

Audrey KICHELEWSKI *

EARLY WRITINGS ON THE HOLOCAUST: FRENCH-POLISH TRANSNATIONAL CIRCULATIONS

Abstract. This article analyses the differences and similarities between documentation centres active in the aftermath of the Holocaust both in France and in Poland. While in Poland the task was from 1945 assigned to the Central Jewish Historical Commission, in France, the Center of Contemporary Jewish Documentation quickly overtook the lead on other minor centres established by Communist Jews or Bundists. The paper focuses on the links between those institutions, through contacts between members, exchanges of documentation, and parallel publications and exhibits. It shows that despite quite different political conditions, men and women working in these institutions shared a similar vision of transmission of history and memory of the Holocaust. They managed to implement their vision partly thanks to their transnational links that helped transcend political and material difficulties.

Key words: historiography, Holocaust Remembrance, France, Poland, Jewish History, aftermath of Second World War.

* Audrey KICHELEWSKI, University of Strasbourg, Contemporary History Institute, Research Unit: ARCHE (Arts, Civilization and History of Europe), Institut Universitaire de France, Palais Universitaire 9, place de l'Université F - 67084 Strasbourg, France; e-mail: kichelewski@unistra.fr, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3518-1652>

1. INTRODUCTION

Until the 1990s, the main historiographical trends considered that the systematic study of the mass murder of European Jews had been neglected in the early post-war period and until the 1960s, when the “era of the witness” (Wieviorka, 2006) started with the Eichmann trial, bringing only then the Holocaust at the centre of studies on the Second World War and Nazism. New research has disputed this claim, putting an end to a “myth of silence” after the Holocaust (Diner, 2009; Cesarani and Sunquist, 2012; Azouvi, 2012) and shown that comprehensive research on the destruction of European Jewry had indeed started already in the very midst of it, during the war itself, for instance with Emanuel Ringelblum’s team *Oneg Shabbat* in the Warsaw ghetto (Kassow, 2007). It has been well established that those documentation projects actively involved the Jewish victims and survivors themselves, throughout Europe (Friedman, 1980; Krakowski, 1990; Jockusch, 2012). Historical commissions and Jewish documentation centres played a crucial role in the early post-war period for laying the ground for research activity and the dissemination of the very first knowledge on the Holocaust.

In this aspect, the Central Jewish Historical Commission (Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna; CŻKH) established by the Central Committee of Jews in Poland, the main Jewish umbrella organisation in post-war Poland played a founding role – since many of its members, including Rachel Auerbach, Nachman Blumenthal, Michał Borwicz, Philip Friedman, Moyshe Yosef Feigenbaum, Noe Gruss, Yosef Kermish, Genia Silkes, and Jozef Wulf, would be very active in various Jewish documentation centres in Europe and abroad, such as Yad Vashem in Israel, the YIVO in New York, the historical commission for DP camps in Munich, or the French Centre de Documentation juive contemporaine in Paris. As these key figures are slowly drawing interest of scholars (Berg, 2008; Cohen, 2008; Aleksiu, 2012; Schuller, 2013; Lyon-Caen, 2018), the aim of this article is to show the connections, through these pioneers, of the founding of Holocaust research centres. Despite dispersion, a lack of financial resources, and political contexts that did not plea in favour of their endeavours of history, memory and justice, I will show that those centres had, in fact, much in common in terms of their objectives, methods, and the initial dissemination of knowledge.

I chose to limit the comparison to that of France and Poland. In Poland, the major institution dedicated to the history and memory of the Holocaust – before this name was even given to the destruction of European Jewry (Fritz *et al.*, 2016) was the Central Jewish Historical Commission (CŻKH), from its beginnings in late 1944 until its transformation into the Jewish Historical Institute (Żydowski Instytut Historyczny – ŻIH) in October 1947. The ŻIH was shortly afterwards made into a scientific society in 1950, under the leadership of Bernard Mark, a Jewish communist. By then, most of the employees of the Institute, including Nachman Blumenthal, Jozef

Kermisz, Rachel Auerbach, and Isaiah Trunk, decided to emigrate to Israel or the USA, while Michal Borwicz, Jozef Wulf, and Noe Gruss moved to Paris, either for a temporary or permanent residence. I shall focus on the similarities and differences between the CŻKH and the French Centre de Documentation juive contemporaine (CDJC – Centre for Contemporary Jewish Documentation), the latter of which was created in 1943 in the Italy-occupied French zone by Podolia-born Isaac Schneersohn (1881–1969), and analyse hitherto neglected strong links established between those two centres in the aftermath of the Second World War.

