

## **The Image of Jews and Jewry in the Literature of the GDR**

In the short time given at this conference I can not develop an overall view of so complex a topic as the image of Jews and Jewry in the literature of the former German Democratic Republic, the East German state under Soviet Russian control. But some observations can be made and the topic described in great outlines. I will try to give some suggestions how to approach a subject showing itself from the beginning on to be deeply ambiguous and ambivalent. I will try to make you aware of the absurd and schizophrenic situation of East German Jewry that was kept alive as a token, but at the same time not allowed to be really Jewish.

The image of Jews, the Jewish people, Jewry, Jewishness, Jewish history, tradition and culture, almost everything connected with being Jewish, was one of the most shadowy, most eschewed and embarrassing topics in the public self-presentation of the GDR. The little country was a satellite of the Soviet Union and, as a former part of defeated Nazi Germany, one of the most devout followers of the triumphant “Big Brother”. It was a “socialist state” by declaration, nevertheless populated by Germans who only recently had been followers or silent subjects of the NS-regime. The East German communists were obliged to copy the ideology and patterns of life of their Soviet comrades, their attitudes towards other countries and peoples, their foreign politics. When the Soviet Union decided to form a disastrous alliance with the Arab countries hostile to Israel – an alliance that would significantly contribute to the financial ruin of the Soviet Empire – the East German communists had to follow this direction and to become hostile towards Israel, too.

For the following decades, until the end of the Soviet empire, hostility against Israel became one of the cornerstones in the relations between the communist block and the Jewish people. “Zionism” was a pejorative word in all East European countries, and some time or other every Jew could be suspected of being a Zionist. In 1952 “Zionism” had been a charge of indictment in the spectacular trial against Rudolf Slansky and other communist functionaries of Jewish origin in Prague, who were sentenced to death and executed.

The second cornerstone of the attitude towards Jews and Jewry was the traditional anti-Semitism of the Soviet Empire. In broad parts the Soviet anti-Semitism was old Russian tradition. Russia is the country where the word *pogrom* comes from, derived from the Russian *ogromnyj*, meaning terrible, or the verb *gromitj*, destroy. The Jew hatred of Czarist Russia had been one of the reasons why many Jews became involved in the communist movement, and rose to significant positions in the party of the Bolsheviki. At the same time, Jews were among the most resolute enemies of the Bolsheviki, as Lenin-assassin Fanya Kaplan or the cadet Leonid Kannegiesser who killed the head of Bolshevist security police, Urizkij.

Jews were persecuted through all periods of Soviet history, especially in the Stalin-era. Hundred thousands of Jews perished in the Stalinist purges, among leading party functionaries like Troztkij, Radek, Bucharin, Kamenjev, Sinovjev, theater director Meyerhold, army General Mechlis or the popular actor Michoels. We also know about famous writers persecuted and killed in Stalinist concentration camps, Isaac Babel, Moishe Kulbak, Perez Markish or Ossip Mandelstam. These names may symbolize the hundreds of thousands of nameless Jews, both, communist followers and opponents, who lost their lives during the decades of vibrant Stalinism. In his last years the dictator became obsessed with his Jew hatred and began to persecute the Jews living in his Empire systematically, for example in the campaign following the so called “doctors’ conspiracy” in 1952 or the campaigns against “cosmopolitanism” and “Zionism”.

Stalin’s death in 1953 did not really change the perspectives of the Soviet Jews for the better. Their situation remained desperate enough, that their majority left the country as soon as the possibility was given. After years of struggle to gain exit permits – with the support of International Jewish organisations – , hundred thousands of Jews emigrated from the various “republics” of the Soviet empire to other countries, mostly to Israel, the United States, Canada or even Germany. Nothing could prove the desolate situation of Soviet Jewry more strikingly than the fact that ten thousands of Russian, Ukrainian, Belo-Russian, Moldavian etc. Jews prefer to live in post-communist

Germany – despite the well-known atrocities German Wehrmacht and SS had committed against them during World War Two. The exodus of the former Soviet Jewry had a strong impact, first on the post-communist Russian society. It was a brain drain, a loss of intellectual capacities that is palpable until today.

Moreover, it changed Jewish life in other countries, for instance here in Israel, where the immigrants from the former Soviet Empire are one of the stringest groups among the Israeli populace, or in Germany, where today about ninety percent of Jews living there are of Russian or other former Soviet origin.

