Curacautín, Chile, Day 1

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By Joe Philipson*

The following post is from the first day of my trip to Curacautín, Chile during the weekend of August 16-18th.

It's a 10 hour bus ride from Santiago to Curacautin, which lies in the South of Chile, just 90km (~41mi) northeast of Temuco, the nearest large city. When I made plans to go here, I asked people for advice on how to go, and what I might see. Even my the resident director at Tufts was baffled, at first, as to why I wanted to go there, but almost no one I talked to in Santiago had ever been here. It's not that they've never seen the south; it's that they've never seen it this way.

After a comfortable and surprisingly restful bus ride, I awaken to find the bus slowly winding through side streets, and realize we have turned off the main highway as we head to Curacautin. I realize, as we make some stops to let off passengers, that they aren't announcing stops, and, not certain that Curacautin is the last stop, I get nervous that I'll miss it. Nonetheless, sleep wins over at 5:30am, and I drift in and out of consciousness and the bus rocks back and fourth on these narrow, empty streets. Finally, we reach a place and I realize everyone is getting off. I slowly wake up and begin to gather my things. As I get up, a mustached man in a heavy coat steps onto the bus. "Joe?", he asks. It's always tempting to try to be witty and return a "who's asking?", but let's not pretend as though, on a bus full of Chileans, this man could have mistaken me for a different tall, lanky redhead named "Joe". I admit to being myself, and he smiles a big smile and opens his arms wide for a hug. "Welcome to Curacautín," he says, embracing me like we've known each other for years. It had occurred to me just after pulling out of the bus station that it might be a little more than unusual to go someplace I've never been, in a foreign country, to meet a man I've never met in my life and see his family. When he greeted me on the bus, every concern melted away.

Oscar Carrasco was born and raised in Curacautín. He met his wife, Joyce, here when she came from the US to do work here with Methodist youth. Oscar was the president of the Methodist youth at that time, so he was Joyce's contact here. He had been praying for some time about finding someone to marry, as he was approaching that age, and just a few days later, she knocked on his door. Years later, in 2001, Joyce was my third grade teacher at the Lab School. People sometimes ask me what it's like to grow up in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood, and have the privilege of attending the Lab School in particular. Here's my answer: it's like having a third-grade teacher from Atlanta, Georgia with a thick southern drawl, a husband who was born and raised in Chile, having her occasionally answer her cell phone during an emergency and hear her speak fluent Spanish, knowing that she has a son in the Marine Corps and therefore has Marine Corps posters all over the room, having her teach you about South America, race in the US, Chile in particular, and how to knit—and all the while, you continue to believe that this is a completely normal, not at all extraordinary, third grade experience. It's usually not until about 12 years later, when you find yourself in Chile and remember Mrs. Carrasco, google her, find her husband, write to them, and he invites you to stay with his family in a small town in southern Chile that even Chileans don't visit, that it starts to dawn on you that, in addition to all the privileges you already knew you had, you also had a completely idiosyncratic upbringing that was entirely unique. It's at this moment you start to count your blessings, and also think about redoubling your efforts to fight for some equality in the US, so other people can have opportunities like you did. But I digress. After living in Hyde Park for 18 years and being away in Boston for two, I finally have my answer to the question. It took coming to Chile to find it.

Oscar is now the District Supereintendent for the Elgin, Illinois district of The United Methodist Church, and lives with Joyce just outside Chicago. Joyce has retired from forming the minds of third graders at the Lab School. Her children have all grown since last heard about them in 2001, and all are doing exceptional things and making their parents proud. Oscar is here in Curacautín to visit his 98-year-old mother, Sara, whose physical health may be declining, but who has every last one of her marbles and likes to play rhyming games at the dinner table. He and his family welcomed me into their home as a guest for this weekend, wanting to show me a part of Chile I might never have seen. Mission accomplished.

We start off our day at Oscar's family home as his sister Ruth makes breakfast for us on the wood fire stove that also keeps us warm. The whole family is very proud of the house—and they should be: it took his father 15 years to build it, literally nail-by-nail, as he worked to earn enough money

to buy supplies little by little. As he built the house, the family lived in a shack with dirt floors with several children (Oscar's mom gave birth to 13, though sadly some have departed this world) and Oscar's grandmother. We spend breakfast catching up as I heard about his wife and his children, and a little family history. His father was a Pentecostal Evangelical Christian who never ate pork or shellfish, didn't permit wine at the dinner table, and taught Oscar to put his family first, and pray regularly for guidance. Oscar's mother was a Methodist, and from her Oscar got his Methodist affiliation and a complimentary set of values and beliefs about which he thinks deeply every day.

