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CHURCH

„ST. NATIVITY OF THE VIRGIN”
Milanovo village, Municipality of Svoge



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www.sofoblast.government.bg

This brochure is produced within the frame of a project,
contract registration number 24-10M-39/24.04.2015
"The temple of the ancestral heritage" – Conservation, refurbishment and
exposition of Nativity of the Blessed Virgin church in the village of Milanovo, Svoge
municipality under Programme BG08 "Cultural heritage and contemporary arts,
Measure 1 "Cultural heritage restored, renovated and protected" funded under the
European Economic Area Financial mechanism 2009 – 2014."

www.culture-eea-bg.org
www.eeagrants.org

This project is funded under programme BG08
"Cultural heritage and contemporary arts,
Measure 1 "Cultural heritage restored, renovated and protected"
– European Economic Area Financial mechanism 2009 – 2014.

St. Nativity of the Virgin church is situated in the small mountain hamlet Staro selo. It is one of the five hamlets of the village of Milanovo, which are located at an altitude from 300 to 1500 m above the sea level above the Iskar gorge near the village of Gara Lakatnik. Administratively, the village of Milanovo is within the region of Svoge municipality, Sofia region. 75% of the lands are part of the territory of Vrachanski Balkan natural park. The landscape is middle-mountain type and highly varying, including deep gorges, steep slopes, and smooth ridges with sub-Alpine elements.

The so called "Lakatnishki skali" (Lakatnik rocks) also are situated in the village lands. They are the most attractive section of the picturesque Iskar river canyon. Residents of the village of Milanovo call these rocks Arzhishkiyo (Raxhishkiyo) kamik. The first alpine climbing with ropes has taken place here in 1931.

The breath-taking nature in the gorge has inspired the popular poet Ivan Vazov who has berhymed it in his travel notes and poems.

Public administrations, such as Sofa regional administration and the Directorate of Vrachanski Balkan natural park, as well as local people and local authority are all committed to preservation of this unique natural and cultural heritage.

The successful cooperation between all of them is the basis for the development of a restoration and conservation project of St. Nativity of the Virgin church, which would contribute to revival of local traditions and customs typical for this area, and also for the development of environmental and sustainable tourism.



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Distance to the capital Sofia – 64 km
Distance to Vratza – 48 km

According to the sagas of the locals the church was built in the sunniest spot and namely where the first and the last sun's ray cross. St. Nativity of the Virgin Chapel is a unique and typical medieval Bulgarian Church dating back to 1492. It is situated 5 km from the contemporary Milanovo Village (Svoge Municipality), in the Staro Selo neighbourhood, surrounded by beautiful and preserved nature. It was built with chiselled stones bound by mortar. The murals used to cover the entire surface of the interior.

The church is made of stones; it is a nave and apse church with semi-cylindrical stone arch. It was built with chiselled stones bound by mortar. A significant portion of the murals are preserved, while a major part of them are hidden under the plaster. In the north-eastern corner of the altar you can find the canonical niche and the washbasin. The iconostasis of this temple is not an exception – looted and empty, and on the floor there are scattered marriage licences dating back a hundred years ago.

Above the altar there is a comparatively well-preserved image of Virgin Mary. The murals best preserved are on a portion of the arch where there is an amazing version of the Last Supper. These are the visible images. The envisaged restoration within the project „Ancestral Memory Temple” – Conservation, refurbishment and exposition of St. Nativity of the Virgin church in the village of Milanovo, Svoge municipality under Programme BG08 “Cultural heritage and contemporary arts, Measure 1 “Cultural heritage restored, renovated and protected” funded under the European Economic Area Financial mechanism 2009 – 2014.” is expected to reveal more.

The Church was declared a cultural monument of national significance. At present it is in a bad condition and that leads to an immediate danger of irreversible damages to the structure and the murals.





The Historical Description of Osikovo Village in 1927 says that the church was built "when the number of houses had grown to 10-12. In the History of the village of Milanovo, based on data by Petar Gionkov Handjijski, who was the mayor of the village around 1902, it is said that "the church was made around 500 years ago" but under the pressure of the Ottoman enslaver it was abandoned, however it was restored and sanctified in 1865. The Historical Description says that "upon repair works 150 years ago (i.e. 1777) everything was erased. Obviously, here, there are discrepancies in the timing or there were two events.

