the process of arrival for third class passengers most of whom spend time in detention on Angel Island (first and second class passengers were generally allowed to disembark in San Francisco after document inspection): upon arrival, the detained travelers were not allowed to speak to relatives who came to meet them; authorities led them past as if they were “prisoners under escort.” Men and women were separated and locked into their rooms at night; sleeping was difficult as guards constantly checked on them, shining lights into the rooms: “Notes,” Taisiia Bazhenova Papers, Box 2:2, HIA.

9. See Mae M. Ngai and John Gjerde, *Major Problems in American Immigration History* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013), Chapters 9-11, on Asian exclusion, nativism, and legislation establishing quotas in the 1920s; on the process of identity formation for Eastern Europeans in the period see, for example, “Becoming American and Becoming White” by James R. Barrett and David Roediger, 324-346, in the above-referenced volume.

10. Eugenists both prior to and after World War I regularly referred to immigrants of the “Slavic race” as an “invading” group, e.g. Frank Julian Warne: *The Slav Invasion and the Mine Workers: A Study in Immigration* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1904).

English more quickly than immigrants who were less educated. Though Shapiro was an exception and did speak English, she spent little time as a student in San Francisco, taking a few journalism courses while getting her bearings, holding a variety of menial jobs, and soon coming to the end of the \$200 she had brought with her. Down to her last \$5 bill and “desperate for a job,” she made a pitch to the editor of the *San Francisco Examiner* newspaper in March of 1923 and he hired her, initially as a clerk/secretary and later as one of only two female reporters at that newspaper.¹¹ Shapiro was not hesitant to utilize her position as an American journalist to advocate for her countrymen and countrywomen, immediately grasping the complicated context of being Russian in America. In her roles as both a reporter and a spokeswoman, covering the contemporary Russian refugee/émigré experience as well as the historical connection, largely through the Russian Orthodox Church, between California and Alaska, Shapiro was instrumental in raising certain questions about the meaning of ethnicity, the importance of culture, and “being” Russian in what historian Marc Raeff called “Russia Abroad”—the result of the worldwide wave of up to three million Russians who initially landed in Europe and Asia, with many migrating to America during and after the Russian Civil War.¹²

Shapiro’s goal was to become an American novelist and, as such, she left behind substantial writings, both auto-biographical and fictional, along with her reporting, which illustrated the experiences of Russians in America, particularly in the interwar period. Shapiro’s self-identification as a White Russian, combined with her unique position as an American reporter of Russian background, provides insight into the fluidity of ethnic identity in the critical period under discussion when Russians émigrés, as eastern Europeans in both a post-Red Scare (1918-1920) and nativist environment, were newcomers in America. As somewhat undesirable foreigners in the eyes of dominant culture proponents, they were just

11. The first female reporter at the *Examiner* was Eunice Waite who wrote about the California wine industry, among other subjects: Kevin Starr, *Inventing the Dream: California through the Progressive Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 154.

12. “How I came to Write in English” and “Journey through Time”: Shapiro Papers, Box 4:14 and 7:10, HIA. See Marc Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Susan Wiley Hardwick, *Russian Refuge: Religion, Migration, and Settlement on the North American Pacific Rim* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); James E. Hassell, “Russian Refugees in France and the United States between the World Wars,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 81, no. 7 (1991): i-vii+1-96; Robert H. Johnson, *“New Mecca, New Babylon:” Paris and the Russian Exiles 1920-1945* (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1988); Robert C. Williams, *Culture in Exile: Russian Émigrés in Germany, 1881-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), among others, for discussions about various manifestations of the worldwide interwar Russian diaspora. Scholars disagree about the appropriateness of the term “émigré” with respect to referencing Russian refugees in the interwar period. For the purposes of this work, the author has chosen to utilize the term to distinguish the interwar diaspora from immigrants from the Russian Empire who came to the United States prior to 1917.

embarking on the process of attaining what some scholars refer to as a “state of whiteness.”¹³

Family Background

In her reminiscences, Shapiro specifically stressed her family’s “middle-class” status in Russia, in part, perhaps, to counter the widespread view common among Americans that Russian émigrés fleeing the Bolshevik Revolution all belonged to Russian royalty, aristocracy, or the nobility.¹⁴ In one of her earliest columns, which touched on that particular stereotype, Shapiro related the story of her friend “Tatiana” who, after fruitlessly searching for a job, finally got hired because the company’s personnel manager noticed her application out of hundreds of others: Tatiana’s name was the same as one of the murdered daughters of the last Russian Czar, Nicholas II.¹⁵ During the job interview, Tatiana neither confirmed nor denied her identity and, apparently leaving her interviewer with the impression that she was hiring royalty, Tatiana ended up with \$100 a month clerical position. Shapiro, alluding to the American affinity for blonde women and the general outlook that Americans found Russians enigmatic, titled the article: “Mystery is better than peroxide when you’re looking for a job.”¹⁶ Even in her own situation, despite her insistence regarding her middle class origins, one of her acquaintances, Barrett Willoughby, an American writer, effusively wrote in a recommendation about Shapiro’s writing talents, that “[s]he is an aristocrat to the tips of her little fingers,” thus insisting with a peculiar American intransigence that even those Russians who denied being aristocrats nevertheless had to be to conform to American-generated stereotypes.¹⁷