After we finish breakfast, Oscar drives me to some nearby mountaintops, seeing the surrounding area on the way. We pass forested areas with towering pines, and large, open spaces for cattle and crops. I ask him how he met Mrs. Carrasco, my teacher. Little did I know that my third grade teacher had gone to Chile in the late 1960s to do community service with the Methodist Church. Before she arrived, a young Oscar Carrasco—then president of the Methodist youth in Curacautín—had been sort-of dating around the community, and had begun praying for guidance to marriage. Days later, Joyce knocked on his door looking to speak with him about her work in Curacautín. Over time, she learned Spanish, they married, and had a son. Oscar was a university student in Temuco during the beginning of their marriage and was involved with the pro-Allende student movement in the late 60s and early 70s. After two years in Temuco, Oscar continued his education as a married student in a city called Valdivia while also serving in an appointment as a Lay Deacon of the Methodist Church under his mentor, spiritual leader Bishop Raimundo Valenzuela. Oscar wasn't as radically left-wing as some of his fellow students, but he always assisted in executing the will of the democratically-run student movement: when they voted to take over university buildings, he participated. Joyce found him once, barricaded under a desk inside a taken building. She directed him to desist, but he stuck with his countrymen then and several times afterward. Finally, in late July 1973, it became too dangerous for Joyce and their young son to remain in Chile, and Oscar, remembering the commitment to family that his father had taught him, went with Joyce and their son to the United States. Food was scarce in Chile, and violence was literally knocking on their door. Thanks to perseverance, commitment, optimism, great intelligence, and a lot of luck, Oscar and Joyce have created a beautiful family and have welcomed grandchildren into their lives in the last few years. Over 35 years and three children later, Oscar and I drive past the place where he and Joyce shared their first kiss.

Oscar and I stop on a mountaintop overlooking Curacautín. It's a small city of about 17,000 residents, and from where I stand I can see the smoke from the wood stoves hovering over the city as the sun rises over the three surrounding volcanoes: Tolhuaca, Lonquimay, and Llaima. People here don't have much, but they have their community, their families, and some spectacular views. Oscar and I get back into the car and he drives me around the area and to a waterfall where he used to go as a boy. While the sky is cloudless and the day is warm, the ground remains wet and slippery. Oscar navigates the terrain without any trouble, and it's easy to see how excited he is by being

back in this place that will soon be home again when he retires from the ministry in two years. He tells me about the waterfall and the river, the forest, and the truck their father used to drive that both earned the family its living and brought Oscar and his brothers on many boyhood adventures throughout this beautiful, virtually untouched area.

After exploring the waterfall, we head to our first meeting of the day with Oscar's brother, Eleazar "Lalo" Carrasco. As we walk up to the house, the brothers embrace. Lalo turns to me and shakes my hand warmly. He is friendly and extremely proud. Oscar had told me in the car on the way over that Lalo, a student leader in the movement for President Salvador Allende, had suffered during the military dictatorship and ultimately had to leave to spend several years in exile in Argentina. In the years since the fall of the Pinochet government, Chile has passed a law allowing for those who suffered during the dictatorship to receive a government pension. Lalo, proud and independent, refuses to receive the pension, preferring instead to work out of a workshop in his house and make a living off odd-jobs and repair necessities. "I never sold my dignity," he says; "because of that, I am as poor as I am."

We enter the house, and Lalo introduces me to his wife, Veronica, and we take seats on their couches. Oscar explains to Lalo what I am doing in Chile and why he thought it might be interesting for us to talk. Then both turn to me, expectantly. I explain that I would really just like to hear Lalo's story. "From when?", he asks. "From when I was a boy, a student, what?" "Let's start from when you were a student," I say, "and see where we get." That was the last thing I said for the next hour, as Lalo told me what happened.

