

Dis/placed Modernism: Ellen Auerbach and Marianne Breslauer's Palestine

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Abstract

This paper addresses geographical displacement, *elsewhere-ness*, as a fundamental experience in early twentieth-century culture. It examines its aesthetic and epistemological consequences within the specific context of German-Jewish women's photography in pre-state Israel during the 1930s. The article focuses on photographs taken during the Palestine sojourns of two prominent photographers from the Weimar Republic: Marianne Breslauer and Ellen Auerbach. The two moved not only through geographical places, but also across intersecting imaginaries, ethno-religious and gender identities, on the margins of discourses and political systems: as women, as Jews, and as photographers. The article explores these balances at a delicate historical juncture: when a distant spiritual homeland slowly becomes a complex territory for a very complicated immigration, and travel photography turns into exile photography. The resulting photographs exist within a dynamic interplay between ancient collective memories of the "Land of the Bible", and the modernist iconographies associated with Zionist nation-building; the enchanted gaze towards the Arab East; and a German training altered by displacement. Lastly, from a theoretical perspective, the study considers how the displacement of the two photographers partially decentered their modernist background, expanding the dimensions of the modernist canon to include nomadism, memory, and longing.

Modernism looks quite different depending on where
one locates oneself and when
(Harvey 1990: 25).

1. A history in motion

This paper addresses geographical displacement, *elsewhereness*, as a fundamental experience in early twentieth-century culture, considering it as a historical, political and generational phenomenon – inscribed in images and gazes – and as a problem of theory (Israel 2000: IX).

For the two personalities we will consider – the photographers Ellen Auerbach and Marianne Breslauer – the experience of the exile, which emerges tragically in the biographies of both from 1933 onwards, is only one element in the dialectic between belonging and estrangement that characterises their work. As we shall see, the two move at an intersection of geographical places, imaginaries, ethno-religious and gender identities, at the edge of contradictory discourses and political systems: as women, as Jews, and as photographers.

As Jane Marcus notes in her reflections on Luce Irigaray (1975), a woman's narrative of exile leads to quite distinct experiences, as "she is already in exile by speaking *his* tongue, so further conditions of exile simply multiply the number of her 'veils' and complicate the problem of exegesis" (Marcus: 276). This scenario is further exacerbated by the photographers' Jewish identity: "aliens at home and Germans abroad" (Lewis 1996: 191) and their complex, liminal, relationship to both Germany and the future land of Israel ("immigrating to the East as Germans and colonizing it as 'orientals'", Grossmann 2018: 138). Palestine, a foreign and eastern land, had indeed recently been considered a 'old new homeland' by Zionist propaganda (Herzl 1902), and in the few years between 1931 and 1933 had evolved from an essentially magical-mythical territory into a realistic new home for thousands of Jews immigrating from the West.

In the next few pages (also resorting for the first time to the archival material collected in the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem) we will examine precisely this delicate historical juncture, in which a distant spiritual homeland slowly becomes a complex territory for a very complicated immigration, and travel photography turns into exile photogra-

phy. The historical and generational movement of the two authors will be contrasted and overlaid with the counter-movement of the photographs, considered in their materiality and social context – as pictures traveling from East to West for two different audiences: the secular, generalist audience in Weimar Germany, and the Western Zionist audience in the early years of National Socialist government. Another level of interpretation considered will then be that of style, for we will observe the interactions and peculiarities resulting from the European and modernist training of the two authors in a context traditionally entrusted to orientalist photography and imagery.

2. Marianne Breslauer's Holy Land and the German Neue Frau

Marianne Breslauer visited Palestine as a 23-year-old in 1931. Born in a wealthy, assimilated and converted Jewish family, Breslauer had studied photography at the traditional technical school of the Lette-Verein¹ – the only one open to women in Germany until 1918 (Troeller 2020: 4). She then engaged in Man Ray's modernism in Paris in 1929, and in 1930 began working for Ullstein Verlag, Germany's largest publishing house. The following year, Breslauer travelled to Palestine to visit her old friend Djemila Nord, the daughter of the German *Generalkonsul* in the British Mandate. From her written account of the journey, one can understand how Palestine appeared to the young photographer a mystical-cultural land, in a radically alien territory. Unsurprisingly, her diary contains all the typical orientalist tropes of Western travelers to the Middle East:

