Susan Stamberg Transcript

DR: First, tell me, where did you grow up?

SS: I grew up in Manhattan, mostly, 96th and Central Park West. It's a world that totally enwraps you in Jewishness. When I married Louis Stamberg who was from Allentown, Pennsylvania where being Jewish was really an issue--his father founded the temple there, and then became its president, he was insistent that we too join a temple in Washington. I said, "Well, Why?" that's how I came to know that the entire world was not Jewish like the world in which I had grown up in the middle of Manhattan in the '50's.

DR: In addition to being surrounded in a Jewish environment, was there Jewish education or Jewish ritual in your home?

SS: Most of these stories are sad and funny ones, mixed. There was no observance that I can remember in my home. No candle lighting on Fridays. I remember being taken on High Holy Days to temple, but that was about it. I was sent, however, to Jewish school, at Temple Rodeph Sholem, a little bit down Central Park West from where we lived, for confirmation lessons. In the middle of the semester the teacher, one Mr. Lear, said, "Today, we're going to learn the rumba." I raised my hand and said, "Really?" A dedicated student, I just wanted to be as good as I could, study everything, and learn as much as possible. I raised my hand, and said, "Sorry, but I really didn't come here for rumba lessons." I was a little kid. The nerve! I was sent to the principal's office--first time that had ever happened. My mother was called into school.

DR: How old were you?

SS: Twelve, I guess, getting ready for confirmation. Maybe even a little younger. Because this was before bat mitzvahs. They became sort of an American invention for

later generations. But I said, “I’m not going to do this. This is just wrong.” I was reprimanded, but my mother very nicely said, “Fine, you don’t have to go any more.” So I never was confirmed.

DR: Do you feel like you were lacking in Jewish education?

SS: I don’t, because I am very sociologically Jewish. Very ethnically Jewish, although not in an observant way. There are a lot of people like me--secular Jews is what they’re called. I feel deeply Jewish and I deeply identify with my Jewishness, but it doesn’t need a formal affiliation for me. Although my husband insisted our boy be bar mitzvahed, again because of his own way of feeling Jewish, and the fact he came from that town where there were so few Jews. So Josh was bar mitzvahed. We had to agree to a certain number of years of Bible study afterward and I said I would do that with him. It was the high point of my week for those years. The rabbi was quite brilliant, at Temple Sinai, Eugene Lipman. When he retired, we left the temple.

DR: When you were growing up and there was no Jewish observance, did you go to a Passover seder annually?

SS: You know, I can’t remember doing that until I was an adult, and until I came here to Washington. Again, because of my husband. I had a good friend in fourth and fifth grade, Ruth Sulzbach and I can distinctly remember they were German refugees, and being at her house one Friday night and watching-- this was, maybe when I was in fifth grade--her mother light the candles. And I thought, “Oh this is so beautiful, I’ve never seen anything like this.” It was a lovely, lovely ritual, and the first time I’d seen it.

DR: Now as an adult, is there a different level of Jewish observance?

SS: No, not in my house. But I go across the street where my young neighbor has many rituals, wonderful ones. She was born here, but lived in Israel for a year, speaks pretty much fluent Hebrew. Her husband was sort of like me, not particularly observant. But she

is raising her daughters Jewishly. So I will go over there on a Friday, sometimes, and watch her light the candles. I go there for Passover, I go there for High Holy Days. That's my temple now.

DR: Feels like home?

SS: No, not a bit like home. My home had none of that. It feels 'homey' and 'family-ish'.

DR: Do you know Hebrew?

SS: No. I learned what I had to do for Josh's bar mitzvah. It was all written out phonetically for me, and vanished the moment the ceremony was over.

DR: Have you been to Israel?

SS: Yes, for 24 hours. My husband and I lived in India for a while. He worked for the Foreign Aid Agency, and on our way home after we'd been there for two and a half years, we stopped in Israel. This was in the late 60's. The Al Aksa mosque had been bombed. We went to Jerusalem to stay, and there was a curfew, but we broke it, and just snuck out there on the streets because we knew our time there was so limited. Lou made several trips for his work with USAID. But that was my only visit.

DR: Interested in going back?