Shapiro also consistently referred to herself as a White Russian to emphasize her opposition to the Bolshevik regime, though she, unlike the vast majority of those who identified as White Russians, was not Russian Orthodox. Her family background, similar to most émigrés in San Francisco in many ways, indisputably contained some anomalous aspects, particularly, and importantly, with respect to religion. Her father, Lazar Solomonovich Shapiro, whose own father had converted to Lutheranism from Judaism, raised his two daughters, Nadia and Maria, as Lutherans. Nadia, however, was intimately familiar with the rituals,

13. Phrase from Barrett and Roediger in Ngai and Gjerde, 328.

14. A few examples of articles running in San Francisco’s newspapers during the period of exodus of Russians, focusing particularly on royalty or aristocracy: “From Royal Robes to Rags,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 16, 1920. “Finding Odd Jobs for Exiled Aristocrats,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 21, 1921: “Does a General Wait on Your Table or a Countess Mend Your Clothes?” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 28, 1922.

15. The Bolsheviks shot and bayoneted Nicholas II, his wife Alexandra, and children (daughters Olga, Tatiana, Maria, Anastasia and son Aleksey), and several other people in a basement in the city of Yekaterinburg, in Siberia, in July of 1918.

16. Notes for autobiography; “Mystery is better than peroxide when you’re looking for a job,” *San Francisco Examiner*, April 22, 1923: Shapiro Papers, Box 5:11, HIA.

17. Barrett Willoughby to Merle Crowell, editor of *American* magazine in New York, February 24, 1927, Shapiro Papers, Box 3:50, HIA. Barrett Willoughby was the pen name of Florence Barrett.

customs, and history of Russian Orthodoxy and maintained relationships with almost all Russian émigré groups in San Francisco, including the clergy, as she embarked on her writing career in America.

Born in Yelisavetgrad (now Kropyvnytskyi, Ukraine), Shapiro spent her early childhood in the Siberian city of Irkutsk where her father, who had graduated from Moscow Imperial University in 1889, worked as the city attorney. As such, for the rest of her life, Shapiro considered Siberia her home, wrote nostalgically about growing up there, and explored Siberian-Alaskan-Californian connections in her writings.¹⁸ Lazar Shapiro had been born in Minsk and Fanny, her mother, in Kiev. Educated in France, Fanny took her daughters to Europe when they were children for the specific purpose of learning foreign languages. Nadia went to school in Paris for two years as a child and spoke fluent French. She also learned German and English, both through extended stays in Austria and Switzerland (Fanny eschewed Germany) and through lessons with governesses. Though Russian nobility often traveled abroad, Russian “middle classes” did not necessarily have such resources but, according to Nadia, Lazar, who later moved the family to Blagoveshchensk-on-the-Amur (also in Siberia) and worked there as the attorney for the State Bank, adored his wife and daughters and failed to amass any wealth because he spent all of his money on their “education and recreation.”¹⁹

Shapiro, particularly through her work for the *San Francisco Examiner*, where she was employed as a reporter until 1932, became somewhat of a bridge between San Francisco society and the Russian community. She cultivated an enormous coterie of friends, acquaintances, and professional contacts both among Americans and Russians. Her narrative about Russia in her professional writing and correspondence with Americans paralleled the general White Russian émigré narrative—the Bolshevik seizure of power was a disaster for Russia and the Reds showed their true brutal colors in the Civil War. The personal experience of her family, who fled Blagoveshchensk “on foot across the ice-bound Amur” River into China when Bolshevik forces seized the city in February of 1918 was not untypical of the violent and horrific experiences of many Russian refugees. Red Guards, after a house-to-house battle, took “strategic positions” and fired their machine guns at civilians leaving the city. Despite the terror of the experience, and perhaps indicative of her risk-taking nature, Shapiro described the flight to China as “exciting.”²⁰ Shapiro also recalled happier times in her youth in Siberia:

18. Personal notes and reminiscences, Shapiro Papers, Box 1:1, HIA. With respect to the Siberian-Alaskan-Californian connections, Shapiro, for example, wrote to “Sasha” (Alexander Dolgopoloff), an émigré who lived in Los Angeles and pursued his own study of Russian America, about visiting Grigory Shelekhov’s grave in Irkutsk in childhood at the Znamensky Monastery. Shelekhov was one of the first Russian merchant voyagers to sail to Alaska in the eighteenth century. Shapiro was likely one of the few Russian émigrés who had explored the history of Russian America (in Alaska and Northern California) prior to coming to the United States : Shapiro to Sasha, January 23, 1973: Shapiro papers, Box 2:15, HIA.