Until then I had never seen an Arab or a Mohammedan and now I was suddenly surrounded by them everywhere, walking through the streets in their long robes and leading camels by the hand. Berbers rode by on small horses or mules, and the warmth, the unfamiliar smells, the foreign language – it was as if I were moving in the flesh in a fairy tale from the Arabian Nights. [...]. It was one experience above all that moved me: the feeling of being only a grain of sand in the desert as a human being. This realisation could only occur in the Orient as immediately as it did at that time, and perhaps it is only because of that that I was able to face many of the things I experienced later with a certain serenity (Breslauer

2009: 116).

This attitude is also reflected in the photographs Breslauer takes in Palestine. Although she generally agreed with the German-Jewish photographic representations of 'the Holy Land' at this time (which depicted an archaic and biblical landscape rather than a modern country) her work notably diverged through its focus on female subjects. This is a decisive departure from the orientalist photography of the period, in which the East was depicted as an essentially empty space: a wasteland that "invited conquerors" (Kalmar 2005: 103). In the few photographs with native subjects taken by western travelers, the inhabitants were often used as 'human scale' to measure the size of monuments (Barromi-Perlman 2017), or were 'posed' by the western photographer who "carefully decided where to place them and where to grant them visibility, making them extras in the staging of their own home" (Grossmann 2018: 141). The few portraits in close-up were characterized by clearly ethnographic, if not physiognomic, or overtly erotic (Alloula 1986), intentions.



Fig. 1 | Gröber K., *Married woman from Bethlehem*, 1925. Gravure printing photograph. In Id., *Palästina, Arabien und Syrien: Baukunst, Landschaft und Volksleben*, p. 112. Copyright expired.



Fig. 2 | Breslauer M., *Untitled*, 1931. Silver gelatin print. © Fotostiftung Schweiz.

A comparison of the Arab women portrayed in the same years by the orientalist German-Jewish photographer Karl Gröber and Breslauer in a very similar context – in traditional dress, sitting on an ancient stone staircase – clears the distance between the two. While Gröber adheres to the pictorialist composition of the frontal portrait and focuses on ethnographic elements such as clothing and jewelry, Breslauer's image is more photojournalistic. The subject seems to be caught off guard, the trope of the biblical landscape is integrated with the bottom-up perspective of New Vision, and the image is heavily foreshortened.

Analyzing her pictures, Anna Sophia Messner commented that

Marianne Breslauer's photographs from Pre-state Palestine illustrate a photojournalistic and documentary style and reflect her ethnographic interest in everyday activities of the Palestinian population. Influenced by a romantic biblical no-

tion and the history of travel photography to the Holy Land, these photographs build a stark contrast to her experimental, sometimes almost surrealist photographs in Berlin and Paris (2018: 119).

I would argue, however, that this statement does not apply to all the images in this corpus. In addition to photographs depicting Arab women, Breslauer includes photographs showing herself and her friend Djemila – *Neue Frauen* of the Berlin Jewish Bourgeoisie – in the new context of the British Mandate. It is crucial to look at the two types of photographs together, as this gives a clear understanding of the positioning of the photographer's identity – as a woman and as a German – in relation to the context. One of Breslauer's focal points seems to be not so much the depiction of the Arab world in pre-state Palestine, but rather the emergence of asynchronous forms of female existence. An asynchrony, it seems, that she expresses not only in content, but also in style and form. According to Messner, Breslauer's photographs of Arab women are ultimately bound to traditional compositional and formal solutions. Nonetheless, there are instances where Breslauer fully embraces her modernist and experimental inclinations, as in the portraits of Djemila. This kind of photographs demonstrates a revival of her modernist training, evident in the bird's-eye perspective and meticulous attention to mundane details such as the subject's pose, haircut, and dress. These elements bear a striking resemblance to the photographs Breslauer captured during the same period for the publisher Ullstein, which are considered exemplary representations of "how women were portrayed in the mass media of that time" (Lavin 1993: 59).

