

*Ursula von Rydingsvard:  
For Paul, 1990-92, cedar,  
graphite, 14 1/4 by 9 by 13 3/4  
feet; installed at the  
Storm King Art Center,  
Mountainville, New York.  
Photo Jerry L. Thompson.*



## Sculpture as Refuge

*Based on emotionally mixed recollections of physical labor, Ursula von Rydingsvard's giant hewn-cedar sculptures reconcile psychological subtlety with material strength.*

**BY DAVID LEVI STRAUSS**

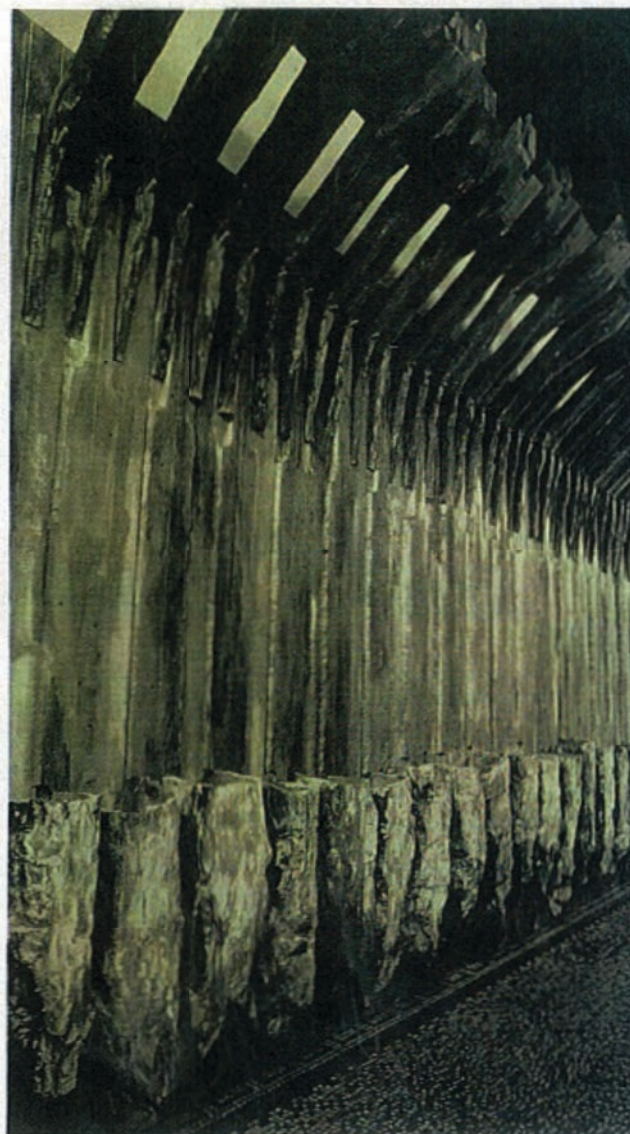
"Ursula von Rydingsvard: Sculpture" at Storm King Art Center<sup>1</sup> was the first full-scale museum exhibition of this important American sculptor's work. Fourteen wood sculptures (two from 1978-79, the rest from 1986-92) filled the Art Center's interior galleries, and four new large-scale outdoor pieces occupied the green hilltop grounds just outside the museum building. Effectively managing to survey von Rydingsvard's abundant oeuvre in a limited indoor space while also indicating the most recent directions in her outdoor work, the Storm King show reflected the reciprocal tensions that activate her art: a sustained play between interiority and exteriority, intimacy and monumentality, sanctuary and confinement.

Since 1975 von Rydingsvard has worked exclusively with milled 4-by-4-inch cedar beams, laminated and carved into abstract sculptures of great emotional resonance. Limiting her material means in this way has allowed von Rydingsvard to concentrate a tremendous energy into her forms, and to produce a remarkably coherent body of work over the last 17 years. The restraints are also consistent with the implicit ethical base of von Rydingsvard's art—a peasant ethic of economy and resourcefulness born out of her experience growing up in forced-labor and refugee camps in Germany at the end of World War II.