The anti-Jewish attitude of the Soviet Empire radiated into its satellite states and dominated the situation of the Jews living there, also the few Jews in East Germany. At the other hand, East Germany was a special place within the Soviet empire. It was a part of Germany, and as a part of Germany – and the socialist and avowedly “better” part, the one with superior socialist morality and progressive *Weltanschauung* – it had to demonstrate a tolerant and friendly attitude towards the Jews. One of the main arguments of East German propaganda against the West was the fact that in West German *Bundesrepublik* old Nazi-cadres rose to influential positions, even high offices in the Adenauer administration. To demonstrate its moral superiority, the German Democratic Republic had to maintain at any cost its categorical anti-Nazi – the official word was “anti-fascist” – attitude. All this made it inevitable for the East German administration to treat those few Jews who still lived at or had returned to East German territory better than other East European regimes.

When other communist countries like Poland, Czechoslovakia or Hungary persecuted Jewish citizens for being “cosmopolitan” or “Zionist” in the early fifties, in the wake of Stalinist Jew-persecution in the Soviet mainland itself, East German party leader Walter Ulbricht avoided at least death sentences and other cruel punishment. He took some action against Jewish intellectuals returning from exile in Western countries who were suspected of being influenced by bourgeois lifestyle and modern Western intellectual trends, there were some internal party tribunals against Jews (Rudolf Herrnstadt) or functionaries who emphasised in compensation payments for Jews (Paul Merker), leading to the expulsion from offices and party membership, even to

imprisonment. But there were no Soviet style show trials with spectacular sentences and executions. Russian friends who came to visit us in East Berlin during the seventies, would notice with amazement that there were several party functionaries of Jewish origin in the highest gremium, the *Polit Büro* of the commuist party, for instance Albert Norden, the son of a rabbi, Kurt Hager, Hermann Axen and others. The minister of Justice in the early years of the GDR, Hilde Benjamin, infamous for her merciless harshness in political trials, was the sister-in-law of essayist Walter Benjamin and a cousin of poet Gertrud Kolmar. Of Jewish origin were the director of the party's propaganda institute, the president of the GDR state bank, the president of the Academy of Arts and the Deputy head of the security apparatus, called *Minister für Staatssicherheit*.

Despite those high ranked persons of Jewish origin the situation of the Jewish communities remained a *Schattendasein*, a shadowy existence, as I wrote in my essay *Jüdische Selbstverleugnung und Anti-Semitismus in der DDR*, published in spring 1989: "The Jews found themselves in the role of vecihles and showpieces of tactical party politics, at times suspected of being 'Zionists', at times privileged as 'anti-Fascits' – the course could change abruptly, there was no protection against the incalculability of the party line, in none of the traditional attitudes of survival, be it self-isolation or assimilation." The hostile atmosphere during the early years of the GDR frightened and intimidated most Jewish intellectuals deeply enough to advise them not further to mention their Jewish roots or even to deny them.

Among those Jewish emigrants returning from exile to settle in the East of Germany where some famous writers like Anna Seghers (from Mexico), Arnold Zweig, Rudolf Hirsch (Haifa), Wieland Herzfelde, Stefan Heym, F.C. Weisskopf (from the US), Friedrich Wolf, Hedda Zinner (from Moscow) and many others. There were also some writers of Jewish origin who had survived in Germany and now came to prominence in the new state. When Paul O'Doherty writes in his book "*The GDR and the German-Jewish Literature*" that "*writers of Jewish origin had played a central role in literary and cultural life of the GDR*", he is not completely wrong, he only forgets to tell that in most cases these writers of Jewish origin did not mention their roots, even tried to conceal them, and would

have contradicted vehemently, as Stephan Hermlin did in an interview with Herlinde Koelbl in the book *Jüdische Porträts*, that they were “Jews” or “Jewish writers”.