19. Personal notes and reminiscences, Shapiro Papers, Box 1:1, HIA.

20. “Chronicle of revolutionary events in the city of Blagoveshchensk on the Amur,” undated; biography dated December 2, 1924 in letter draft dated December 12, 1933: Shapiro Papers, Boxes 4:7, 4:16, and 3:29, HIA.

the “[g]lorious butterflies [that] danced among yellow poppies, blue bells and orange lilies” and “the masses of...fragrant white flowers I used to pick on Siberian meadows,” her heart suffering “a little secret twinge” of melancholic nostalgia for her home.²¹ Positive recollections of home among Russian émigrés often included nostalgia for Russian landscapes and natural settings, memories of spaces of tranquility and calm prior to the war and violence that followed.

Once in Harbin, Lazar was able to obtain a job as city attorney which he held until 1926, while Shapiro, realizing the futility of attempting to build a life in Harbin, and already working as a writer and reporter for Russian-language newspapers, made the decision to go to the “country of the future,” as she called the United States. Upon coming to San Francisco and working at the *San Francisco Examiner*, she utilized her knowledge of the situation in Russia to further her journalistic career but also actively worked to highlight the critical situation of Russian refugees in China in the 1920s. Although she was able to bring her mother to live with her in 1929, she never saw her father or sister again. Her family circumstances, then, paralleled those of the majority of Russian émigrés who were often separated from family at some point during the war or the process of emigration and, in many cases, never reunited. Shapiro’s father died in Harbin in 1934 while, her sister, Maria, a prolific writer in her own right, and a legal scholar, was arrested in 1945 by Soviet authorities when the Red Army invaded northern China, deported to the Soviet Union, and sent to KarLag, a labor camp in Karaganda (present-day Kazakhstan). Maria survived in the labor camp for ten years after which authorities sent her to a “home for invalids” in a remote area near the Volga River. From there she was able to get word to Nadia and her mother in the San Francisco Bay Area that she was alive and they began to send her parcels and money, though efforts to get her out of the Soviet Union were unsuccessful. Despite ill health, Maria survived another 16 years, passing away at the home for invalids in 1971.²²

In her autobiographical writings and correspondence Shapiro made it clear that she had never been a monarchist, and that her family’s political views were “liberal” but her identity as a White Russian complicated those liberal views when it came to Russian nationalism. Describing the people and groups with whom she associated in San Francisco’s Russian émigré community, she wrote to a Library of Congress librarian: “[w]e are all “Whites” – that goes without saying, but we are liberals.”²³ In a response to an American would-be author who had inquired about the particulars of Russian profanity through the *Writer’s Digest*, she wrote, “Yes, I’m a thoroughgoing Liberal but I draw the line [at] Marxism and abhor

21. “How I came to write in English,” and “Chronicle of revolutionary events in the city of Blagoveshchensk on the Amur”; biography December 2, 1924, Shapiro Papers, Boxes 4:14 and 4:7, 4:16, 3:29, HIA; Nadia Lavrova, “My Home Town,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 24, 1933 in Boris N. Volkov Papers, Box 17:13 and Shapiro Papers, Box 6:8, HIA.

22. Biographical documents, letters, and accounts, Shapiro Papers, Box 1:1-7, HIA.

23. Shapiro to Mikhail Zinovievich Vinokuroff, November 18, 1934, Shapiro Papers, Box 3:47, HIA.

communism: I have seen enough of them...during the first years of the revolution in Russia.”²⁴ Though firmly and incontrovertibly anti-Bolshevik, however, in an example of the contradictions inherent to Russian identity abroad, in 1945, as the Second World War ended and the United States and Soviet Union began to divide up Europe, she wrote in response to an article by William Chamberlin that “[Byelorussia] should go to Russia, commies or no commies.”²⁵ Rather than support independence and self-determination of peoples as a “liberal,” she insisted on the inviolable connection of Byelorussia to Russia even in the hated form of the Soviet Union.

The Shapiro/Kashevaroff/Willoughby Triad

By 1924, Shapiro was an established reporter for the *San Francisco Examiner*, writing under the pseudonym of Nadia Lavrova and, as much as she was able given the constraints on her by her editors, she focused her writing substantially on human interest stories having to do with the Russian émigrés, their struggles in Harbin, the growing émigré community in San Francisco, and the history of the Russian presence in San Francisco, northern California and Alaska.²⁶ In November of 1924 she spotlighted the life of the “Fighting Priest,” Father Andrew Kashevaroff, when he came to San Francisco from his home in Alaska in connection with “the biggest fight of his life...defying the Moscow government that is trying to get possession of the Russian churches on American soil.”²⁷ The actual battle was a serious one as the value of Russian Orthodox Church property amounted to many thousands of dollars and the Soviet government sent the

24. Shapiro to Mr. W.H. Mack, Whitmore Lake, Michigan, January 7, 1936, Shapiro Papers, Box 3:16, HIA.

25. Shapiro to Sonya Chamberlin, May 19, 1945, Shapiro Papers, Box 2:9, HIA. “Byelorussia” is today’s Belarus and was commonly translated as “White Russia” in the time period in question although it has absolutely no relationship to the term “White” Russian as used to describe anti-Communist émigrés. This distinction remains unclear to the present day in U.S. government narratives, which incorrectly identify “White Russian” anti-Communist groups with the geographic and political space of Belarus, e.g.: “Vonsiatsky Espionage,”