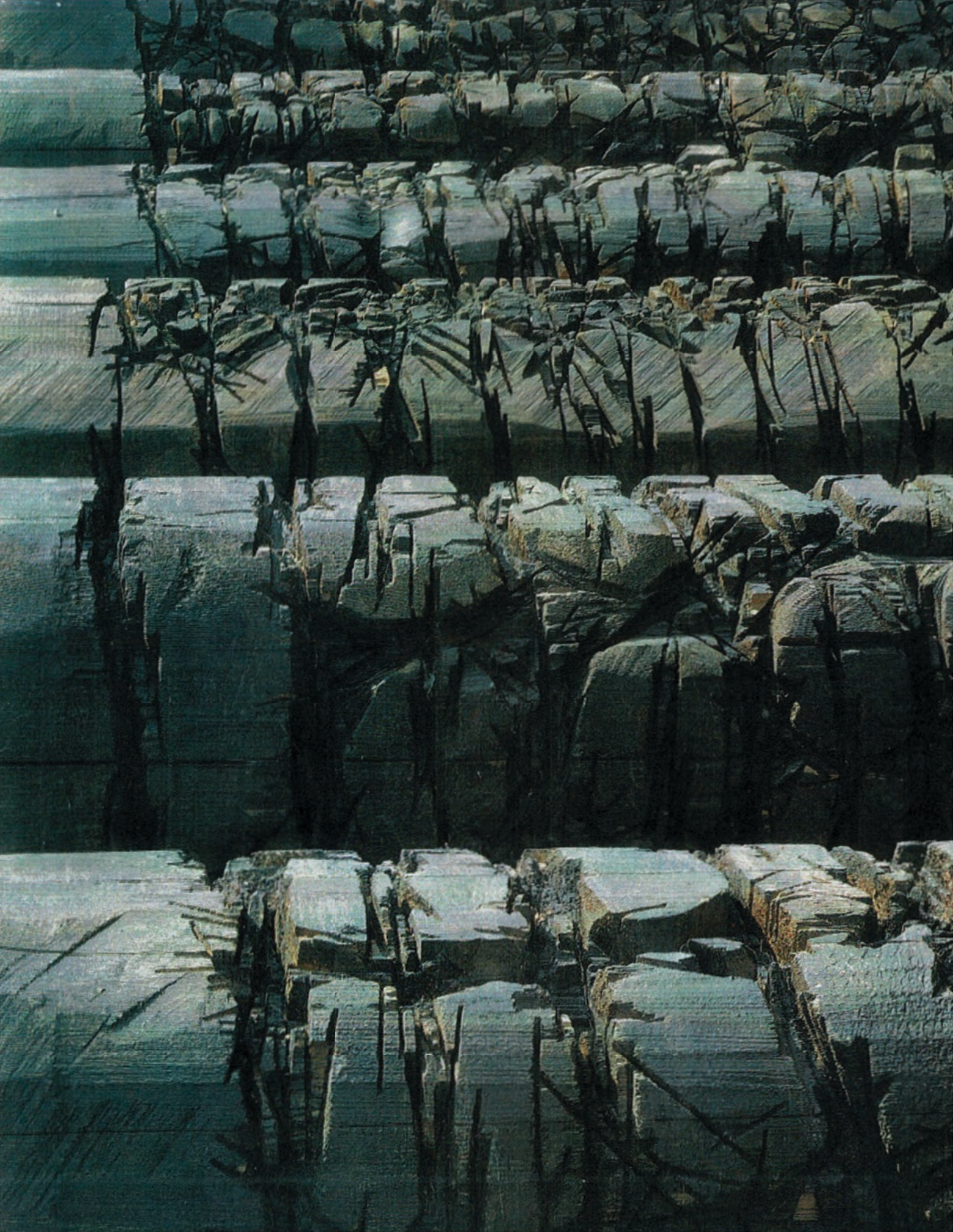
Von Rydingsvard's Ukrainian-born woodcutter/peasant father and Polish mother were driven out of Poland into Germany in 1938 and spent the next 12 years moving from one camp to another. Ursula, the fifth of seven children, was born in 1942 near Deensen, Germany. Life in the camps was austere and frugal but not torturous; her family and the Catholic Church provided partial refuge. The isolation of the camps caused each detail of daily life—the gray timbers of the barracklike dwellings, the look and feel of household utensils and simple furniture, the rustic interiors of the buildings used for worship—to be etched into the child's memory. This constricted existence came to an end in 1950, when the family emigrated



For Weston, 1978, cedar,  
4 by 5½ by 1½ feet.  
Collection Vera List.



Zakopane (detail), 1987, cedar,  
paint, 11½ by 22 by 3 feet.  
Photo Marbeth.





Above and opposite (detail), *Land Rollers*, 1992, cedar, 3 $\frac{3}{4}$  by 14 $\frac{1}{4}$  by 55 $\frac{3}{4}$  feet; installed at Storm King. Photo Jerry L. Thompson.



*Iggy's Pride*, 1990-91, cedar, graphite, 7 by 77 by 17 $\frac{1}{2}$  feet; installed at Oliver Ranch, Geiserville, Calif.

to the U.S., but the images and textures of that period were eventually transformed into a durable and flexible sculptural vocabulary.