SS: Not particularly, no. Those are not my affiliations. I understand that Jews need their own land. I understand that. My father was quite the Zionist and did a lot to raise money, and worked in behalf of the Weizmann Institute in Israel. For him and his generation it was so important. But I never really felt that. I understand it all in principle, but not emotionally.

DR: Growing up, did you have siblings?

SS: No, I'm an only child.

DR: Do you ever think about whether there were Jewish values that were passed down to you from your home?

SS: I certainly feel that there were. Jewish values led me to be a hard-working student. Tremendous respect for the book, for the written word, for the law. For multiple interpretations of things. For good discussion and argument. But this is also very generational, I think. Getting ready to meet you, I just was asking myself how much am I a product of my generation, the first in my immediate family to go to college. And how much is being Jewish, and how much is being a New Yorker. It's very hard to separate all of that. And I was immensely influenced by the mix of people I knew, some of whom were far more observant that I, others far less.

DR: Your parents were not college educated.

SS: No.

DR: Were they immigrants?

SS: No, they were not. They were born here. They were first generation. Their families were from the same town, Vilnius, in Lithuania.

DR: Which was the capital of Jewish culture, in its time.

SS: Absolutely. They were trades-people. My father's father was a carpenter. My mother's father a tailor. He came here, and began being a fashion designer. She would tell me that he was the number one women's coat and suit designer in New York—not bad! He worked for some big manufacturer for a certain number of years. He made a lot of money and he bought up big chunks of Washington Heights. He owned buildings there, and then became a landlord. I have a photograph, family photograph, of my

mother Anne Rosenberg, one of eight children, all dressed up. She was seven in the picture with a big bow in her hair, she was a beautiful little thing, the baby. The photo shows them all at the same family table, where we all went every Sunday, and she told me at some point, that was a seder picture, that was the family getting ready for a seder. They certainly had a kosher home. May I tell you a story that she told me?

DR: Please.

SS: She was raised in an observant home. My father, too, I believe was raised in a kosher home. I don't know how orthodox it was. When they were first married in the 1930's, they had a Christmas tree. They bought a white Christmas tree with blue light bulbs. And she said, "My parents were coming visit us. They were coming to see you, baby Susan and I just held my breath when they walked in and saw that Christmas tree. I didn't take it down, because it had been our choice, your father's and mine to have it, and I didn't feel I should hide it. But, to her credit," she said, "my mother never said a word. She looked around and said, 'What a lovely apartment, what a beautiful baby', and never said anything about that tree." Isn't that interesting?

DR: Was it by design or by accident that you married a Jewish man?

SS: I'd say it was pretty much by design. I didn't think, I have to marry someone Jewish! but I never went out with anybody who wasn't. And since I traveled in that kind of world—I went to a very good public high school in New York, and then to Barnard College, and Lou had been to Columbia and I met him up in Cambridge. (He was in law school and I was in graduate school), I was living in a world of really bright intellectual Jews. That was a kind of person who appealed to me from a very young age. It's what I knew. What I married. What I lived with.

DR: You attended Barnard. You must have been a very high-achieving student in high school.

SS: Well, yes, and I feel that—not so much high achieving, but hard-working. And that too, when I was saying that I couldn't tell how much was Jewish, how much was generational, we children of that first generation of Americans, the ones born here, had that deep belief in education. Although I didn't have that kind of pressure from my parents because they had not been to college. Parents of friends of mine put much more pressure on their children than I ever received. Nonetheless I was in an atmosphere in which high achievement was expected. I went to the High School of Music and Art. Highly competitive, you took stringent exams in order to get in, as well as really high academic standards. And then Barnard College, which had very high expectations. So it was all there, and part of my being was the determination to fulfill that, to fulfill that promise and to have confidence that I could.

DR: Did you always expect to have a career?

SS: Oh, it was expected of us, we Barnard girls! Our role model was the president of the college, a woman named Millicent McIntosh. She had a terrific husband, a doctor, five children, all very successful, a busy life of social action, participation, and she ran this fabulous school. It was expected of all of us to do that. We did everything we could to imitate her, and be her.

DR: How about from home? Expectations?

SS: My parents' expectations of me? I would say all of that was really self-imposed. But they were always there helping. At night my mother would drill me on French verbs, on 'le's' and 'la's'. And my dad made a huge gift to me. I lived at home. Once I started college dad said that he would wash and dry the dishes every night. For a man of his generation that was a big deal. But they never put on any academic pressure. I felt they didn't know enough, and they found my education a source of pride and irritation. A little intimidating. I argued, and my arguments got better, and smarter. You pay a price for educating your daughter when you're not quite at that level of disagreement and

discussion.