On the one hand, the photographs that Breslauer brings back to Germany seem to confirm² the German orientalist image of Palestine and the Arab world. On the other – as Heizer states with respect to German-Jewish orientalist literature – they "say less about the historical Orient than about Jewish-German [and, we may add, female] values and concerns" (1996: 2) at the time. The insistence on Arab female subjects, as well as the iconographic and formal gap between them and 'modern women' like Breslauer and Djemila, seem to reflect the photographer's need to position herself and her world – even when physically located in Palestine – as unambiguously

Western, German, modern, "protected" from Eastern otherness.

Further evidence of this sensibility is the German use of the photographs, which Breslauer reused as stock images in the works for the Mauritius Agency realized in the same year. The photos in the modern style and with Djemila as the subject were published in magazines such as *Die deutsche Frau im Heim* or *Für die Frau* – women's supplements of some of the most important liberal newspapers of the period, in which women photographers (Dallet-Mann 2021) and



Fig. 3 | Breslauer M., Djemila Gallethy, geb. Nord, die Tochter des deutschen General-Konsuls in Jerusalem, in *Die deutsche Frau*, September 2, 1931. Copyright expired.

writers helped shape the taste and public sphere of the Weimar *Neue Frauen* (Bertschik 2000: 68). Djemila's Palestinian portraits were presented – also in the captions, indicating her high social status – together with images from Paris of fashion and cosmetics, as part of the “mythology of everyday life” (Sykora 1993: 11) that the magazines constructed as desirable for young German women. In contrast, the photos of Arab women were destined for exotic or mythologizing placements. In the same year, Breslauer's photo of an Arab family is offered among travel photos in the generalist newspaper *Funk-Stunde*,³ and the portrait of a nameless Palestinian mother with child is featured with the suggestively biblical headline “The proud mother. Canaanite woman with her child” and published in the conservative family magazine *Allgemeiner Wegweiser für jede Familie*.⁴ Breslauer's perspective, both in photos and their editorial placements, ultimately mirrored that of fully assimilated German Jewry. It emphasized the distinction from the “Arab Other” not for political motives as Zionist propaganda did back then (Berkowitz 1996), but to avoid being seen as different from non-Jewish Germans, particularly within the contentious oriental context. As Breslauer herself would state again in her mature memoirs:

This term ‘non-Aryan’ is something that still makes me shake my head even into my old age, because no one could or can reasonably understand what is supposed to be a ‘non-Aryan’. Recently, a book entitled *Jewish Women of the 19th and 20th Century* was published, and in this book I also appear as the photographer Marianne Breslauer, although I am not a Jewish woman at all. It was Hitler who made me a ‘non-Aryan’. [...] “We are the non-Aryan Christians” was the first verse of an apt quatrain that circulated at the time: “We are also quite nice / The first in our lists / Is Jesus Christ” (2009:136).

3. Ellen Auerbach's Palestine

Ellen Auerbach, born Rosenberg, must have had a similar impression about her “non-Aryan” status at the arrival of National Socialism in Germany. Auerbach shared with Breslauer not only the profession of photographer, but also the broader Weimar background in which, “ethnicity, class and gender overlapped and often interacted in complicated ways”

(Roemer 2013: 99). The two women were of the same age, both of Jewish descent, middle-class, emancipated, more or less openly queer (Otto 2020) and interested in a commercial photography stylistically close to the New Vision. We can assume that the two knew each other, or at least we can claim that they were part of the same social network. Since 1929, Auerbach had been a private student of Walter Peterhans', professor of photography at Bauhaus, and had started the successful advertising photography studio *Ringl+Pit* together with Grete Stern. Although Auerbach's family was mildly religious, “Ellen, who grew up in a German nationalist home, naturally saw herself as German and had never pursued Zionist ideals; moreover, she had increasingly detached herself from her family's Jewish roots since her Berlin years” (Ingelmann 2006:50).

In 1933, only two years after Breslauer's journey, Auerbach had to reach Palestine no longer as a traveler, but as an exile. What is peculiar about her condition, as well as that of many German Jews of her generation, is the seamless transition from German citizen to immigrant, and then active participant in the visual nation-building of the Zionist project. If, as Peter Gay noted in a seminal essay, the Weimar Republic had the extraordinary characteristic of being a culture in which “outsiders – democrats, Jews, avant-garde artists and the like – became insiders” (1968: 8), then the historical conjuncture in which authors like Auerbach find themselves was to play an active role as insiders – while remaining outsiders – also in the nation-building of a new culture, and a different nation. Because of her profession, once in Palestine the photographer worked for some of the largest Zionist organizations: the Jewish National Fund (*Keren Kayemet L'Israel*, KKL) and the Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO). Both organizations already used photography for communication and propaganda purposes in the 1920s, and had their own photo departments. Moreover, photographers were urgently needed in those years, as the demand for visual material to be sent to the West was exceptionally high, due to the deteriorating situation of the Jews in Europe, and the need to increase donations and encourage immigration (Oren 2013: 202).