The indoor portion of the Storm King exhibition contained a number of works especially marked by this history. *Zakopane* (1987) is a wall-size piece (approximately 12 by 22 by 3 feet) that weds figurative suggestions to more abstract concerns, managing to be at once menacing and reverential. It takes its name (the Polish word means something like "to be buried forever") from a town in the Carpathian Mountains of southern Poland, and the work resembles a row of bowed, kneeling, kerchiefed worshippers backed by the gray weathered walls of a barracks. At the same time, however, the upper part of the piece may be seen as looking more like defiant fists than bowed heads, and what one might initially take as the whitened knees of supplicants reads just as easily as a host of reptilian burrowers. This is a distinctly willful sculpture.

**Von Rydingsvard's art is preserved from sentimentality by the straightforward use of materials and tools. Her working methods are relentlessly pragmatic.**

As the vernacular architecture of the camps is charged in von Rydingsvard's theater of memory with multiple meanings, so too are her representations of common household implements and utensils. *Paul's Shovel* (1987) is a hanging sculpture that may depict a shovel laced with frost, but it also has the iconic gravity of a sanctified relic. Similarly, *Mother's Bonnet* (1990) is swelled by a mixture of devotion and fear into the spiky headgear of a demigoddess. The five winnowing trays (or infant-sized stretchers?) on a stand in *Urszulka* (1986) are transformed into ritual objects by their hieratic presentation and by the mysterious hieroglyphic script carved into their whitened surfaces. Even the almost Pop, near-Oldenburgian knives in a kitchen rack represented in *Dreadful Sorry* (1987-88) at times suggest a line of hooded supplicants, projecting sacrifice and cloistered piety.

This blending of the sacred and mundane was inspired at least in part by von Rydingsvard's 1979-80 travels in Italy, where she studied Giotto's paintings in Assisi, Florence and Padua. Giotto's break with the abstraction of Byzantine art, his firm drawing of contours, and the sculptural compactness, economy and integrity of his forms clearly made a lasting impression on her.

The straightforwardness of von Rydingsvard's art, its autobiographical origins notwithstanding, protects it at every turn from sentimentality. In interviews she has described her approach to tools as no less pragmatic: "I am not involved," she says, "in getting the best of tools and tending to them with loving care. I think this is true for a lot of women especially. I get whatever [tools] I need to get done what I need to do—what the image needs, what the idea needs."<sup>2</sup> Her choice of medium is similarly governed. Milled cedar wood has certain properties—the right solidity and "give," clean-cut lines, unobtrusive grain—that serve the sculptor's purposes. But she has no sentimental attraction to the material itself and would switch to another in a minute if she found something more useful or fitting. This attitude she shares with Louise Bourgeois, who told Donald Kuspit, "You do not make sculpture because you like wood. That is absurd. You make sculpture because the wood allows you to express something that another material does not allow you to."<sup>3</sup>

**T**hough the overall effect of the Storm King survey was to emphasize the coherence of von Rydingsvard's oeuvre, one could also trace significant formal shifts that have occurred over time. The earliest piece in the show, *For Weston* (1978), consists of a group of waist-high conical forms. The smoothly carved undulating surface it presents was characteristic of von Rydingsvard's indoor installations of the time and could be found as well in her large site-specific landscape works of the late '70s and early '80s. Around 1986 von Rydingsvard shifted her angle of address: instead of carving the flat sides of her laminated beams, as for the most part she had been doing till then, she began working their stacked ends. The grid formed by the 4-by-4-inch-square ends of the milled cedar beams thus became a geometric foundation for her increasingly complex mark-making with grinders and circular saws. In the large indoor "wall" pieces included here, such as *Lace Mountains* (1989) and *Undo* (1992), violent change is powerfully evoked by von Rydingsvard's incessant laceration of the original gridded surface.

**While most of her previous large-scale works invited a sequential reading, the low-lying "ENE DUE RABE" coalesces into one unified monumental form, a repository of ambivalent tensions.**

This is the method the artist employed in three of the four new outdoor sculptures installed at Storm King. *Five Cones* (1990-92) consists of five 8-foot cones perched precariously on their vertices and fused together from three feet up. A view from above (from the second-floor gallery at Storm King) revealed that the connected cones are hollowed out, forming an interior sanctuary. They stand like scarred sentries, defending their own shared but hidden hearts.

At Storm King, *Five Cones* overlooked the single largest sculpture von Rydingsvard has ever made, *ENE DUE RABE* (1990). (The Polish title comes from the first words of a children's rhyme.) Produced in San Francisco during von Rydingsvard's six-week residency at Capp Street Project in the winter of 1990, the work consists of a low 1¾-by-43½-by-17¼-foot expanse of cedar, with 98 rough-hewn cup-like receptacles cut into it in an irregular honeycomb grid.

While most of her previous large-scale works invited a sequential reading of their repeated forms, *ENE DUE RABE* coalesces into one unified, monumental form, a mass of "welded, organic vessels [working together] in an anchored yet charged way as giant pores might."<sup>4</sup> The cell-like cavities—irregular, not quite body-sized—that make up this piece suggest a bed of sepulchers or, alternatively, a matrix of birthing chambers. Played out at such a large scale, these associations readily transport the piece into the realm of monument: a repository of both memory and admonition, history and prophecy. *ENE DUE RABE* is one of von Rydingsvard's most persuasive sculptures.