<https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/vonsiatsky-espionage>, accessed April 5, 2020. The text in the noted article refers to the leader of the Russian Fascist Party in the interwar period, Anastase Vonsiatsky, as a “White Russian,” and subsequently identifies the geographic space of “White Russia” (Belarus) in terms that imply that the “White Russian” movement both originated there and only included people of ethnically “White Russian” (Belarusian) origins, which is incorrect. As noted previously, the “White Russians,” White Guard, and White Armies in the Russian Civil War included people and groups from the entire Russian Empire, who adopted the color identification as a strictly political, not ethnic, delineation to indicate their opposition to the Red Guard, Communists, and Bolsheviks.

26. According to Shapiro, her editors at the *San Francisco Examiner* allowed her to write about “Russian topics” only once a month: Shapiro to “Sasha” (Alexander Dolgopolofov), November 24, 1973: Shapiro Papers, Box 2:15, HIA.

27. Nadia Lavrova, “Alaska’s Fighting Russian Priest Helps Win from Reds,” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 2, 1924: Andrew P. Kashevaroff (APK) Scrapbook, 1906-1939, Alaska State Museum (ASM) archives.

representative of the Soviet “Living Church,” “Red” Archbishop Ivan Kedrovsky, to New York to seize such property. His efforts unsuccessful, Kedrovsky and other church representatives filed lawsuits to gain title to properties, including in Alaska.²⁸

Shapiro’s prose about Alaska evoked the romanticized view of the Russian imperial project in Alaska and Northern California that became an integral part of the San Francisco Russian Orthodox community’s narrative about their Russian-American identity. This narrative encompassed the spatial and spiritual foundation of an imagined Russia that intersected with their Russian Orthodox faith and with a sense of identity through place:

Alaska...the land of...distant creole villages, that in every tradition perpetuate eighteenth century Russia...Alaska that has received gifts from Katherine (sic) the Great...Alaska, where eighty years ago the Russian Governor used to give balls for officers of visiting Russian warships; Alaska, where Russian church bells were cast over a hundred years ago at Sitka, one of which hangs in an orange grove at Ramona, California; Alaska, where early in the nineteenth century Russian mills ground flour and Russian workmen built ships for Spaniards of California.²⁹

The language of Shapiro’s description was evocative of what came to be the nostalgic narrative of Russian émigrés in San Francisco as they sought to make connections between the Russian Empire, of which they were, in their perspective, the last remaining representatives; their own history; the Russian cultural legacy in Alaska; and the relics of the Empire that remained in northern California. Over

28. The Bolshevik government, under the auspices of reform, encouraged a schism in the Orthodox Church in the 1920s. The result was a “modern Living Church,” under the control of the Soviet government. Kedrovsky ultimately won control of St. Nicholas Cathedral in New York: Hassell, 54.

29. Nadia Lavrova, “Alaska’s Fighting Russian Priest Helps Win from Reds,” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 2, 1924: APK Scrapbook, 1906-1939, ASLM. “Creole,” in the context of the Russian Imperial project, referred to people of mixed Native Alaskan and Russian heritage. Scholars do not agree about the exact definition of “creole” as the Russian Empire utilized the term. Generally it was a social category (estate) in the Russian Empire that may have specifically referred to people of mixed Russian and Native Alaskan/American heritage, thus specifying particular rights and obligations under Russian law. Author and Orthodox Church historian Father Michael Oleksa made the case that being “creole” was more a “state of mind” than an actual definition of specific ethnicity. According to him, any Native Alaskan who pledged loyalty to the czar and thus became a subject of the Russian Empire after 1821 gained the classification of “creole”: See “The Creoles and their Contributions to the Development of Alaska” by Archpriest Michael J. Oleksa in *Russian America: The Forgotten Frontier*, ed. by Barbara Sweetland Smith and Redmond J. Barnett (Tacoma: Washington State Historical Society, 1990), 185. Further, in Russian Alaska, “all tradesmen, merchants, or company foremen were also Creole, regardless of race”: Michael Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska: A Theology of Mission* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992), 150.

time, the narrative informed the evolution of Russian identity from émigré and, as such, sojourner, into Russian-American, and therefore “citizen,” with a direct connection to the physical spaces they now inhabited in California. Shapiro effectively touched on every aspect of what would soon be a mytho-poetic collective memory informing Russian-American identity—the “creole villages” perpetuating eighteenth-century Russia (villages Shapiro herself had not actually seen), the gifts of the Russian Empress Catherine the Great providing a connection to the Romanov dynasty (the martyrdom of the last czar and his family playing a critical part in the émigré narrative of traumatic loss); the church bells, essential to Orthodox worship, and a concrete artifact critical to Russian religious ritual, which were (arguably) cast in Sitka and sent to California.