The condition of being accepted in the official literary scene of East Germany was a self-presentation of being a socialist, a strict atheist, an enlightened and modern person above all reactionary religious and traditional thought. Texts of any other tendency would not have been accepted by the strictly controlled East German publishing houses. Being a successful, accepted writer – or other public figure – and being Jewish in the real sense of the word, that means in any religious or traditional way, was incompatible. Anyway, there was no real Jewish life. There was not a single rabbi nor *mohel* on the territory of the GDR until 1987. Circumcision and bar mizvah were not performed. In case there was a Jewish wedding, a rabbi from Budapest had to be brought to East Germany. No Hebrew written books were available, in some countries of East Europe, first and foremost in the Soviet mainland itself, they were simply forbidden. Under these conditions it was almost impossible to acquire knowledge about Judaism, even for writers and scientists, and subsequently almost no one wrote about topics connected with it.

There were few exceptions. Stefan Heym wrote some novels in the seventies and later, connected to Jewish history and tradition as *Der König David Bericht* or *Ahasver*, and it is no accident that he drifted into conflicts with the party administration and was more and more treated like a dissident. The same happened to Jurek Becker, one of the few East German writers of Jewish roots who picked out being Jewish as a central theme in his novels *Jakob der Lügner* or *Bronsteins Kinder*. Both writers were far from any declared belief in Judaism or Jewish thought, both insisted in being socialists. Heym remained anti-religious in his general positions, his attitude to write about topics of Jewish history and tradition was rather ironical, but whatever the attitude – writing about these topics was reason enough to raise suspicion. Jurek Becker was finally expelled from the party and went to the West. Heym remained in East Berlin, observed by the security service.

At the other hand, there were examples of extreme self-denial and devotion like poet Louis Fünberg who wrote the text of the infamous song *Die Partei, die Partei hat immer recht* (*The party is always right*). Even if they did not go that far, those who kept to the party line like Anna Seghers, Friedrich Wolf, Hermlin, East German PEN president Kamnitzer and other writers and intellectuals of Jewish origin, avoided to deal with Jewish topics at all. Friedrich Wolf's stage play *Professor Mamlock* gave the typical image of the Jewish victim, we had to read it at school, but except that the protagonist was killed by the Nazis because he was Jewish, there was no clue what it meant to be Jewish and nothing to learn about Jews, Jewish life or Judaism. Arnold Zweig's stories about his years in Haifa, for instance his interesting text in commemoration of Else Lasker-Schüler, were published only after his death.

A book like Victor Klemperer's *Curriculum Vitae*, his memoirs of the years of the Third Reich – a time Klemperer survived in Germany – , was never published in the GDR, only posthumous, after the German unification (and then with great success), although the author, a prominent university teacher and public personality, well connected, at times even a member of the East German parliament *Volkskammer*, made all possible efforts to find a publisher. The few people who knew about his manuscript – I was among them – tried to fathom out, why no East German publishing house was willing to publish these holocaust memoirs. There was no direct pro-Jewish or pro-Zionist statement in the manuscript, on the contrary, the author spoke out against Zionism several times and more than once ridiculed Jewish religion and tradition. Another book of Klemperer, a study about the language of Nazi-Germany, called *Lingua Tertii Imperii*, abbreviated LTI, had many editions as a Reclam paperback and was widely distributed. Why not his *Curriculum Vitae*? Today I think, there was simply too much talk about Jews and being Jewish in this manuscript, about the personal qualities of the Jewish protagonists, their courage, their wisdom, their steadfastness in the darkest time of German history, to allow the publication of these memoirs.

The politically correct way to approach topics connected with Jews and Jewish matters was to write about their persecution during the Nazi era and

their victimization throughout history. Of course, books like *Das Tagebuch der Anne Frank* (The Anne Frank Diary) or its Polish counterpart, the memories of young David Rubinowicz, were published and widely distributed. Positive Jewish characters were those affiliated with the communist resistance, for instance – in the official interpretation – the fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto rebellion. Eberhard Rebling, a party-conform composer of Jewish origin, emphasized – in his preface to the volume *Es brennt, Brüder, es brennt, Jiddische Lieder*, published 1966 in East Berlin – the similarity between some melodies of some jiddish songs and those well-known from the communist party as a prove for his theory that the Warsaw Ghetto uprising was a part of the communist movement. Also in Bruno Apitz famous novel *Nackt unter Wölfen* (*Naked Among Wolves*) the few Jewish figures seem completely integrated in the communist resistance.