2. FOUNDATIONS AND MOTIVATIONS

Comparative studies of the historical commissions and documentation centres have established a typology dividing “those whose main goal was to assemble documentary evidence for historical scholarship and those which aimed at using the data toward political ends such as the prosecution of war criminals, the fight for material compensation, and against anti-Semitism” (Jockusch, 2007, p. 444). In this regard, the cases of the CŻKH and CDJC would fall into those two categories. Indeed the very first aim of the CŻKH was to collect testimonies from the survivors who arrived at the newly founded Jewish committee established in the liberated areas of Poland (Aleksiu, 2007). In contrast, the CDJC’s initial goal was to prepare a “handbook for French Jews’ claims” for justice once the country would be liberated after the war (Poznanski, 1999, p. 51; Perego, 2012). Yet both centres, despite very different backgrounds of the contexts of their founding, had much in common.

First, both the CDJC and the CŻKH initiated still during the war, and they shared a certain urgency of documentation. In the Polish case, the CŻKH clearly continued the endeavours of Emanuel Ringelblum in creating a secret underground archive in the Warsaw ghetto, to tell the world about the nightmarish destruction of the Jewish world: survivors of Ringelblum’s Oneg Shabbat such as Rachel Auerbach, Hersz, and Bluma Wasser joined the CŻKH while several of its trained historians had been pre-war members of the YIVO Historical Commission under Ringelblum’s guidance, such as Jozef Kermisz or Isaiah Trunk (Stach, 2019, p. 213). And for the French CDJC, its beginnings occurred in the midst of the war, at a time of uncertainties: the committee was disbanded only a few months after its creation, when in September 1943 the Italian zone was taken over by the Nazis and anti-Jewish persecution increased. Many efforts were made to hide the collected documents, many members of the committee were killed or deported, in a strikingly parallel chronology to the fate of the Ringelblum archive.

Second, it is doubtless that seeking justice was indeed the major goal of the CDJC – as shown by the fact that the material gathered by the centre was sent to Nuremberg

trials where they served as evidence and two members of the CDJC, Leon Poliakov, as expert of French delegation, and Joseph Billig as representative of the CDJC, were indeed sent to the German city to attend the trials of the Military International Court in 1945–1946. Afterwards they returned with many documents that were to enrich the CDJC's collections. Rapidly, the CDJC became a major centre for historical research.

Conversely, even though it had not been among its initial emphasis, the CŻKH appeared to play a major role in the legal processing of the Holocaust. Philip Friedman, Józef Kermisz, and Rachel Auerbach worked on various committees investigating the crimes in the Auschwitz, Treblinka, Majdanek, and Chelmno concentration and extermination camps. The CŻKH compiled a selection of documents regarding the extermination of Polish Jews by Nazis for the Polish delegation in the Nuremberg trials. A special department was tasked with identifying war criminals and producing expert opinions for courts. Material was sent to Polish authorities, such as the Main Committee for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland (*Główna Komisja Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce*), the public prosecution authority, and Polish courts. In 1950, the ŻIH estimated that its work contributed to the transfer of approximately 1,800 Nazi criminals from Germany's four occupied zones to Poland (Stach, 2019, pp. 217–218).

The third observation that somewhat blurs the essential difference between the two institutions is that the CDJC quite soon became also a major place for commemoration and writing about the Jewish experience during the Second World War. Already in the founding documents, it was stated that the aim was also to “write the big book of French Jews' martyrdom” (Poznanski, 1999, p. 51). In the early 1950s, a memorial project to commemorate the victims of the Nazi genocide of European Jews unfolded and eventually materialised at the CDJC, in the centre of Paris, in 1956: the Memorial of the Unknown Jewish Martyr (Perego, 2015).