The history of Alaska was important in another way with respect to defining Russian identity in America: the American view after the purchase of Alaska by the United States in 1867 was that Russians were foreigners, which made their descendants, who, in Alaska, were almost all of Russian and indigenous Alaskan descent, “foreign” as well. Nadia’s portrayal of Kashevaroff was the basis for how Barrett Willoughby, who billed herself as an “Alaskan” novelist, portrayed him in her “nonfiction” book about Alaska and its Russian history published in 1930 and titled *Sitka: Portal to Romance*.³⁰ It is worthwhile to note that Willoughby’s friendship with Shapiro, which began soon after Shapiro’s arrival in San Francisco, greatly benefited her in that Shapiro, who wrote about Russian Alaska for newspapers well before Willoughby’s book about Sitka was published, was a reliable source for Willoughby when it came to learning about Russian customs, language, and tradition, a subject about which Willoughby was generally uninformed.³¹ A critical difference in the overall description of Kashevaroff, however, was that Shapiro focused on the fact that he was an American of Russian descent while Willoughby highlighted his foreignness—it is indicative that the latter described Sitka as “the quaint old Russian capital” and the first Russian American Company manager, Alexander Baranov (1747-1819), as a “dare-devil little Iron Governor” just as she insisted on addressing Shapiro in virtually all of her letters to her as “little Nadia.”³² Infantilizing Shapiro, under

30. Barrett Willoughby (Florence Barrett) spent many years in Alaska but was actually born in Wisconsin: Nancy Warren Ferrell, *Barrett Willoughby: Alaska’s Forgotten Lady* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1994).

31. In later correspondence with Willoughby, Shapiro noted, for example, that the film version of Willoughby’s book, *Rocking Moon*, a romance taking place in a “creole” village in Alaska, showed an icon hanging “flat against the wall,” which would never happen in an Orthodox house – icons are hung in the corner: Shapiro to “Billie,” December 24, 1939; in other correspondence, Shapiro described houses in the Siberian city of Irkutsk and provided commentary on societal structure there (e.g. the “wealthy merchant class in Siberia assumed the role of nonexistent nobility”): Shapiro to “Billie,” September 3, 1943: Shapiro Papers, Box 3:50, HIA.

32. The Russian American Company functioned in Alaska and California as part of the Russian Imperial colonial project. See, for example, Lydia T. Black, *Russians in Alaska, 1732-1867* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004).

Though Russians use diminutives when addressing very close friends or children, Willoughby’s adoption of this practice in English was patronizing.

the guise of praise or affection, established a dominant/subordinate relationship, something Willoughby consciously promulgated in her correspondence with Shapiro, as part of a generally patronizing attitude towards Russians as people with “quaint” customs and traditions, which placed them at a disadvantage to “modern” Americans.³³

In her own article about Kashevaroff, on the other hand, Shapiro described him as someone who was trilingual, “preaching in slow solemn Russian, or precise English, or guttural Aleut,” and as a Russian Orthodox priest who was conscious of the importance of maintaining indigenous culture and Native Alaskan identity, insisting that native youths not “neglect their ceremonies and tribal traditions.”³⁴ Kashevaroff was descended from the son of a Russian serf, Filipp Artamonovich, who came to Alaska in 1793 as a teenager with his father at the behest of his father’s owner, the merchant Ivan L. Golikov. Filipp served in various capacities during his life in Alaska including as a ship’s commander. He married an Alutiiq woman, Aleksandra Rysev, and their descendants made up an “enormous” and very prominent family in Alaska, who were designated creole by the Russian government due to Rysev’s heritage.³⁵ That designation acknowledged indigenous heritage, important in the Imperial Russian classification of people into social estates.

After the American purchase of Alaska, however, Father Kashevaroff (as did other people of Russian/indigenous background) consciously downplayed that heritage, insisting that his family was “of pure Russian blood” even though his own mother was also creole.³⁶ That effort to highlight Russian (European) background over indigenous ancestry spoke directly to American legal and social racial discrimination when Alaska became a U.S. territory in 1867.³⁷ The subterfuge

33. Correspondence between Shapiro and Willoughby dating from 1925 to the 1950s: Shapiro Papers, Box 3:49-50, HIA.

34. Nadia Lavrova, “Alaska’s Fighting Russian Priest Helps Win from Reds,” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 2, 1924: APK Scrapbook, 1905-1939, ASM archives. Kashevaroff likely spoke Alutiiq, not Aleut, but Russian colonial authorities referred to all Native Alaskans they initially encountered as Aleuts and were not informed about actual group, tribal, or clan affiliation.

35. Richard Pierce on Kashevaroff family history: *Russian America: A Biographical Dictionary* (Kingston, Ontario: Limestone Press, 1990), 215-221. Information about Aleksandra Petrovna Ryseva from Kashevarov/Rysev family trees at Geni.com, <https://www.geni.com/people/Aleksandra-Petrovna-Kashevarov-Rysev>. In other sources Ryseva is described as creole. Kashevaroff is variously spelled Kashevarov/Kashevarof.