Scholars like Caplan have argued that “Euro-American discourses of displacement tend to absorb difference and create ahistorical amalgams;



Fig. 4 | E. Auerbach, *Schaukeln*, 1933-36. Modern Print. © Akademie der Künste

thus, a field of social forces becomes represented as a personal experience, its lived intensity of separation marking a link with others" (2000: 26). Auerbach's photography instead denounces the need to situate twentieth-century displacement in historical and political terms.

In Breslauer's photography, the portrayal of the Palestinian world as 'distinct from her own' (while affirming her German identity on the other side) gave rise to a photography imbued with a strong exotic allure. Despite her modernist style, she embraced here the orientalist imagery common to "her" (German) culture and visual habit.

In contrast, Auerbach's photography shows an attempt to transport her own modernist visual language into the new context, i.e. to find a second home for it. For example, Tel Aviv is presented as a *Modernstadt* in the making. The decision to focus on modern elements rather than on the biblical landscape is surely part of that cultural movement in which (especially from the perspective of her clients), photography was "not just an end in itself but a means to an end, linked to colonial and native desires not only to represent but also reshape urban spaces" (Abusaada 2021: 360). On the other hand, there are moments in Auerbach's city photography that are removed from any triumphalism and in which modern life takes on the abstract and decontextualized forms of *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography.

In photographs such as the one in Fig. 4, the narrative of modernity gives way to a taste for linear

compositions, to the interplay of intersections and diagonals, skillfully complemented by the study of light. Unlike the entirely rational and architectural-ly 'perfect' structures of *neue sachlich* authors like Renger-Patzsch (Pfungsten 1997) or the advertising photos produced by Auerbach and Grete Stern in Berlin a few years earlier, these photographs embrace a new sense of contingency. They deliberately disrupt the frame and employ alienating perspectives without relinquishing their chronicle-like quality, their interest in the new context. Compared to the "two-style solution" of Breslauer's photography, exile seems to convince Auerbach of the need for more radical experimentation and hybridization of identity and style with the new context. In such context, the photographer's point of view is no longer safe, completely different from the context, yet it does not coincide with it.

This dimension becomes even clearer in the construction of the "new Jewish woman" in Auerbach's photographs for WIZO, which have not been studied so far because of the difficulties posed by the archive.⁵ These pictures reveal the stylistic and material consequences of exile on her photography. As Auerbach herself would comment: "I had to separate myself from some of Peterhan's teachings, since vivaciousness and spontaneity sometimes took the place of technical perfection. It was, therefore, not the country but, rather, the circumstances that changed my photographic methods and conceptions" (Baumann 1998: 9). While certain photos in the collection exhibit bizarre perspectives and employ techniques like photomontage⁶ reminiscent of her Berlin photography, most of the images serve as a visual chronicle. They were captured swiftly and in outdoor settings, reflecting a leaning towards modern photojournalism rather than experimental avant-garde photography.

Again, these are oriental photographs intended for the West.⁷ However, not for the secular, generalist German public, as in the case of Breslauer's photographs. But for events like the "Palästina Ausstellung", which took place during the nineteenth Zionist Congress in Luzern in 1935 and was curated by graphic artists and propaganda activists Ernst Mechner and Otte Wallisch.⁸ It was not an art exhibition (Hermann Fechenbach's lithographs were rejected on the grounds that art exhibitions "always end up with a deficit"), but an event that ultimately served



Fig. 5 | E. Auerbach, *Preparations for the Histadruth Seder by pupils of the Hostel*, 1934, PHW1245041. © Central Zionist Archives.

propaganda purposes (“essential Zionist educational tasks”). Its objective was to inform people about the activities of the most significant Zionist organizations in Palestine, employing approximately 300 photographs and films as part of its essential Zionist educational tasks of propaganda.⁹

Messner noted that:

Liselotte Grschebina – as well as her photographer colleagues who escaped Nazi Germany in the 1930s and worked as commissioned photographers for Zionist institutions to promote the Zionist project – used the know-how she gained in the Weimar Republic through advertising and propaganda photography and appropriated it aesthetically and conceptually to the ideological requirements of the new environment in Palestine (2018: 126).