However, one has to stress a French special quality that has for long been understudied: the fact that the CDJC was not the only documentation centre, although it quickly became the most important one. The French Jewish Communist resistance movement called the Jewish Union for Resistance and Mutual Aid (Union des Juifs pour la Résistance et l'Entraide – UJRE), among many other actions decided to commemorate their actions during the war and, in September 1945 decided to open a documentation centre, whose aim was to “collect all illegal documents, try to make live again the Jewish participation to the Resistance and collect all documents that had not been destroyed by the Nazis” (Grumberg, 2018, p. 25). This centre was clearly more politicised and did not seem to serve to fuel further trials, contrary to the CDJC or CŻKH. It, however, managed to gather throughout France important documents on clandestine Jewish and non-Jewish resistance press, as well as documents on their political activity and pieces of literature by Jewish writers murdered during the war. Though it was quite small in scope, this centre is important to mention as, like their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, it focused on the Jewish agency and reactions to the Holocaust. It was important to all those centres to show the Jew-

ish participation in the resistance against Nazism and in the liberation of the country. In order to achieve this goal, collecting documents accompanied their dissemination through publications and exhibits. Indeed, the UJRE also created a publishing house in Yiddish, called *Oyfsnay* – “Revival”, which extensively published on Jewish resistance and survival in transit camps in France (Beaune-la-Rolande, Pithiviers). Furthermore, dissemination was also implemented thanks to exhibitions for the general audience. It is interesting to note that the first exhibition was held as early as April 1946, and dedicated to «Life and death in the ghettos in Poland», which, according to their documentation, attracted more than 100,000 visitors. Contacts with Polish Jewish (pro-Communist) organisations, namely the Organisation for Polish Jews, a branch of the Polish Committee of National Liberation (*Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego* – PKWN), were essential for the implementation of this exhibition. Information circulation was also attested at this very early stage. For instance, a book by Bernard Mark on the Warsaw ghetto uprising was printed in Yiddish in 1945 in Paris thanks to this Organisation for Polish Jews. It included a foreword by Adam Rayski, a pre-war Communist activist from Białystok, journalist for the *Naye Presse* Yiddish daily and underground member of Jewish resistance. Bernard Mark became the head of Jewish Historical Institute in 1949, the same year that Adam Rayski returned to Poland, to work for press censorship.

These short but illuminating biographical sketches lead to the final point to be examined, which links together all those documentation centres: the personality of their founders and key members. In all countries, most activists of those centres were survivors of the Holocaust, with Eastern European, predominantly Polish backgrounds, even in France, where the Russian background prevailed at least in the beginnings of the CDJC. Indeed, Isaac Schneersohn, born in Kamenetz-Podolsk in a Yiddish-speaking religious family, Leon Poliakov, who had fled the Bolshevik revolution front Saint Petersburg in 1920, as well as Joseph Billig, also a Russian Jewish refugee from 1920, were among the founding members of the CDJC. As for the historical commission of Communist UJRE, its head was David Diamant, born in 1904 in Hrubieszów, from where he left for France in 1930. Soon after their emigration to France, two former members of Krakow branch of the CŻKH, Michel Borwicz and Józef Wulf, created a short-lived «Research Centre on the History of Polish Jews» (Centre de Recherche sur l’Histoire des Juifs Polonais) in Paris in 1947.

3. TRANSNATIONAL GOALS: BOOK PUBLICATIONS

It is also interesting to note that the CŻKH and their French counterparts, both the CDJC and the Communist documentation centre, had many contacts as it is shown by the rich correspondence between the centres, files that still await an in-depth

investigation. This point is particularly illuminating in terms of exploring the links between the two institutions.

From their very beginnings, both institutions strove to make the results of their documentation efforts public by publishing books and journals. In 1950, at least 20 books had already been issued by “les éditions du centre”, the CDJC publishing house in Paris. The most important titles included first monographs, and series testimonies, mostly owing to the collections of documents gathered by the centre itself. Priority was hence given to the study of internment camps in France (Weill, 1946) or the history of Jews in Italy-occupied France (Poliakov, 1946) while the first historical overview of the Holocaust appeared in 1951, by Leon Poliakov, based mostly on the documents available at the CDJC (Poliakov, 1951).