Lalo tells me about being a member of the student movement for Allende, and of the energy behind the accelerated land reform that took place between 1970 and 1973. On the day of the coup, Lalo's life turned around completely. This wasn't a lost election, a small setback in a broader fight; Lalo knew his life in Chile would never be the same, having been such a leader in the movement. He told me of beatings he endured at the hands of the Carabineros—the Chilean National Police. It was Oscar's first time hearing that his younger brother had been beaten, and we both sat there in silence as Lalo continued. Fortunately, Lalo wasn't imprisoned for a great length of time, nor was he one of the disappeared. He was, however, relegated to the lowest possible positions in society, and shunned. The only job he could get was as a janitor or handyman for the municipality—a significant fall for a man who had been studying agricultural engineering at the university level in Temuco. While working, though, the mayor of the town would frequently call Lalo a "Communist," and a "rat" in public, subjecting him to terrible humiliation and libel. Ultimately, unable to make an adequate living and feel safe, Lalo left Chile and with it, his wife and two young boys, Rafael and David. Ultimately, the distance was too hard on his marriage that ended in a divorce. The sons he left behind have grown up to be a sergeant in the military ski regiment in the Andean Army in the extreme South of Chile, and a miner in the mines of the North, respectively. Since coming back to Chile, Lalo has been living with his "wife," Veronica, but could not

actually be remarried due to complicated divorce law and the tremendous financial cost of doing so. They have two wonderful children together, Valeria and Gabriela.

Oscar and I asked Lalo why he thought there is no new political leadership in Chile, why the "next generation" hasn't taken the reins. Lalo blames two things: first, the "Sistema Bi-Nominal," which basically allows the right to remain in control of the legislature even if representatives from the left are elected; and second, the fact that "right versus left" in Chile is still "Pinochet versus Allende." Even Lalo, who has a picture of Salvador Allende above his dining room table, believes those times have passed—that new rhetoric and new symbols are necessary to move forward.

We leave Lalo's house and head across town to the home of Profesora Elena Germani, one of Oscar's former high school teachers whose husband, a Mason, was detained by in October of 1973 by the Pinochet government. In an unbelievably surprising turn of events, we are welcomed to Profe Elena's house by her son, Eliah Germani, who discovered Jewish roots to their family some years ago, and, compelled by his discovery, converted to Judaism. He now lives in Concepción with his wife and children, and works as a pediatric intensive care specialist. He is a publish author of fiction in Chile, writing stories about the Holocaust based on what he learned during a fellowship in Germany. Last weekend, there were five Jews in Curacautín: myself, Eliah, and his wife and two children.

After we settle in with tea and coffee, Profesora Elena arrives at her house from the supermarket. She's a tiny woman—possibly not five feet tall—but full of life, warmth, and energy. Oscar and I explain to her what I've been doing in Chile, and I ask her to tell me her story. With that, she takes us back to October 26, 1973, the day her husband Hernán Soto, the vice-principal of the very school Oscar had attended as a boy, was arrested by the Carabineros of Chile—the National Police. "He was arrested and treated just like any other criminal," she tells me. His crime? Señor Soto was a Mason. Masons were routinely arrested and tortured under the Pinochet government, having been labeled untrustworthy enemies of the state. While there have been rumors that Pinochet himself was a Freemason and *not* a Catholic, these have never been confirmed, and his regime's treatment of Masons indicates otherwise (O'Shaughnessy, Hugh. "General August Pinochet". The Independent. 11 December 2006: London. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/general-augusto-pinochet-427998.html>.).

Profesora Elena spent the better part of a week going to different jails to look for her husband. She was allowed to see her husband, and eventually allowed to pay to have him released. At the time, Hernán was a young man and a respected teacher, and had no particular political affiliation. When he was released, his fellow prisoners stood and applauded him. Though he was released and never faced detention or arrest again, Hernán and Elena's life would never be the same. Indeed, Profesora Elena tells me, there was always a lot of helicopter activity in Curacautín because, much like the ocean

dumping in the pacific, some prisoners were thrown out of helicopters into the mouths of volcanoes in the surrounding area—something for which, she says, native peoples of Chile were especially at risk. I have to stress that I haven't been able to confirm that part of her story with anyone else, but she sees it as part of her story and I'll have to do more research.