What is striking about Auerbach’s photographs is the distance from this paradigm: the ideological gap, the mismatch, between the aesthetics of Zionist propaganda and her photographic work for WIZO. In her pictures, the women of WIZO are depicted without any sense of triumphalism. Auerbach directs her focus towards their everyday activities, capturing female bodies that are just as removed from the “fetishizing gaze” of her Weimar advertising photography (Krauss 1982: 104) as they are from the heroism of the “muscular Jewish youth” (Presner 2007) canonized in Zionist photography.

The playful dimension of Auerbach’s Berlin photography is preserved in the dynamism of her images. They do not feature rehearsed poses like those



Fig. 6 | E. Auerbach, *Mrs. Rebecca Sieff, Chairman of the London WIZO Executive, signing the foundation deed of the new Domestic Science School at Nachlat Yitzchak*, 1935, PHW1245046. © Central Zionist Archives.

seen in the works of WIZO photographers such as Schweig¹⁰ or Kluger. The community of Jewish feminist pioneers deviate from the archetypal depictions of roundabouts or Millet-inspired fieldworks. The bodies portrayed are neither the heroic athletic figures of the “new Zionist women” – the “pioneer Madonnas” (Konopny-Declève, Yanay 2019: 61) absorbed in rural labor –, nor the androgynous, scandalous and ephebic beauties of the *Neue Frauen*. The everyday life at WIZO takes instead an anti-rhetorical shape. In these photographs, a yearning for rootedness and a personal quest for community emerge as existential needs that precede commitment to the Zionist cause.

4. Endnote

A final aspect of Auerbach’s Palestinian corpus that deserves attention, because of its specificity in this context, is her private photography featuring Arab subjects. These images hold importance as they unveil the constraints and impossibility of the photogra-

pher's new anchorage in pre-state Palestine, which she had hoped to establish through the photographs she took for WIZO. Insights from Auerbach's diaries shed light on her dissatisfaction with the treatment of the Arab population by settlers and newly arrived immigrants.

It was the time of the great German-Jewish immigration. These 'Yekkes' were very businesslike and looked down on the old pious Eastern Jews and the little Yemenites. They were also very hostile to Arabs. One poster said that a Jewish girl who dated an Arab was a disgrace to the Jewish race. I guess I had a preconceived notion that Jews were very adaptable, internationally minded, and good cooks. I could not find any of that. Today I understand this nationalist reaction better, but I still cannot share it. I felt uncomfortable, especially with the thought that I would have to spend my life in this country (Auerbach 1990: 35).

Photographs depicting the Arab world were notably scarce in the Zionist photography of the period. As Rozental points out:

by the end of the 1920s, the appearance of Arabs in the archive would shift from neighbors and collaborators to disruptors, alienated from the needs of Eretz Israel. The growing focus on the victorious Zionist body then also speaks the dislocation of locals, as though realizing concerns voiced by early Zionist activists, who cautioned against the move to Palestine, since the land was neither vacant nor readily available for settlement (2023: 137).

Once again, Auerbach's photography expresses, in the new language of exile, her quest for a potential second homeland, and a new sense of community.

Among her photographs depicting Arab life in Pal-



Fig. 7 | E. Auerbach, *Untitled* (Poster announcement in Hebrew, German and Arabic concerning a land sale, Palestine trip), 1934. © Akademie der Künste.



Fig. 8 | E. Auerbach, *Untitled*. (Men in a train compartment, sleeping, reading newspaper, a man with traditional headgear, fez), 1933.1936. © Akademie der Künste.

estine, one can find details from everyday life, such as the billboards in three languages: Hebrew, German, and Arabic (Fig. 7). Additionally, she captures secular scenes of modern life, exemplified by a photograph of a train carriage where a European man sit next to a man wearing a fez (Fig. 8). It is worth noting that the latter is dressed in modern attire, departing from the archaic and orientalist portrayal of Arabs prevalent in Western photography at that time. Through these images, Auerbach's visual language appears to verge on portraying a land that is not only modern but also multicultural.