In the meanwhile in Warsaw, the CŻKH managed to publish within two and a half years no less than 3,000 articles, and 39 leaflets and books: compilations of documents (Blumental *et al.*, 1946), journals (Hescheles, 1946), testimonies (Hochberg-Marianska and Grüss, 1947), and monographs on ghettos (Kermisz, 1946) and camps (Friedman, 1945; Reder, 1946)¹. A central topic was the Jewish resistance movement and its role in the struggle against Nazis (Ajzensztejn, 1946). In this aspect, a quite similar enterprise was undertaken at the same time by the Communist documentation centre in their publications: in 1949 it issued in Yiddish a collection of underground Yiddish press from during Nazi Occupation of France, with a foreword by Adam Rayski (UJRE, 1949).

4. *LE MONDE JUIF*: A JOURNAL ILLUSTRATING TRANSNATIONAL CONTACTS

Apart from books, the CDJC edited a journal as early as 1945, even before the war was over. Its very first issue stated very clearly that “the work of which we inaugurate the first pages today is a work of testimony. We will carry it out without any political aim, without any apologetic or propaganda second thought, with the sole ambition of being impartial witnesses taking the oath of truth on countless graves” (CDJC, 1945, p. 1). The journal was not sold but handed out every month to Jewish institutions in France and abroad. It aimed at giving news of the situation of Jewish communities around the world and called for reconstruction. However, commemoration was from the very beginning central and testimonies were published from the very beginning. After a year or so, the *Bulletin* changed its name and became *Le Monde juif* [The Jewish world]. It published articles on contemporary Jewish life, but also documents from the war

¹ For a complete list, see Jockusch, 2012, pp. 284–285.

and testimonies (Lyon-Caen, 2020). As for Poland, it was not before 1947 that the newly created Jewish Historical Institute issued its journal, first in Yiddish under the name *Bleter far Geshichte* (Letter for History), while a Polish version was added in 1949, still existing today with the name *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* [Jewish History Quarterly], as does exist a journal of the Memorial de la Shoah, the successor organisation of the CDJC in Paris, with its journal, now called the *Revue d'histoire de la Shoah*.

A close look at the French publication shows the very close links between the French CDJC and the loss of Polish Jews. In the fourth issue of the *Bulletin*, in July 1945, large excerpts from the book by Jan Karski, published a year earlier in the USA, were made available for the Polish audience in the *CŻKH*². The passages chosen for translation referred to the meeting between Karski and the representatives of the Jewish resistance in the Warsaw ghetto.

4.1. The Warsaw ghetto: a central reference

The Warsaw ghetto, and especially the Warsaw ghetto uprising, was hence a major focus point in the journal, as early as the second issue in May 1945, which mentioned the Warsaw ghetto uprising and its second anniversary. In 1946, French communist journalist Hélène Gosset interviewed for the journal Izabela Stachowicz, better known under the pseudonym of lieutenant Czajka, former escapee from Warsaw ghetto then People's Army lieutenant. In 1947, *Le Monde juif* published an article signed by French journalist Jane Albert Hesse, who had met Isaac Zuckerman, deputy commander of the ŻOB [Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa] Jewish resistance organisation, which provided guns and ammunition from the "Aryan" side of the city during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The climax of the presence of the Warsaw ghetto uprising in the columns of the journal occurred on the occasion of its 15th anniversary in 1958. A special issue contained the testimony of Helena Szereszewska, whose husband was a member of the Judenrat in the Warsaw ghetto and who managed to escape in January 1943, shortly before the uprising. She had left Poland for Israel and her testimony is among the first she gave and her only text available in French. The same issue also included a translation of a text by Isaac Zuckerman on the uprising, previously published in Hebrew.

If Israeli institutions seem to have, at that point, taken precedence over Polish ones, there were still contacts with former members of the Jewish historical commission. The special 1958 issue also contained a reminiscence by Emanuel Ringelblum, the historian of the Warsaw ghetto, interviewed by Genia Silkes, a social worker. Silkes had been a member of the Oneg Shabbat team in the ghetto

² This text and the following, coming from the journal of the CDJC, were reprinted in a special issue of *Revue d'histoire de la Shoah*, n° 211, March 2020.

and had managed to survive deportation to Treblinka by jumping from the train. After the war, she worked for the Jewish historical commission in Łódź, gathering hundreds of children testimonies. She left Poland for France in 1949, before settling in New York and working as a secretary in the YIVO institute. The text published by *Le Monde juif* in 1958 was a second version of an initial text published in Yiddish and in Poland in 1949, on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of Ringelblum's death (Person, 2015, pp. 673–678).