DR: You seem to be a person who is very much at ease, and relaxed. You have a fabulous sense of humor. Were you always like that?

SS: My father had a fabulous sense of humor. He was very imposing. He would walk in a room, and sort of take it over. He was kind of a performer in that way, a great joke teller, and a schmoozer, and a narrator. I think I learned all that from him. I saw that that was possible. And yes, I'm not much different from how I've been all my life. I don't think so. A few more wrinkles, that's about it.

DR: Very self-confident always?

SS: Pretty much. That was Barnard, and it was being an only child and being adored by parents. You know all that goes very far.

DR: Your early career. Can we talk about that a little bit?

SS: Sure.

DR: I read that you started out working for the New Republic.

SS: Yes, that was my first Washington job.

DR: What were you doing for them?

SS: Typing, mostly. I didn't even have a fancy title. I mean it wasn't even editorial assistant. I was secretary to the editor in chief. My big thrills were getting to create titles for book reviews in the magazine. Women of my generation could be schoolteachers. I wasn't interested in that. We could get interesting jobs in publishing. Otherwise, maybe we went into psychology, I wasn't much interested in that. It never occurred to me to try, and there weren't opportunities anyway in broadcasting. Maybe a newspaper. My very

first job was in Cambridge, Massachusetts for Daedalus, a very scholarly, esoteric journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. So the magazine world was a familiar one to me, and I was very glad to have that job here. It turned out to be a great introduction to Washington because I learned here who knew what. So that when I went to the next job, which was my first radio job, at WAMU [local public radio station] as a producer of a weekly discussion program, I knew who to call on various themes and topics because of what I had learned at the New Republic. Everything sort of built on everything else.

DR: Did we skip the weather girl?

SS: No, that was my on-air debut! [laughter] I love that you know it. That was at WAMU, the day that the weather girl got sick. The format of the program I was producing called for the weather. So it was up to me to do it.

DR: Do you have a memory of that first time on air?

SS: Oh, total, total memory. Here's how you did the weather: it was very sophisticated. You picked up the phone, and dialed WE 6-1212. They told you what the weather was and you wrote it down. We didn't have meteorologists, there were no computers, and there were no windows in the studio. So you wrote down what they said, and then you took your notes into the studio, and read from them. But that first day, I forgot to call. So I went in the studio, and the on-air mike came on, and I had no idea what the weather was. And I couldn't think of anything else to do but to make it up. It was February. I said it was 98 degrees out. [laughter] Then I made up a barometer, and the wind. Then the format called for it to be repeated, but I was so nervous that I forgot what I said the first time, so I made it up again!

DR: Same forecast?

SS: No, no, I couldn't remember what I'd said. So I had to put in different numbers. But I got through it and got off. We probably had two listeners. Neither of them called. But it taught me enormously important lessons: don't go on the air unprepared, and never lie to your listeners. Even if they never hear you and never call.

DR: I also heard that you would put a poem on the broadcast.

SS: I did, I did. Eventually the real weather girl left, and then I took it on. That was my first on air job. It was boring! I would remember to call, but it was not interesting, the answers from the weather department. So I thought, "I know! I was an English major at Barnard. I'll just make it interesting for myself and something nice for listeners. I'll look for lines of poetry that would be appropriate on a given day for whatever the day's weather was." I made a little file folder and poetry excerpts for cloudy, warm, hot, sunny, rainy, snowy with many [poems]. I spent hours, hours, going through all my books of poetry, to find appropriate lines.

DR: You didn't make up the poems?

SS: No. But there was one favorite for the times I would forget to look for a poem. It was Gertrude Stein, I'll recite it for you now. I have very little poetry committed to memory, but here's this: "Pigeons in the grass. Alas."

[laughter]

DR: This is a spring poem, perhaps?

SS: I think so, it could have worked for summer. You have to have grass.

DR: Was it love at first sight with broadcasting?