36. Father Andrew P. Kashevaroff objected to Hubert Howe Bancroft’s description of his uncle (to whom he referred to as his great uncle) as creole, noting that “our family was of pure Russian blood and came to Alaska about 1820”: letters between Kashevaroff and E.O. Essig: Andrew P. Kashevaroff Papers ca 1901-1935, f. 4, ASM archives.

37. According to Sergei Kan, in Russian Alaska, “the category of Creole was a sociocultural rather than a racial one” though scholars have provided evidence of racial prejudice particularly among Russian American Company elites. Kan also notes that “Creole definitely became much more of a racial than sociocultural category” after the American occupation in 1867: “Guest Editor’s Introduction: Individuals and Groups of Mixed Russian-Native Parentage in Siberia, Russian America, and Alaska”: in *Ethnohistory* 60, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 351-361.

was so complete however, that Shapiro wrote in her article that Kashevaroff was “one of only ten full-blooded Russians in Alaska, the great majority of Russian Orthodox parishioners being creoles, some with only a tinge of Aleut blood.” Notwithstanding this privileging of Russian heritage, she also specifically pointed out that “with *Russian freedom from race prejudice* he tries to bridge for... [his parishioners]...the gap between their own secluded villages and modern America” concluding that in the far future, Russian scholars would come and find “the true Russian spirit of old times” in Alaska.³⁸ Shapiro’s focus was that connection to Russia, so important to the Russian diaspora about whom (and often to whom) she wrote. Kashevaroff’s lack of “race prejudice” she attributed to his “Russianness” while the reality was that Kashevaroff himself was of Native Alaskan origins but chose to obscure that fact, perhaps to protect his children—five daughters and a son, some of whom went to school and lived in the continental United States. Nevertheless, just as important, Kashevaroff (and others of the same background) was an American of Russian descent in her telling who, largely because he was a Russian Orthodox priest, maintained Russian cultural and linguistic heritage, critical to the Russian émigré community in San Francisco, in the process of selectively acculturating to American society.³⁹

Willoughby, in her book about Sitka, devoted an entire chapter to Kashevaroff and emphasized continually and repeatedly his foreignness (Russianness), despite labeling him a “connecting link between the Russian past and the American present”: when meeting, he bowed over her hand in “his charming foreign manner”; Kashevaroff’s “English was delivered with Russian vividness and a faint accent that made interesting his most commonplace utterances”; he used American slang in a “naïve and delightful” manner.⁴⁰ Kashevaroff, however, was born in Kodiak in 1863, attended school in San Francisco, and was an American citizen, as he related later in their discussion when describing how white Americans accused him of preaching allegiance to the Czar when he foiled their attempts to take advantage of the “Indians.” Just as in Kashevaroff’s conversation with Shapiro, he focused on his family’s Russianness, distancing himself culturally from his Native Alaskan congregants, stressing his loyalty to the United States of America, but also making it clear that the “white riff-raff” invading Alaska from the time of the Yukon gold rush were people with whom he warred perpetually due to their constant incursions into Native Alaskan life and attempts to profit from selling alcohol-based drinks to indigenous people.⁴¹

The triad of Nadia Shapiro/Lavrova, Father Andrew Kashevaroff and Barrett Willoughby illustrated aspects of the complicated nature of being Russian in America. Willoughby insisted on characterizing Shapiro as a Russian aristocrat despite Shapiro’s own explanation of her background. The relationship was also

38. Lavrova, “Alaska’s Fighting Russian Priest Helps Win from Reds,” (my emphasis).

39. Lavrova, “Alaska’s Fighting Russian Priest Helps Win from Reds.”

40. Barret Willoughby, *Sitka: Portal to Romance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1930), Chapter 6. Willoughby was so enthralled with Kashevaroff that she also dedicated her novel, *Rocking Moon*, to him: Ferrell, 141.

41. Willoughby, Chapter 6. Also, Pierce about Kashevaroff, 215-6.

one-sided and exploitive. Willoughby was a fairly successful author in that time and although she used Shapiro's knowledge of Russian customs and culture to authenticate her own writing, her support of Shapiro's efforts was questionable. "Little" Nadia was Willoughby's own personal Russian, giving Willoughby an air of legitimacy when writing about Russians that she otherwise would not have, but, in their correspondence, Willoughby pointed to Shapiro's foreignness and therefore inability to understand America or Americans. As a descendant of Russian colonizers, Kashevaroff was also a curiosity to Willoughby, who framed him as such in her writing about the "romantic" period of Russian colonization of Alaska. Yet Kashevaroff was not simply a Russian-American but a person of Native heritage as well. Shapiro, who had to have some understanding of the social and sexual history of Alaska, i.e. a large number of Russian and/or Siberian men arriving without families cohabited with or married Native Alaskan women, nevertheless chose to follow along with Kashevaroff's insistence of his "pure" Russianness but felt the need to stress Russian "lack of race prejudice." A critical factor in this subterfuge was the erasure of the heritage of women in the Kashevaroff family, all of whom, including Kashevaroff's wife, were descended from Russians and Native Alaskans. The purpose of Kashevaroff's subterfuge, however, was not to emphasize his "pure" Russianness to Russians but to Americans, who, as much as they considered Russians exotic, mysterious, and foreign nevertheless did selectively grant them "whiteness," something a Native Alaskan heritage would complicate given the racism Americans brought with them when they occupied Alaska after the 1867 purchase.⁴²