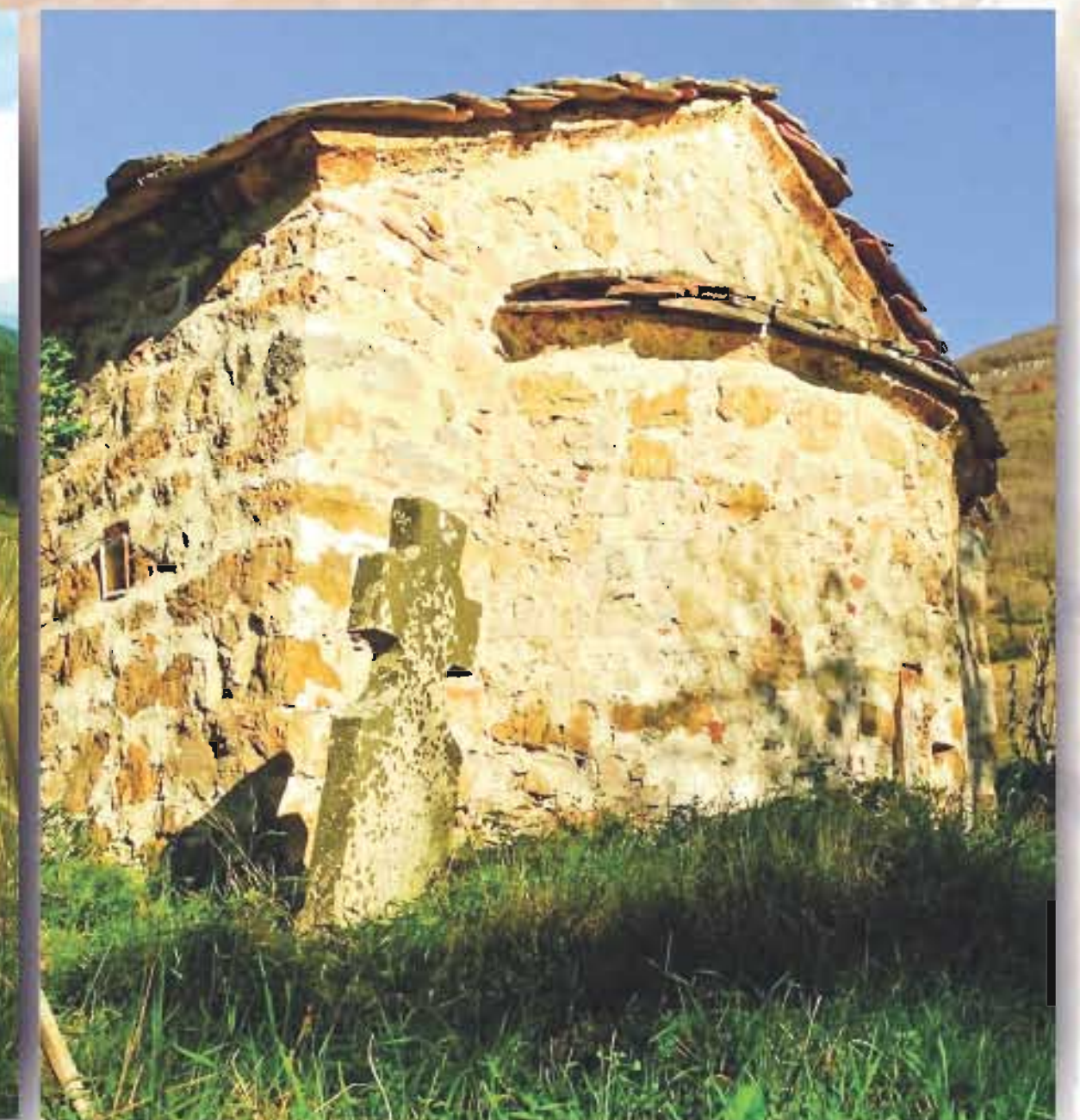
In the period from 1939 to 1940 the writer Dimitar Nikolov, who had been born in Ozirovo Village, shed some light on the subject. While visiting the church in Staro Selo, he finds the inscription above the door, copies it as seen, translates it and publishes it in the Church Gazette, issue 6 of 1940, in the article One Old Shrine. The answer has been given: It was started and it was finished on July 15 in the year of 7,000 since the Creation", i.e. 1492. The translation was confirmed in 2009 by Iasen Tzvetkov from the village of Milanovo, graduate of the National High School of Ancient Languages and Cultures in Sofia. During the past 70 years since Dimitar Nikolov's visit, the inscription has been deteriorated and now it is not what it used to be.

After the death of Priest Kotzov Ragiov in 1984 the chapel has not been used for its normal purposes. It has been looted many times; a part of the surviving icons have been to this day kept by the long-standing chapel warden, Alexander Tzvetkov Alexov, age 80, from Milanovo.

The chapel in Staroto Selo used to have a bell which was bought during the time of Mayor Petar Gionkov Handjijski, i.e. circa 1902. For the purchase, the mayor collected copper from the residents and a smith manufactured the bell. The residents of the village, who are over 50 years of age, know and remember what an amazing sound this bell used to have. The bell was stolen and another bell was dumped along the road to Druzhevo, by the outskirts of the village. This replacement bell serves the new chapel and has a nice sound but it is not the same as the old bell. The chapel warden, Alexander Tzvetkov says that the two bells were made by the same craftsman, but their metal contents differ, hence the difference in their sounds.

From the translations of the Ottoman Tax Registers it is clear that in the period from 1515 to 1520 the taxpayers were Priest Radivoi and Priest Radul, in the period from 1541 to 1542 those were Priest Bero and Priest Peyo, and in the period from 1566 to 1574 it was Priest Doino.

This is a proof that the village had a chapel and sermons were held in those old times of the yoke.