But while the communists were triumphant, the Jewish fighters ended in tragedy. The image of the Jew in East Germany was generally the image of a victim. In the few instances where some pieces of Jewish literature were published, for example in the anthology *Der Fiedler vom Getto*, Leipzig, 1968, the editors did everything possible to suggest, that Jewish literature was a phenomenon of the past, as the subtitle of the anthology clearly indicated: *Dichtung eines ermordeten Volkes*, Poetry of a murdered people. In my childhood in East Berlin, I heard and read the words *Jude* or *jüdisch*, Jew or Jewish, usually in combinations like *Judenverfolgung*, *Judengesetze*, *Judenstern*, *Judenvernichtung*, the vocabulary of victimization. I had no real idea what the word Jew could mean without these additions. Nobody, no teacher, no available book told me about it. The image of Jews I got in my childhood: Jews were hated, repressed, persecuted, finally exterminated. They were a people with a long dark past and obviously no future.

Jews were the eternal victims of history. As a victim, being a loser seemed to be their fate. You should feel compassion, nothing else. Those Jews who did not fit into the pattern of victimization, for instance the war-winning Jews in Israel or the wealthy, powerful Jews in the United States were mentioned only with greatest reluctance. The fact, that some Jews lived in the United States, came to

my knowledge only when I read a story about American Jew hatred and persecution, Arthur Miller's novel *Focus*, German title *Im Brennpunkt*, published in East Berlin in 1968, that gave the impression, the American society was overwhelmingly anti-Semitic and the few Jews existing there had to live in permanent fear. There was almost nothing published about life in Israel. One story written by Israeli writer Efraim Kishon, German title *Spitalsbelagerung*, found its way into the anthology *Welthumor*, published by East Berlin Eulenspiegel Verlag, specialized in comedy and humor, but it was a well chosen story, without any hint that its protagonists were Jewish and the place was Israel. Only towards the end of the GDR, 1988, Kishon's famous story *Blaumilchkanal* (*Blaumilch Canal*) came out in East Berlin. A copy of this story, in the West German edition of 1971 was found in the private library of the late party leader Walter Ulbricht (as *Berliner Zeitung* reported on November 26, 2003), a fact containing the information that the East German party leadership knew well about works of Israeli literature, even read and liked them, but kept them away deliberately from the population. One simply cannot help but feel the parallels between this kind of banishment of Jewish literature and the way, the NS regime dealt with it. With these small exceptions, modern Jewish literature was not published in the GDR.

I have already mentioned the first generation of GDR literature, the old "anti-fascist" writers and communist comrades, many of them returned from exile, among them several Jews. A second generation followed, already home-grown, born in the late twenties, and in 1949 still youngsters, when the GDR was founded. They had been contaminated with Nazi-ideology, most of them were sent into the last battles of the dooming empire, a kind of children-soldiers, and were now re-educated in the communist way. They became the official representatives of GDR literature in the era of cold war and constant ideological confrontation with the West. Again, some of them were of Jewish origin like Günter Kunert, born 1929, my father Dieter Noll, born 1927, or the author of Party-supported TV plays Benito Wogatzki (1932). This entire generation, whether Jewish or not, evaded the topic totally. You will barely find any Jewish

figure or even any mentioning of Jews in the Oeuvre of Christa Wolf, Hermann Kant, Dieter Noll, Erik Neutsch or any other of the successful, state-backed writers of this generation. One of them, Franz Fühmann, born in 1922, wrote one story *Das Judenauto*, published in 1962, but here the Jews were only a projection of the young protagonist's anti-Jewish feelings, that led him into a kind of hysteria, incited by the Jew-baiting of his NS-education, and the entire story was written not in order to picture Jews, but to describe the author's youth in the NS system with its deep-rooted racism and Jew hatred. The writer was forty when this story was published: it had cost him decades to overcome the anti-Jewish attitudes implanted during his childhood and youth, to write about it and to lay open his own problem to his readers. It was honest and commendable that he took up the challenge of this task at all. But it seems, it would have been too much for him and others of his generation – especially under the circumstances given in East Germany – to find to a positive, vital image of Jews.