42. In an example of excluding Russians from whiteness, the Executive Committee Chairman of the Diamond Jubilee, an event celebrating the 75th anniversary of California's admission to the Union in September of 1925, Lewis F. Byington, in his "official" history of California for the booklet about the event, excluded the Russians in his paeans to the "white men" (Western Europeans) who explored and settled California from 1542 on – his history made no mention of any Russian presence: *California's Diamond Jubilee Celebrated at San Francisco, September 5 to 12, 1925* (San Francisco: E.C. Brown Publisher, 1927), 9. Alternatively, according to William C. White, Russians were unsuccessful at being white as they were the culprits in "lowering the prestige of the white man in China" due to the fact that "White" Russians had to take on menial jobs in exile: "White Russians: Flotsam of Revolution," *New York Times*, June 5, 1932.

With respect to immigrants and perspectives of "whiteness" see, for example, Thomas Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago 1890-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) and Arnold R. Hirsch, "E Pluribus Duo? Thoughts on 'Whiteness' and Chicago's 'New' Immigration as a Transient Third Tier," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 23, no. 4 (2004): 7-44, regarding Italian and Polish immigrants' changing perspectives regarding race and identity in interwar Chicago as they acculturated to American society.

For racialization of social status, legal and social construction of race, gradations of whiteness, and development of the hierarchical racial paradigm in the United States, see, among others, Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: Racial Oppression and Social Control*, Vol. 1 (London: Verso, 1994) and *The Invention of the White Race: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America*, Vol. 2 (London: Verso, 1997); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and*

Shapiro's and Willoughby's relationship lasted until Willoughby's death in 1959 and in that time period they did have conversations in their correspondence about culture, race, and ethnocentricity. Shapiro certainly became aware of Willoughby's patronizing attitude, noting how the latter depicted Russian creoles "in a condescending manner" in her writing and considered Russian characters that Shapiro created authentic only if they were "vulgar" and "picturesque" with no "redeeming" features. Shapiro chided Willoughby for her "subconscious objections" to Shapiro's "Russian viewpoint," which in Willoughby's eyes did not understand or sufficiently respect American culture, accusing Willoughby of living in "your little ivory tower" on Hillcrest (in the suburban community of San Carlos south of San Francisco) and not coming into contact with the Americans Shapiro encountered daily on her streetcar rides to work, at her job, in her neighborhood, and about whom she wrote. Shapiro's earnings over the years, until she acquired a steady U.S. government job after World War II, were such that she lived very modestly (and was also supporting her mother) unlike Willoughby whose books were quite successful. Thus Shapiro noted that her social milieu included people that Willoughby never encountered: Shapiro ate lunch in cafeterias on the waterfront, "even" speaking to longshoremen she met there "without being introduced"; over the years, she and Constance Dixon, daughter of Maynard Dixon, also went to speakeasies in San Francisco without male escorts, places that Willoughby apparently considered beneath her. In this particular letter, written in 1941, Shapiro noted that the situation, in which Willoughby was "consciously or unconsciously...attempting to create an inferiority complex" in Nadia's mind had gone on for many years and she felt it necessary finally to "stop and clarify it."⁴³

the Alchemy of Race (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 19-44; Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 11-12; Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 195-8; Ian Haney-López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 20, 83; Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2013), 137-8; David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 2007), 22-3; 133-4; 148-150 and *Working toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 93-94 and Chapter 4; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 152; Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 89, 141; and Natalie Molina, *How Race is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

43. Shapiro to "Billie" (Barrett Willoughby), October 27 1941, Shapiro Papers, Box 3:50, HIA. Nadia likely met Constance at the *San Francisco Examiner* newspaper office and the latter might have then been the third female reporter to work there, hired "after she turned 19," therefore 1929 or after: www.maynarddixon.org/timeline/ accessed June 2019; Constance noted she was fired from the newspaper in a letter to Nadia dated June 25, 1932: Shapiro Papers, Box 2:14, HIA.

Willoughby also objected to Shapiro's mention of the "Amos and Andy Show" in the chapter of a novel Shapiro was writing that took place in the 1920s. To Willoughby the show (on the radio in the 1920s and voiced by white actors) was an embarrassment and an "insult to Americans" and her objection appeared to be that Shapiro, a foreigner (despite the fact that Shapiro had become a U.S. citizen in 1928), selected a show that depicted African American rather than Euro-American culture (her objection did not appear to be that there was an inherent racism in white actors profiting from their racialized depiction of African American culture but that this was "low" culture). Shapiro, apparently bowing to Willoughby's authoritative knowledge of what was or was not proper, acquiesced to changing the reference to the Fred Allen or Jack Benny shows though she defended "Amos and Andy" as a show that she had listened to upon arrival in America as did, she insisted, many Americans.⁴⁴