The imposing presence of the topic of the Warsaw ghetto in the journal of the CDJC could also be explained by the arrival in France of Polish Jews who had experienced the war and the ghettos in Poland. Apart from Genia Silkes, one should also remember Michel Mazor a worker from the CDJC, who arrived in Paris in 1947. Mazor had been in the Warsaw ghetto and had managed to escape from the train upon his deportation, surviving in hiding until 1945. Mazor worked as a translator within the CDJC, before becoming the head of the Archive department. His memoirs on the Warsaw ghetto appeared in *Le Monde juif* and were thereafter published as a book in French (Mazor, 1955).

4.2. Children testimonies in Poland and France: a major point of interest

More surprising than the omnipresence of the topic of the Warsaw ghetto, which is certainly not specific to French Jewish milieu but has been more widely quite early acknowledged as central in first Holocaust commemorations around Europe and even in the USA (Slucki, 2019, p. 204), is the translation into French in the March 1946 issue of *Le Monde juif* of children testimonies collected in April 1945 by Ida Gliksztejn, a Polish-Jewish survivor from Lublin who worked for the Jewish historical commission of Bytom in Lower Silesia. Those testimonies are available in the archives of the Jewish historical institute, with the same call number as indicated in the French journal (903, 904, 906). This means that someone from the CŻKH probably sent the testimonies to the CDJC, where they were translated into French and published in the journal.

At the same time, similar endeavours were undertaken in France to collect and publish testimonies from survivors, especially children. The Polish influence can clearly be seen, for instance, in Miriam Nowicz Bath-Ami interviewing refugee children from Poland in a DP camp near Marseille, on their way to Palestine. During the war, Nowicz had met in the Vittel internment camp Yitzhak Katzenelson, Yiddish poet from Warsaw, saving his poems from destruction, before he was deported to Auschwitz and had also helped Hillel Seidman, another survivor from Warsaw ghetto, escape the Vittel camps. As a member of the “Fédération des Sociétés juives de France” (Federation of Jewish *landsmanshaftn* in France), Nowicz collected many testimonies in France, now available in the archives of the CDJC. The collection of children testimonies, excerpts of which were made available in *Le Monde*

juif in 1946, were subsequently published in a book (Bath-Ami, 1946). Nowicz left for Israel in 1949 where she worked in the *Lohamei Hagetaot* kibbutz-museum.

Another piece of evidence of contacts and interest for the Polish Jewish war experience could also be found in the 1949 publication of additional children testimonies from Poland, collected by the CŻKH and published by Noe Gruss, former member of the Jewish Historical Commission. However, it is interesting to notice that the documents published in the French translation do not come from the Polish edition by Gruss and Mariańska-Hochberg, but from a Yiddish, slightly different version of the book, published in Buenos Aires, after Gruss emigrated to Paris from Poland in 1947.

5. HYBRID CHARACTER OF NARRATIVES: BETWEEN HISTORY, MEMORY, AND LITERATURE

This short and non-exhaustive list of examples taken from the journal of the CDJC shows the various topics that were important in both countries for Jewish survivors working in research institutions. It also shows the impact of circulation and emigration on the diffusion of those topics across boundaries. Although initially positioned as a centre devoted to French Jewry and the depiction of its sufferings during the war, the CDJC from the very beginning, and because of the migration influx of several Polish Jewish refugees, also publicised quite early their loss, hence giving the French audience access to testimonies by Polish Jewish children or about the survival in places from which the refugees had come – mostly Warsaw, but sometimes other cities as well, such as Lviv, or smaller towns in Poland, like Mińsk Mazowiecki. The arrival in Paris of Yiddish writers who had survived the war in occupied Poland, e.g. Ephraim Sedlecki, Jechiel Granatsztajn, or Leib Rochman, enabled them to make their testimonies available to readers in France, though predominantly Jews. It is worth noticing that the published excerpts from their narratives, initially written in Yiddish, were presented not so much as testimonies of survival, but as texts from “a young generation of Yiddish writers” (*Le Monde juif*, n° 16, 1949). For the editors of the journal, it was equally important to disseminate knowledge about the destruction of European Jews and to help rebuilt a new Jewish – and here, especially Yiddish – literature.