To summarize, we can say that the image of Jews in GDR literature – seldom as Jews were depicted – was aimed rather at the reflection of own German problems than at the Jews themselves. For a long time, nobody seemed to have been interested in Jews and Judaism, and the topic was only kept alive as a part of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, coping with the past. This changed in the late sixties, early seventies, when some anthologies about Jewish life in Eastern Europe were published like the afore mentioned volumes *Es brennt Brüder, es brennt*, for instance the poetry collection *Welch Wort in die Kälte gerufen* and – edited by Hubert Witt of Reclam Verlag Leipzig, one of the first editors dedicated to that topic – *Meine jüdischen Augen*.

At the same time we can observe some publication of Jewish authors from other countries or of the past. Also here a strong selection must have taken place, if we look at the few authors and books permitted to the knowledge of the East German readers. The main criteria was again political, the attitude of the Soviet Union and its satellite states towards Israel. Because Israel remained an enemy state until the breakdown of the Soviet system, all writers of pro-Zionist tendency were banned. Also pro-Zionist statements of non-Jewish writers were

excluded from all editions in East Germany, for instance Thomas Mann's pro-Jewish and pro-Zionist statements in the thirties, published in exile, that had no place in the complete edition of twelve volumes published by the Aufbau Verlag in East Berlin.

The selection process preferred Jewish writers of rather pessimistic and anti-Zionist tendency like Stefan Zweig or Joseph Roth. Zweig's novel *Ungeduld des Herzens* or a volume of stories with the title *Leporella* were published in the seventies, even in popular, widely distributed paperback series like *bb* or *Taschenbuch der Weltliteratur* in Aufbau Verlag. Joseph Roth's novel *Hiob* was published in the Christian St. Benno Verlag Leipzig in 1967, *Hotel Savoy* in the popular paperback series of Reclams Universal Bibliothek in Leipzig 1966, a volume of stories called *Der blinde Spiegel* in the same year in Aufbau Verlag Berlin. This house had published his novel *Radetzky marsch* as early as in 1957, but only in a very small edition. His novel *Kapuzinergruft* was published in the East Berlin Verlag der Nation in 1984. Also satirical writer Sandor Friedrich Rosenfeld, called Roda Roda, who died in exile in New York, was published in East Germany, another witness for the decadence of the Austrian monarchy. All these books were considered fitting into the pattern of social criticism of the *Klassengesellschaft*, class society, that was to be overcome by socialism, and thus a valuable contribution to the education of citizens of the East European countries.

Because of their status as victims, Jews were considered especially credible witnesses of exploitation, deprivation of personal rights and persecution of the poor. For this reason the books of Jewish writers Karl Emil Franzos were published in the GDR, for instance his novel *Der Pojazz* and a volume of stories in Verlag der Nation 1970 – giving a depressing picture of Eastern European Jewry and the misery of the poor Polish country population in one – or the novel *Kaiserwetter* by Karl Jakob Hirsch, first published in 1931 and interpreted as a text picturing the inescapable decadence of the capitalist society. Of course, there was no mentioning of the fact that the author was a grandson of famous German rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch who became the founder of the pro-Zionist modern orthodox movement. From most of these editions something had to be

removed or was not allowed to be mentioned. When Reclam Verlag Leipzig published a collection of Isaac Bashevis Singer's short stories in 1980 – rather late, by the way, the author had published his stories since decades, acquired fame and already received the Nobel Prize – the editors had to be careful that neither any of his numerous stories dealing with Soviet Jew-persecution was included, nor any depiction of Jewish life in Israel. Also Kafka was published late in East Germany, in 1979, with a small selection of *Erzählungen*, stories, in the paperback series of Verlag Philipp Reclam jun., and also in his case – as we can easily imagine – the editors had to negotiate several obstacles. I think it is fair to remember those few editors and literary scientists who tried to publish texts of Jewish writers considered “controversial” by the party officials, not always successful, often back-firing on themselves.

The propaganda apparatus of the communist party had no scruples to use Jews and Jewish stories for its own purpose. As an example I will mention the booklet *Janusz K. oder Viele Worte haben einen doppelten Sinn*, a biography of Janusz Korczak, a pediatrician, who did not abandon the Jewish orphans entrusted to his care and was killed together with them in Treblinka in 1942. The booklet was first published in East Berlin Kinderbuchverlag, and later, 1974, in the West, in Weismann Verlag Munich. In this book, written for young readers, Korczak's tragic fate served as a pretext for anti-capitalist propaganda. The author of the epilogue, Pit Sander, called with reference to Korczak's suffering for a socialist revolution and the destruction of capitalism, in which he saw the fertile soil of the NS-system and its cruelties.