SS: It really was. I was thrilled. It was terror and love, which are often connected. I grew up listening to the radio. We didn't get television until I was in junior high school and I

never really watched it much. So radio was the glamour medium of my childhood. So the chance to be able to do it was thrilling! But I remember walking in to the station, and seeing all these wires and cables, and thinking, “What am I doing here? I was an English major and I’ll never understand this.” But I couldn’t wait to learn it.

DR: Were you influenced by the feminist movement?

SS: Of course I was. Certainly. We were living in India at the point when it was really ginning up here, but when we came home in 1968, that was the height of everything in this country. We had our son in ’70. I think I feel, as many women of my generation do, that I helped to invent feminism as well as deeply understand it in my bones. Gloria Steinem used to say, “The personal is always political.” Things you thought were only happening to you, you suddenly realized that there’s this cadre of people who were experiencing the same thing, so there must be some systemic issues. When I started anchoring All Things Considered, I consistently put feminist issues on the air. I think I was a favorite of the feminists because I paid so much attention to so-called ‘women’s issues’. They’re everyone’s issues! Women’s rights, family matters, elder care, that whole panoply, as well as professional status, pay, and all of those issues that affect all of us, but in particular women.

DR: I consider you a pioneer in broadcasting, the first woman to anchor a broadcast, and NPR was brand new at the time.

SS: Brand new.

DR: Obviously, you were aware that you were the first doing this, did you sense there was discrimination against women?

SS: There certainly was in broadcasting at large. Here, not at all, and in some ways for all the wrong reasons. We could be managers of stations, and still can in public broadcasting as I was very briefly at WAMU before there was an NPR. We could get top

jobs. Usually it was because the salaries were so terrible that the men couldn't stick around for very long. They had family responsibilities. I took a pay cut for my first radio job. But I was married and my husband said, "God bless you, Go! This is a wonderful opportunity." We had two salaries, and I was lucky to be able to do it. Women in similar situations could stick around longer than the men, and so the opportunities here were wonderful for us. But also I felt that burden that first women always do, to do it better, do it more carefully, do it more thoroughly, really, than any man was doing it. It was so much easier [for men] to meet those daily demands. I felt I had so much to prove.

DR: Did you have a mentor?

SS: I wouldn't say mentor, per se, because they weren't out there either. I had a couple of role models. The other month I interviewed Dick Cavett. I admired him enormously. I would watch him on television as I was starting ATC [All Things Considered] and thought, "Oh my goodness! Look! You can be really smart and be on the air." That was a revelation to me. So he was a kind of role model. That was the point at which women were hitting the job market in big numbers and so there were very few on the air doing anything responsible. Linda Wertheimer talks about how important Pauline Frederick was to her, reporting from the United Nations. Linda said she looked at Pauline on television during the Hungarian uprising and said, "A woman can do that!" It was the first time it had been possible. Pauline and Nancy Dickerson, some of these early reporters had plum but rare, rare, rare jobs in broadcasting. But here, for a variety of reasons including the fact that I was on the air and I was doing just fine, (and Linda, too, quickly came on and began reporting,) we could open the door to all the others, to Cokie [Roberts], to Nina [Totenberg], to all of them. And we were known for our strong women and our soft men.

DR: Do you feel like you are a role model for young women in broadcasting?

SS: Maybe. But the field is so much more dispersed now. There's so much more attention to online, where I'm nobody's role model; it's not my medium. I'm not sure radio,

the way I've loved making it for all of these years, is what the future is going to be about. So I can't say that the new ones coming in the door now would find me, or any of us, role models. They're doing their own thing in their own voices and in their own ways of expression. But as for our way of doing it, I don't know, I'm not sure.

I wanted to tell you about criticism though, and resistance really to my pioneering role. I hope it doesn't sound immodest, I'm just trying to report it. When I first started anchoring, apparently there was quite a bit of opposition to me by managers of our stations across the country. They said, "A woman's voice doesn't carry well. She's not authoritative. She won't be taken seriously. You can't have a woman anchoring the news." The man who was running things then, Bill Siemering, who was the one who decided that I should be the anchor and also was the major creator of All Things Considered, never told me about the opposition. He told me that story eleven years later. I know he didn't tell me this at the time for a number reasons: he knew it would affect who I was on the air. He wanted me to be myself and keep at it. And he felt if I did that long enough the criticism would die away. In fact it did. There was probably a small amount of truth to the criticism. We were broadcasting then on really poor quality telephone lines, 5 KC lines, and they tend to boost the shrill end of a sound spectrum, and dampen down the deeper end. So it would distort and change your voice some. But over the years our lines got better!