Toward the end of our meeting, Profesora Elena turns to Oscar. "I think these situations—like the dictatorship, like the coup, like Pinochet—are a test from God to see if we can continue believing or being religious people," she says to him. "You're a man of God," she continues, "what do you think?" It's the Book of Job interpretation of atrocity, and Oscar shifts in his chair as he considers the question as both a response to a lived experience and a theological puzzle. "Evil exists," he says, "and faith may be a way of understanding the expression of violence and suffering." I write that down as fast as I can—there's nothing like an opportunity to ask a preacher about a question like that.

We finish up our coffee and some pastries and prepare to leave. Eliah wishes me a "Shabbat shalom," and a "shanah tovah" (a sweet new year) as we exit. Sometimes you have the most unforgettable experiences and meet the most interesting people in just an instant.

Oscar and I return to his mother's house for lunch with his mother and his sister Ruth. I had met his mother and his niece, Carolina, just briefly before heading to Profesora Elena's but just for a moment. Oscar's mother is 98 years old, and as he put it, while her mind is sharp, her body is in decline. Nonetheless, she rises to greet me from her chair by the wood-fire stove where she keeps her feet warm. Oscar and I eat a delicious vegetarian soup while I speak to his mother for a while. Once, out of curiosity, Oscar and his brothers did some research to see just how big their quite sizable family is. They discovered that this tiny woman who knows my name but calls me "joven"—young one—has over 80 living descendants. The word "descendants" seems to diminish that, but when you consider that she's 98 years young and raised some on her own after losing her husband to a heart attack in 1976—during the dictatorship—and continues to stand at the center of a strong, united family, you start to appreciate the magnitude of her story.

We finish lunch and Oscar and I jump in the truck to go exploring near the Volcán Llaima (pronounced "JAI-mah" in English). Before we get on the road, we stop briefly at the soccer stadium to meet his brother, Eli Carrasco, who is a youth soccer coach employed by the municipality to run after-school soccer programs for local youth. Eli was, at one time, a professional soccer player in Chile, but a knee injury ended his career and left him without a pension. Still, it's clear he's a passionate and beloved coach. It's a clear blue day—unusual for Curacautín in the winter—and a bunch of young boys kick a ball around. Eli blows a whistle and calls them over to meet Oscar and me. One by one, each of the boys shakes our hands and introduces himself,

stepping back into formation for a picture. We take a picture and then Eli sends them to run some drills.

Before they go, Oscar stops two of them, twin boys. "What is your last name?", he asks them. "Leyva", the say. Oscar turns to me: "Leyva—like Levite," he whispers in my ear. Just like Eliah Germani, these young boys probably have Jewish roots of which they are completely unaware.

As we leave the stadium, we see a mother sitting in the bleachers watching the kids. "Which one is yours?", Oscar asks her, with his warm, inviting smile. He is ever the minister, asking everyone for their names, their stories, and giving them blessings on their journey. She points to her son. "He loves soccer," she says, smiling.

We get in the truck and head out on the road toward the end of the lava flow from the last eruption of Llaima. The volcano is one of the most active in Chile, and one of the tallest at just over 10,000 feet (3,000 meters). It rises out of the earth smoothly and takes over a huge surrounding land area and on this blue day with its fluffy blanket of snow, it looks like a South American Mount Fuji.

On our drive, I ask Oscar about Profesora Elena's question. "That must be a hard question, but one you get a lot," I say. It's no significant insight, for sure, but Oscar answers with deep consideration. "That kind of question tests my faith in a merciful God," he says. "But ultimately, people have a choice. Evil exists, and we can choose—we have the *option*, to say 'yes', or to say 'no'," he preaches. It's obvious from the time I've spent with Oscar that he doesn't see "good" and "evil" as black and white concepts. His point, however, is that the world is not the Book of Job repeating itself over and over. There are problems, daunting problems, and he concedes that sometimes it may seem impossible for people to reach one another. But, he stresses, we solve more problems when we see the humanity in others, the holiness in each person, and begin to find solutions together—without turning to violence or totalitarianism. In simplest terms, it's a strong endorsement of saying, "I don't know," or "I could be wrong." The key to "doing good" and avoiding evil, therefore, lies in humility.

We arrive at the lookout point and step out onto the lava flow. Volcanic rocks stretch forth toward the volcano for miles. Oscar and I are the only people. We step out of the truck and look, in silence. "If you listen," he says, "you can hear Mother Nature breathing."