As she acculturated, Shapiro was quick to pick up the American language of race, using the word "white" in a way that, at the time, was not common to Russian expression. In her auto-biographical writings she first quoted "a friend" and then simply began to write in her (English-language) recollections that she was "the first and only white girl who ever worked on a Japanese paper" when she lived for a year in Japan with her sister in 1919-1920.⁴⁵ In an article she wrote describing the desperate situation of Russian refugees and residents of Harbin in 1923, who were stateless, she wrote of the "200,000 white people...placed in a position practically unknown until now to international law," as the identification documents they legally had to carry were issued in the Chinese language, which Shapiro described as "a string of incomprehensible hieroglyphs." She concluded that the situation was likely "the first and only case when white men and women have Chinese passports for all purposes of international relations."⁴⁶ In this article, which highlighted a period in Harbin when Chinese authorities began to replace

44. Shapiro to "Billie" (Barrett Willoughby), October 27, 1941: Shapiro Papers, Box 3:50, HIA. Shapiro wrote that she would "of course" change the reference for "the story," which seemed to mean that she planned to publish the chapter as a story initially. Regarding citizenship: Shapiro Papers, Box 1, HIA.

45. "How I came to write in English," Shapiro Papers, Boxes 4:14 and 7:10, HIA. The term "white" was not one Russians used to describe race or ethnicity in the time period in question when speaking Russian (at least prior to coming to the United States): discussions in broad terms about race/ethnicity utilized terminology such as "European" and "Asian."

46. "200,000 Russians in Harbin Face Helplessness under Chinese Rule," *San Francisco Examiner*, June 3, 1923; Shapiro Papers, Box 5:14, HIA. In a 1925 article, Shapiro (writing under her pseudonym Lavrova) described how 300 Russian refugees, including "admirals," lawyers, doctors, actors, newspaperman, army officers, and "graduates of engineering colleges" replaced the Chinese crew of Canadian Pacific steamer in Hong Kong when the Chinese crew walked off as part of a general strike. "The Orient is not a comfortable place for a stranded white man, who cannot possibly compete with coolie labor," Shapiro wrote. The shipping line manager sent a boat to Nagasaki, Japan, where his agents recruited the Russians for a round-trip sailing between Hong Kong and Vancouver, Canada: "Admirals of Russia Swab Deck Gladly," *San Francisco Examiner*, August 2, 1925.

Russian employees in the court and other systems with ethnic Chinese personnel, Shapiro was clearly aiming for sympathy for the “white” people (the word “white” here clearly indicative of race, not the usual “White” Russian political affiliation) because she had likely encountered the prevailing views in San Francisco about Asian, and specifically Chinese immigrants or residents, who, though long-present in the American West, continued to suffer routine discrimination and often violent attack. Therefore, her deliberate use of the term “white” to describe Russians in China played directly to American sympathies and fears of “yellow peril,” focusing on race as opposed to culture.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Shapiro had hoped to find success as an American novelist but that dream did not come to fruition. After working for the Works Projects Administration from 1937 to 1942, she acquired a position at the Office of Censorship, then later at the Office of War Information and, in 1945, worked as a translator at the United Nations Conference in San Francisco. After World War II, she worked as a foreign broadcast monitor, first under the Department of the Army, and, beginning in 1947, for the Central Intelligence Agency, relocating first to Portland, Oregon, then Los Angeles. Her last place of employment was a covert location in Sonoma County and, upon retirement in 1953, she remained in Santa Rosa, California. She never married and had no children, making a concerted effort to pass along her research to other émigrés exploring the history of Russian America, as well as to the Hoover Institution Archives.⁴⁸

Shapiro’s somewhat unique role as both a bridge between the Russian émigré and American communities and a writer who documented the process, at least in part, of attaining “a state of whiteness” in interwar America, highlighted the choices that immigrant groups in the United States may have consciously and unconsciously made over time in the process of Americanization. The importance of the specificities of their culture to the Russian community, which largely informed the identity of émigrés—literature, music, art, language, religion and history—gradually receded in the face of implicit demands to select “whiteness,” i.e. identification with a generalized constructed racial category dominating social relationships in the United States. Culturally, “whiteness” as an identity held no meaning for Russian newcomers to America. The process of beginning to identify as white was a function of exposure to the dominant culture narrative, which

47. Barbara Berglund, for example, discusses the developing racial hierarchy in San Francisco in the late nineteenth century that placed Chinese people at the bottom, configuring a racial divide between “Chinese” and “white” rather than “black” and “white” as existed in much of the United States, particularly the eastern and southern areas: *Making San Francisco American: Cultural Frontiers in the Urban West, 1846-1906* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 97-8. The Chinese population in San Francisco in 1920 was only 7,744 having dropped precipitously from a high of 25,833 in 1890. San Francisco’s Chinese population more than doubled by 1930 though still only 2.6% of the total: www.sfgenealogy.org. Accessed 11/7/2019.

48. Documents and correspondence, Shapiro papers, Boxes 1-4, HIA. Shapiro died in 1989.

both explicitly and implicitly promoted the criticality of maintaining the existing hierarchal racial paradigm.

About the author

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