Auerbach's attempt to forge a new language for a new homeland ultimately proved to be a utopia. In 1936, with the escalating conflict between Jews and Arabs, she left Palestine and embarked on a long exile, first in London and then in the United States. Auerbach's departure left behind a cultural and emotional landscape vastly different from the one Breslauer had encountered and visited. A landscape that had undergone significant changes in just a few years, not only politically and geographically, but also in its impact on the photographers' sense of identity. In this desperate game of mirrors and failed mirroring, which is the grammar of these authors' exile, one can nonetheless discern traces of an alternative modernism. It is a modernism that blurs boundaries, contaminates and hybridises, embracing contingency, politics and personal narratives in sometimes idiosyncratic, rapidly changing signs. These signs compel us to decentralize and rethink the modernist canon as it has been received – Western, masculine, unequivocal – and open it up to complexity, stratification and nomadism.

Notes

¹ The training provided by the Lette-Verein is well chronicled by Breslauer herself, in her late autobiography *Bilder meines Lebens Erinnerungen* (2009: 57-58): "At that time, there was a 'school for women's professions' in Berlin, the so-called 'Lette House', which still exists today at the same location. Here you could do a really well-founded photography apprenticeship with a journeyman's examination from the Berlin Chamber of Crafts at the end. You were taught comprehensively in all areas of photography, starting with optics and camera technology, motifs and image composition and ending with the technical details of developing and retouching". Unless otherwise stated, all translations from German are by the author.

² Albeit in dialogue with the author's modernist training and tastes.

³ "The Nomad Family in Their Tent", in *Funk-Stunde*, September 4, 1931.

⁴ "The Proud Mother. Canaanite with Her Child", in *Allgemeiner Wegweiser für jede Familie*, November 25, 1931.

⁵ The Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem holds millions of documents and pictures chronicling the history of the Jewish people, from the formation of the "Jewish state" to the early years of Israel. It serves as the historic archives for the World Zionist Organization, Jewish Agency, Jewish National Fund, and others. The collections include correspondence, printed materials, maps, photographs, posters, newspapers, books, and more. The Central Zionist Archives is an institution of the World Zionist Organization, established by decisions made in the 24th (1956) and 27th (1965) Zionist Congresses. As Ingelmann (2006: 97) has already noted, the material of the WIZO preserved in the Archives is not arranged by author but by subject, so that a lengthy review of the entire corpus was necessary to reconstruct which of the photographs were actually taken by Auerbach.

⁶ See e.g., the photomontage taken by Schweig and Rosenberg (Auerbach's maid name), *At the incubators in the WIZO "Hostel" in Tel-Aviv, Aliya st: The first chickens*. Central Zionist Archives, PHW11245033.

⁷ That this was the main aim of the WIZO photographs can be learnt from the records of the WIZO Propaganda Department for the years 1935-37, which state: "during the last two years about 180 new photographs have been taken of the work of WIZO and of women's work in general, all under the direction of the propaganda secretary. They were taken mainly for WIZO picture walls at exhibitions such as the Colonisation Pavilion at the Event Fair Tel Aviv, the Pal. Pavilion at the Paris World's Fair, Dr. Mechner's picture panels at the Lucerne Zion. Congress" (Central Zionist Archives, F492672-11_2).

⁸ Information regarding the exhibition comes from the "Office of the 19th Zionist Congress Exhibition" papers from 1935, Central Zionist Archives, LK822.

⁹ While there are no studies on photography at the Congress the films exhibited are analysed by Horak (1984) and Tryster (1995). Yet it is worth noting that these articles make no mention of *Tel Aviv*, the 12-minute film commissioned to Ellen and Walter Auerbach for the occasion. Although the film is not the subject of this article, which focuses only on Auerbach's photography, it was the focus of recent discussions at the Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe on the occasion of the exhibition "Bauhaus Film Expanded" (2020).

¹⁰ For example, in a letter between two WIZO members dated 12 December 1932, Toni Hauser reported to Nadja Stein that Schweig wanted the Zionist communities to be prepared in advance for his arrival for the photo campaigns (Central Zionist Archives A217/28).

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