We look for a long time at this beautiful place, at once desolate and alive. Though the volcano can be a source of panic and destruction, it also leaves the soil here to be some of the most fertile in the world. We walk around the area, at one point slipping under a barbed-wire fence to look at a small pond whose bottom glows a brilliant emerald green in the sunlight. As we sneak under the wire, I joke with Oscar that back in 2001 when I was in his wife's third grade classroom, I would have dismissed anybody who told me I'd be crawling under barbed fences near a volcano in South America while

talking about theology with her husband the minister twelve years later, as a quack. We walk back down the dirt road and I get distracted taking photos of the lava flow. As I emerge back onto the road, I see Oscar just a few meters ahead; it's clear from the way he's walking, smiling, picking up rocks to give me, throwing some back, that he is back in his boyhood haunts, in a way he may not have been in a while. His adventurous spirit remains alive, well, and hungry.

We get back in the truck and Oscar drives closer to the volcano. It's a rare blue day when the volcano isn't spewing some ash, so it makes sense to get a better look if we can. As the jeep careens down the dirt road, Oscar regales me with stories of his travels, his children, and people he has met through his ministry. As we get closer to the volcano, snow begins to appear, and soon snow and pines surround us as the road shrinks and we approach a guard. Oscar turns to me and asks if I might be interested in venturing further. He seems intent on making sure I capture every part of his native landscape with my camera, and I'm not going to turn down a good shot, so of course the answer is yes. Oscar puts the jeep in four-wheel drive, and we proceed into the snow along the riverbank. Sadly, we don't get that far before running into some tourists from Argentina who have gotten their car stuck in the snow. They ask Oscar is he has a rope or could help tow them out, but sadly we have nothing. Oscar asks them for their names, and gives them blessings for a safe resolution.

Just as we begin to turn around, however, we, too, get stuck in the snow and mud. All the vehicular technology and maneuvering is for naught, and we have to get out. We toss some stones and mud under the tires and Oscar gives some power. One of the tourists from Argentina is kind enough to help us push. After a few tries and some maneuvering, we make it out without a problem. We drive back toward the road, stopping for a few moments behind a group of campers loading up their car. While we are stopped I take a moment to get some pictures of the rapidly setting sun by the river. Oscar has ignited some adventurous desire in me, so I step out onto some stones in the river for some better angles. I would never, ever do this in any other situation, but something compels me, and indeed they're some of the most exhilarating photos I've ever taken.

We get back in the car and Oscar drives us back to the lookout point to watch the sunset. The sun will set behind us, throwing brilliant colors onto the white snow of the mountain. We ride mostly in silence, and when we get to the lookout, Oscar shuts off the engine and we sit for a while, listening. After a while, he turns to me: "if you want to take a moment for some personal prayers or reflection, that's okay." He steps out of the car and walks alone toward an elevated hut that has a spectacular view of the lava flow leading to the volcano. I stay in the car for a few moments and reflect. Shabbat is now upon me, and the roar of activity of the past week grows softer and softer as the sun sets further and further. I get out of the car as Oscar walks over to the other side of the road to see the sun setting behind the trees. I walk over to him and we exchange a few words as we admire the landscape together. We walk back over to the car, and as we

get in, I show him that already some pictures I've put up on Instagram have been well received. He lights up. It's not about the technology or the quality of the picture; he's deeply humbled that people—my friends, my family, people I don't know—think the area, his home, is beautiful.

As we get ready to leave he extends his hand to shake mine. "Shabbat shalom," he says, smiling.

We stop a few times on the way back to the house to take some photos of the beautiful sunset happening before our eyes. When we arrive at the house, Oscar's oldest brother, Itiel, is standing outside the house with Eli. The brothers stop and chat for a while, hugging each other and laughing. They laugh the way siblings laugh, and it's beautiful to see, especially as someone with siblings myself. It's "cariño", affection, between siblings that just can't be matched.