In general, the image of Jews and Jewry in the literature of the GDR remained shadowy and vague. Because of the ambiguity of the party's attitude towards Jews, this image could not find to a more precise shape. Only few writers living in East Germany tried to picture some real Jews in their texts, and these few writers have been Jews themselves, survivors of the holocaust, a status that made them invulnerable, at least for a time. Fred Wander, born in 1917, a survivor of Auschwitz, came to East Berlin in 1958 and published his novel *Der siebente Brunnen* in 1971 that was dedicated to the human beings, Jews and non-Jews, victims and culprits, he had met in thirteen concentration

camps. The text is called *Erzählung*, that means story, but it is rather a short novel with fascinating characters and other qualities of great prose. The Jewish protagonists are impressing and symbolize the power of survival of the Jewish people. Wander, an Austrian citizen, felt increasingly uncomfortable in East Germany and returned to Vienna in 1983. Born into a socialist, assimilated family, the writing about Jewish topics obviously brought him back to his Jewish roots. In an interview after his return to Austria, the former communist pointed out to the deep influence of Jewish religious literature, especially the Bible, on his thought and writing: *“Das Alte Testament hat mich mein ganzes Leben lang beeinflusst“*.

Also Jurek Becker, a survivor of ghetto and concentration camp, shows impressive Jewish characters in his famous novel *Jakob der Lügner*, first published in East Berlin in 1969. His protagonist Jakob Heym, at the beginning of the novel the typical victim of persecution, surpasses himself and becomes a person spreading hope and confidence in the ghetto. Although the novel ends with his death, he has demonstrated the inner qualities necessary to survive. The reader feels that Becker loves his Jewish protagonists who found the strength to believe in a future, even in sheer hopeless situations. In the figure of Hershel Shtamm, Becker depicts a religious Jew, probably the first one ever created by a writer living in East Germany. Like Wander, he left the German Democratic Republic a few years after he had published his novel. Perhaps in both cases the process of writing about the years of persecution may have influenced the authors' thought and reshaped their personalities in a way making it impossible for them to accept further repression, this time by a communist regime. Becker emigrated to West Germany in 1977.

I can only mention, as a counterexample to these authors' genuine approach to deal with their Jewishness, the trilogy *Ahnen und Erben* of communist writer Hedda Zinner, born in 1905, who was one of the last supporters of the East German party-regime until its end. Zinner, of a bourgeois family in Lemberg, joined the communist party in 1929, emigrated to Moscow in 1935 and was not touched during the Stalinist purges when many other German-Jewish emigrants were reprimanded, arrested or even killed. Although she was shocked when

Stalin started to persecute the communist emigrants, she continued to write pro-Stalinist poems and articles. In 1945 she returned to East Germany and held several functions in the cultural establishment of the GDR. Besides, she published some books, among them an autobiographic trilogy with the novels *Regina* in 1968, *Die Schwestern* in 1970 and *Fini* in 1973. Zinner told the story of a Jewish girl leaving everything Jewish behind her to join the communist movement. She was highly decorated and lived in a protected neighbourhood, reserved for high ranked party-functionaries in Berlin-Niederschönhausen, until her death in 1994.

The history of Jewish writing and depicting Jews and Jewry in the German Democratic Republic is a topic obscured by silence and official party propaganda in the East and the lack of knowledge and insight of most literary scientists in the West. We are only at the beginning of some research that may shed light on many details unknown until now. It can help us to understand the complex situation of a literary scene controlled by a cultural establishment caught in the schizophrenia between strict anti-Zionism and the subsequent suspicion of all Jews and, on the other hand, the necessity to keep a token-Jewry for political reasons. In the GDR we find a very special kind of anti-Semitic feeling that would never admit to be what it was, so that its bearers often not even realized that the stereotypes they followed were those of traditional anti-Jewish attitudes. In such an absurd atmosphere it was extremely difficult to be Jewish and, as a writer, to write about Jewish topics. There are still secrets surrounding the relations between party and Jews, especially Jewish intellectuals and writers in the GDR. Let me express my hope, that some of the younger scientists will dedicate their research to that complex and help us to solve its mysteries.

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