In this aspect, members of the CDJC who advocated the importance of literature had their counterparts in post-war Poland, whether in the Central Jewish Historical Commission or its successor body, the Jewish Historical Institute. Early publications of the CKZH included attempts to name and count the Jewish writers murdered during the Holocaust; literary texts written during the occupation were also published (Gebirtig, 1946).

5.1. One joint publication: “Dos buch fun Lublin” (1952)

The last example to be mentioned here, although not related directly with the participation of the CŻKH nor the CDJC, was the joint publication in Paris in 1952 of the Memory Book or *yizkor bukh* in Yiddish, about the city of Lublin (Kopciowski, 2011, pp. 9–136). This publication is important in as much as it is one of the only five *yizker bikher* published in France, while the majority of such books were published in Israel or in the US by survivors in *landsmanshaftn* or mutual aid societies formed by Jewish immigrants from the same hometowns, but also because of its quite early publication and the cooperation of authors across the borders between Poland, France, and Israel. As I have shown elsewhere (Kichelewski, 2018), this publication contained articles written by several members of the CŻKH and ŻIH, before or after their emigration from Poland: Nachman Blumenthal, as the coordinator of the book, and Isaiah Trunk, who had both just left for Israel; Noe Gruss who had left for Paris; Ida Gliksztejn and Tatiana Burstin-Berenstein, who were still in Poland. Moreover, the book contained several archival documents but also articles initially published in the journal of the Jewish Historical Institute. Last, the book also had a very hybrid character, typical of *yizker bikher*, mixing historical documents, testimonies and literary accounts, some of them by Polish Jewish refugees who had just made their way to Paris, such as Granatsztajn, whose narrative had already been made available for the French speaking audience in *Le Monde juif* in 1949, as previously mentioned.

6. CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study has shown how two important Jewish documentation centres, i.e. the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland and the Center of Contemporary Jewish Documentation in France, shared similar visions for the transmission of the history and memory of the Holocaust. This was in part due to maintained transnational links and migrations of key figures from Poland to France. Yet, one has to keep in mind that each centre had its own autonomy and was, of course, closely linked to the national political context. However, contrasted the reconstruction policies of the two countries might have been, both shared some priorities, one of them being a strong emphasis on the loss and the future of their children (Zahra, 2011, p. 8; Doron, 2015, p. 2). This could explain their shared interest to publish children’s testimonies. Similarly, both institutions tended to celebrate the fighting dimension of the Jewish experience, in order to legitimise the active role of Jews during the war – as part of the anti-fascist movement in Poland, that the official discourse would soon encourage; and to be considered

as “political” rather than “racial” deportees in France, thus to be part of the celebrated Resistance. For these reasons, a crucial episode such as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, even if it did not involve many survivors living on France, could well fit the political agenda of the French CDJC.

Last, the example of *Dos Buch fun Lublin* shows that circulations between research and publication produced in Poland and France managed to continue well into the 1950s, despite the drastic changes imposed upon Jewish institutions in Poland after the Stalinisation of the country from 1948 on. Such circulations owed a lot to the migration of former members of the Jewish historical commissions and subsequently the Jewish Historical Institute, from Poland to France, migrations that would last well into the 1970s, with the arrival of historian Adam Rutkowski to the CDJC after 1968, contributing to the publication in French journal of previous articles and documents he had been working on while working at ŻIH. Both centres held many similarities both in their motivations, actions, topics of interest, and ways of considering the nature and structure of testimonies. However, the circulation remained in most part restricted to the Jewish community, and the Yiddish-speaking community in the case of *yizker bikher*. That would explain in part why those testimonies and precious voices of the survivors striving to give sense and account of their dreadful experiences largely failed to be heard and understood in mainstream European societies. Whether in the process of social reconstruction or because of political ideologies, both East and West put aside the specificity of the Jewish experience of the Second World War. It would take decades for these voices to be at last heard and considered by researchers.

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