DR: Would you talk about the family/career balance? The work/home balance?

SS: It was never right. I never got it right in all that time. And I think any working mother, anyone terribly involved in the job they care about as passionately as they do their child and their husband, would tell you exactly the same thing. You're always putting something on the back burner, especially raising a young child. My husband was wonderful in this. He was so supportive. If Josh got sick, I'd stay home in the morning with him, and then Lou would come home in the afternoon, so I could come and be on the air. He would share in that way until we got stabilized and got good solid childcare.

But that doesn't keep you away from your child. I feel always there was that, and with so many children now, that absence of 100% attention to anything, to any one thing because always in the corner of your mind is the other thing, it's just waiting there for you. So that was very, very tough. Luckily, he's a grand boy, he's a terrific man. He turned out OK.

DR: I've heard you say that men and women use language differently. So you think that affects the way you approach a story that you're doing for the radio?

SS: I don't know if it's language. And by the way, that's not original with me. I learned it from my friend Deborah Tannen who wrote that wonderful book, You Just Don't Understand. She writes about how differently men and women use language. To women, language is the glue of relationships. We talk in order to connect. For men, it tends to be more of a weapon. That is, part of a competition for authority in whatever the situation may be. So there'll be a contradiction, there'll be a quick answer to something, there'll be a simple quick declarative statement. I think she's spot-on. Now, men have changed since she wrote that. Feminism has done a lot for men! So I don't know how much it is true now. Certainly I think it's true for me. I tend to ask questions far more than make declarative statements. That's handy in work like mine.

DR: At this point in your career you're a special correspondent for NPR. Do you get to pick the stories that you want to do?

SS: I do. I'm very lucky.

DR: What inspires you? You're curious about this, or this. How do you pick?

SS: Well, I always trust my curiosity. I've done that all my life. I always felt it was part of my job description as an anchor: be curious about everything. You know that name, All Things Considered, we take quite seriously. And it's something I did naturally anyway, and so I found the perfect place to exercise a natural tendency. And I continue that way.

Look, I'm getting older, I'm not curious about everything anymore, so that makes me listen even more carefully to the things I am curious about, because then I can go and make that my story. But just name it. I mean anything that sounds unusual or quirky.

I did a piece the other day on a wonderful exhibit here at the National Gallery of Gauguin paintings. At first I thought, uhh, Gauguin, I've seen a lot of Gauguin, and I'm not a big fan. But I've never done a story about him. I started reading, and saw that the curator's take on it—actually it's from the Tate in London—is a biographical one about his life. All these exotic visions of Eden that Gauguin created there were completely manufactured. Because what he found was 'colonial-ized', by the French, 'missionary-ized'. No more bare-breasted ladies-- they were forced by the missionaries to cover up with very unattractive gowns. So he just made it up. He didn't find it, he invented it. As I asked the curator, "Isn't that the artist's job? They look at things, and they make up their visions of it." She said, "Yes, but the problem was he kept sending those pictures home and saying this was really what it was like there."

DR: Do you have any sense of, if you look at the body of work, that this is a really a picture of America? I mean, that's how I see it. I wonder if you see it the same way?

SS: I certainly think the work that National Public Radio has done since its beginning 40 years ago and through today is absolutely a picture, and not just of America, but the world, as our coverage expands, especially overseas. Oh, yes. It certainly was my job when I was on the daily program to look at the country and the world and talk about what had happened that day. Now I think mine is the icing on the cake, it's that thing you get to eat after you've heard all the horrible news. I give a little treat.

DR: I for one, appreciate that. Do you want to comment on what you see as the future of radio?

SS: Radio, in my heart, will always have a future. Sound will always have a future. The form of it, the box that was on my kitchen table as a little girl, the box that Bob Edwards talked about that sat in the corner of his living room and he always wanted to crawl inside it and be that voice, that's not part of the future anymore. You do a focus group with 20-somethings and you say, "Who here has a radio?" and no hands go up. They don't even think about the radios in their car. So it will be iPods, and those other ways of downloading through computers, sound files. Sound will still be very important but in two funny little buds that you put in your ear. Sadly, I think that's the future and there are huge losses as a result.