We park the car and enter the house to find it full of people. People are gathered in every possible part, and the dinner table is set and extends through two rooms, spanning three actual tables pushed into one. There are all kinds of dishes ready to eat, including fresh salmon and delicious salads and good-looking chicken and meat. The stove is burning, and the house feels warm with heat and with familial love. As the final preparations are made for dinner, we sit around and people get to know me. It's a pleasure to talk to each member of the family. All are very warm and sweet, genuinely interested in what I have to say, and very complimentary about my Spanish. At one point, I am sitting with one of Oscar's sisters, Noemy, and Itiel's wife, Lidia. We are talking about my interests in Chile, what I have seen and what I'm learning. Obviously, what I've learned about the coup and the dictatorship feature prominently in my experience here. As we talked I began to realize that Lidia, Noemy, and I weren't all quite on the same page. Though Noemy and I were discussing the atrocities of Pinochet, Lidia didn't quite see it the same way. It's not *bad*. She certainly doesn't believe that the bad things that occurred were good. The economic policies of the time, however, benefitted her and Itiel, who worked for years as a guard in Chile's prison system and is now retired with a healthy pension. They aren't bad people, it's just that there are two sides to every story. For a lot of the bad things to be written about the Pinochet regime—and to be clear, I'm not defending the actions of the regime at all—there are things to be said about the radical parts of the Allende government and related social and political movements. In spite of the day I've had talking to those who suffered, it's interesting for me to hear the perspective of someone who didn't. This divide, this difference in experience, after all, influences the political discussion today and will ultimately play a role in Chile's future.

As we sit down to dinner, Oscar speaks for a moment to the family. Every opportunity he has to be with them is sacred, and he gives thanks to God for the chance to visit and for everyone's health and safety. He invites me to say a few words. I'm usually pretty comfortable about addressing groups, and I sort of like the adrenaline that comes from

a healthy nervousness about public speaking. I've never actually had to do any real speaking in Spanish though, so I've pretty much never been more nervous in my life. Thankfully, everything comes out just fine, and it is an exceptional experience to be able to thank Oscar's mom, especially, in her language of comfort, without the barrier of a translator. Oscar's mom says a few words of welcome to me, and that makes it all the more special. Finally, Oscar's brother Itiel gives the benediction to the family and over the food as we prepare to begin dinner. He tears up as he does so. This isn't just a typical blessing over the food we are about to eat. Almost the entire family is united, and this is both a rarity and a tremendous blessing. His mother, despite her frailty, is seated with them ready to eat and make delightful conversation. His emotions are more than warranted.

Dinner is as fun as it is delicious. There is lively conversation all around, and the family enjoys catching up. Oscar introduces me to one of his family members, Raul, who is the former mayor of Curacautín. It's the kind of town where everyone knows everyone, and the mayor could be related to you. We talk a little bit about the issues facing Curacautín in the future—it's a tough economy down here, too, and Curacautín has definitely felt the effects. He did say they have been very fortunate to get some support from the central government for major municipal projects, but that the economic future of the area remains uncertain. From what I've seen, however, it looks like tourism will be a significant part of the economy of the future as more people begin to discover the area's natural beauty. Chile's conservationists now have yet another area to protect.

After dinner we sit around the living room as Oscar's brothers Lalo and Eli get out a guitar and a glass jar that they beat with a knife. They're joking around, imitating the songs and style of the farmers who live in the surrounding area. The songs are simple: "Mama, I'm going to Santiago after my love, don't worry about me." Still they are funny and the whole family enjoys listening to them. Moreover, they're pretty good musicians with pleasant voices and a sense of what sounds good. Everyone laughs as Lalo does his best Pavarotti impression; he's definitely not the maestro, but the whole family seems to have memorized various arias, which is pretty neat.

As things quiet down, we sip maté and talk. It's been a 17-hour day on about four hours of sleep, and I'm finally really struggling to fight off exhaustion. Lalo notices and tells me I should go to bed. I am defiant: how could I pass up an opportunity to spend more time with this family, with these people? Lalo calls me "the boxer," fighting against sleep all the time. He's not wrong, but I finally surrender. Everyone hugs meet goodnight, and I head next door to my bed at Oscar's sister Judith's house. She's already there with her husband Nelson, their daughter Sara, her partner, and their grandchild Raulito. They all wish me a good night, with Nelson adding that I should be sure to root for ColoColo, the soccer team popular in the south.

I get in bed and fall asleep immediately. I am far from my house and my family, but I have found another one here. Shabbat has brought me to a beautiful place with

wonderful people. There will be more to do tomorrow, more stories to hear, and more to see.

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