Of the four outdoor pieces constructed for the Storm King hilltop grounds, *Land Rollers* (1992) was the most obviously site-specific. Made up of 17 carved log-shaped "rollers," each 14 feet long and placed in parallel alignment atop a pair of enormous rails, the sculpture was perched as if to roll precipitously into the valley it overlooked. Far away, a maple-tree-lined road echoed the work's placement. In its attempt to activate such a vast spatial terrain, *Land Rollers* was nothing if not ambitious, but, lacking the curious mixture of gravity and buoyancy exhibited by *ENE DUE RABE*, it ended by seeming disappointingly earthbound.

A more successful site-specific work not included in the Storm King show is *Iggy's Pride* (1990-91), recently completed at the Oliver Ranch in northern California. Though this piece is so integrated with the Sonoma Valley landscape that it seems more an extension of its surroundings than an outright intervention, it also retains an unmistakable independence. Nine craggy carved finger-shapes grow out of the hillside, as if in benediction of the valley below. Dedicated to von Rydingsvard's father, Ignacy Karoliszyn, the piece exemplifies the "packed pride" and "containment of emotions" that von Rydingsvard has always admired in Giotto's forms.<sup>5</sup>

In its monumentality, *For Paul* (1990-92) was clearly the breakthrough piece of the Storm King exhibition, achieving a grandeur out of all proportion to its already considerable size. An intricately carved and faceted 14-foot-high mass, wider at the top than at the bottom, it seems to rise up out of the ground like a lost prehistoric

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# Counting the Rain



ENE DUE RABE, 1990, cedar, graphite,  
1 1/2 by 43 1/2 by 17 1/2 feet; installed  
at Storm King. Photo Jerry L. Thompson.

# Von Rydingsvard

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monolith, craggy and defiant, almost geological in effect. Taking over two and a half years to complete, it became known to the workers in von Rydingsvard's studio as "the fortress," and its articulated walls do resemble those of a castle keep in more ways than one. At Storm King, swallows soon nested in the south face of the structure. Its walls conceal an intricate 12-chambered interior space that cannot be seen from the ground. Protecting this enclosure, the walls of *For Paul* are a potent bulwark against loss.

In her encyclopedic survey *American Women Sculptors*, Charlotte Streifer Rubinstein places Ursula von Rydingsvard in a special section (also including Mia Westerlund Roosen and Ida Kohlmeyer) that concerns itself with "an odd new kind of eccentric abstraction, somewhere between animal, vegetable, mineral and geometric form..."<sup>6</sup> The term "eccentric abstraction" recalls the influential show of that name organized by Lucy Lippard at Fischbach Gallery in 1966, including the work of Eva Hesse, Alice Adams and Louise Bourgeois, among others. Lippard almost immediately regretted her title, as women sculptors have so often been deemed "eccentric" to mark their distance from the canonical (male) center from which they are excluded, but she later explained the usage by saying she was trying "to indicate that there were emotive or 'eccentric' or erotic alternatives to a solemn and deadset Minimalism which still retained the clarity of that notion."<sup>7</sup>

It is this balance between the evocative and the literal that makes von Rydingsvard's sculpture so compelling. Virtually from the outset she has shown herself adept at combining seeming contraries: the geometric and the organic, the abstract and the representational, the

**For 17 years, von Rydingsvard has shown herself adept at combining seeming contraries, melding the formally rigorous and the intimately evocative in compelling new ways.**

formally rigorous and the emotionally expressive. Now, in the new outdoor works shown at Storm King, von Rydingsvard brings the tensions between imprisonment and refuge into a similarly poignant complicity, producing monumental sculptures of great subtlety and strength. □

1. "Ursula von Rydingsvard: Sculpture," curated by David R. Collens, director, and Maureen Megerian, associate curator, at Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, New York, May 18-Oct. 31, 1992. The show was accompanied by a catalogue with essays by Maureen Megerian and Michael Brenson.
2. Unpublished interview with the artist, Nov. 21, 1990.
3. *Bourgeois: An Interview with Louise Bourgeois* by Donald Kuspit, New York, Vintage Books, 1988, p. 45.
4. Artist's statement printed in the catalogue, *Capp Street Project 1989-1990*, San Francisco, 1991, p. 24.
5. Avis Berman, "Studio: Ursula von Rydingsvard, Life Under Siege," *Art News*, December 1988, p. 97.
6. Charlotte Streifer Rubinstein, *American Women Sculptors*, Boston, G.K. Hall & Co., 1990, p. 553.
7. Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, New York, New York University Press, 1976, p. 88.

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