DR: Susan, are you ever surprised at what people will reveal to you when you're speaking with them?

SS: It's not so much my goal to get big revelations as it has been to get people to really engage in thought with me over microphones. That's different, I mean it's a different kind of journalism that I've always practiced, and certainly that we practice here at NPR. We're not into 'gotcha' and we're not into that celebrity stuff where you just want people weeping for you. I used to always turn my tape recorder off when people began to cry, I felt it was a terrible invasion of privacy. I don't feel that way anymore, so much in the world has changed. I've certainly been surprised, but that wouldn't be my lead.

DR: Is there any story that you've done that's particularly meaningful to you, or particularly memorable? There must be many.

SS: There are so many, but the one that just leapt to mind was Miss Lilly Szenasi. She just seemed emblematic to me of a grand world and in a way, my working life. I stumbled on her sitting on a park bench in the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris. I got off a bus, and going through the park to get to a friend's apartment, and on a bench, sitting wearing a pork-pie hat over her forehead and pants and a nice windbreaker, a perfectly proper lady, gray hair, holding a sign on her lap. It said, "Parlons nous" and on the other side in

English, “Let’s talk”. A few people had pulled up chairs near to her. I went over and said, “What are you doing?” And she said, “Well, you know, I’m just sitting here and inviting people to come and have conversations with me. I do this all the time. Wherever I am I carry my sign.” I said, “Well you know, that’s what I do for my work. That’s my career. I talk with strangers and invite them to have conversations.” She said, “Wouldn’t you like to interview me then?” I thought to myself, “Would lobsters wish to fly?” So we made a date, and I came back the next day with my tape recorder and interviewed her. She was 80-something at the time, lived in Brussels, was visiting Paris. Wherever she is, in a public place, she carries that sign. She’s waiting on line to get into a theater, she’s got her sign, she holds it up. She’s sitting on a bench in Paris, she holds it up. And people come, and talk to her, and they have wonderful exchanges. She has very few rules: We will not discuss religion or politics she says, because that way, wars begin and so do arguments, and that’s not what we’re here for. You don’t have to tell me your name, it can be completely anonymous. Let’s just have a chat. She believes the world would be a better place if there were “chatters places”. She says, “We make room for smoking—find outdoor space for people who are smoking. Why don’t we designate spaces outdoors where people can just talk to each other?” While I was there, people came, people left, they sat down, utterly unself-conscious. They talked about the day’s news, politics, the flowers in the park, a book they were reading, asked for help with language translation, anything. Just this wonderful interchange. And I thought it was fabulous. This was like a gift to me, this woman. It was great.

DR: What is the greatest satisfaction of your career? I know you were admitted into the Radio Hall of Fame.

SS: Those are all surprises, and those are all very nice. Satisfaction is seeing through the process. I think it’s every aspect of the process of a story, from the very first idea to doing the research, lining up the people. I’m in the middle of it now, for a very sad reason, and a little ghoulish, but the conductor and pianist and composer Andre Previn has not been

well. We bank obituaries. I was asked to prepare his, and had a wonderful time reading his books, and listening to tapes from times when he was on NPR with me and others. Every second of this process I really love. Tomorrow I'll interview a music critic about him. Then I'll start to find music and put all that together and write it. That's all so satisfying. And pleasing people with it. I think that's important too.

DR: Do you see anything Jewish in the storytelling that you do? There are so many stories in the Jewish tradition of storytelling, whether it's interpreting the Bible, or Hasidic tales…

SS: Yes, I do. I think all of that is very Jewish, the telling of stories, but also the seeking of opinions and also being open to the range of opinions that are out there. I also feel that sometimes mine's right [laughter]. I think that's very Jewish, too.

DR: Over the years of your career, you've met people from all over the world, and all walks of life. Is there anything that you could say that you have learned from all of the people that you have met, learned about people?

SS: The last time I counted, maybe twenty years ago, I'd done something like 30,000 interviews. I don't know how many I've done, by now, this long afterward. I think the greatest lesson is staying open, staying open to life, and ideas. As I get older that gets harder, sometimes. So I have to remind myself to do that more—staying open to possibilities. That's a wonderful lesson, and it's been part of pretty much every person I've met.

DR: Thank you very much.

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