THE MURALS

The entire inside of the chapel was art painted. Today, significant fragments of the murals are preserved, but a major part of them is hidden under the plaster. In the apse there is a considerably well-preserved image of Mary in Heaven (Bogoroditza Shirshaia Nebes) and a frieze with medallions of saints. Below them are the images of the church forefathers, but they are damaged and not much has been left.

A fragment was discovered on the South wall of a saint behind the throne and a Biblical scene by the west wall. Also on the west wall there is a commemorative inscription: "In the name of the Father and for the triumph of the Son and the ... of the Holy Ghost – Amen. It was built (this) shrine on the nativity of our Holy Mother of God and ever-virgin Mary. It was commenced and completed on 15th of July in the year of 7000 (from the Creation) – 1492". One heavily damaged wall (to the left of the destroyed Assumption (Uspenie Bogorodichno) was found including the almost unrecognisable images of St St Constantine and Elena to the left of the door.

Only little parts of the murals are visible on the north wall, destroyed by damp and mould. At the zenith of the arch above the altar area the image of Mary is comparatively well-preserved. The most well-preserved murals occupy a part of the arch above the south wall, adjacent to the west wall. There, you can see a magnificent version of the Last Supper.

Inside the chapel's altar there is an altar stone covered with plaster and inscribed with decorative motifs.

And yet the archaeologists and historians will be deciphering the inscriptions and murals that obviously, for the time being, hide many undiscovered plots.



RESTORATION

The restoration and construction works of the chapel and the surrounding area start from the roof of the shrine. The entire roof part is envisaged to be restored, while working under a temporary protective covering during the entire duration of the works. These works include removing and sorting of tiles, replacement of broken or eroded ones with new ones, of identical material, dimensions and processing. A new mortar binding solution has been applied on which the assembly of the tiles will be treated as masonry on incline.

Regarding the stone walls, all remnants of contemporary plastering are to be removed along the west facade and the masonry benches. All later plastering on the surfaces of stones and masonry joints are to be removed. A protective coating will be applied using a deep penetrating waterproof and protective product. At the apertures of the facade the temporary glass with wooden frames and wooden beams will be removed. Decorative metal grates made with wrought iron will be installed, adding a protective aluminum mesh, installed on the inside of the grates for protection against animals, while not impeding the natural ventilation of the interior.

The rotten lower part of the entrance door of the chapel will be replaced.

Regarding the chapel's yard the plan includes the construction of a new wooden structure over the stone masonry base for the purpose of installing a clapper. In the missing parts walls stone masonry will be built using the existing one as a model. Two gates will be formed – southern and northern – accessing the yard of the chapel's property, which will comprise two low wooden gates – pen fencing type, along the old roads to the village.

Alleys will be built connecting the two egresses to the yard, as well as the exposed elements of the area adjacent to the chapel. The pavement will be done using stone slabs irregular in size and positioning.

A visitor's centre is envisaged to be built. It will be a new two-level structure situated in the low southeast part of the chapel's yard, at the egress to and from the village. The first level will contain the hygiene amenities and a storage area, and the second level will feature multifunctional space that can be used for reception or conducting community feasts.

The building is planned to be built using natural materials in unison with the old building tradition of the village. The ground floor will have stone walls which will serve as retaining walls for offsetting the displacement of the terrain. The pavement of the ground level will be stone slabs over a reinforced mortar coating. The second level is entirely wooden encased with processed planks. The roof will be executed using tiles bound with mortar applying a double Voalit layer underneath.

It is envisaged the visitors centre to be used seasonally – during the months with good weather, therefore no heating or insulation on the outer surfaces are planned.



THE VILLAGE

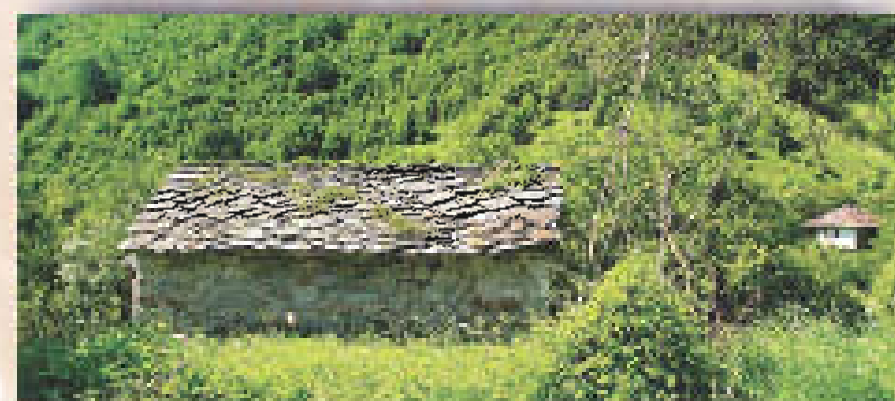
Prior to 1950 the village of Milanovo was called Osikovo. The name Osikovo derives from osika, or aspen. There are traces that the land of Milanovo was inhabited from earliest historical and ancient times. It is supposed that the caves along Iskar River – Temnata Dupka (the Dark Hole), Kalugerski Dol (the Frier's Vale), Svinskata Dupka (the Pig's Hole) and others – were inhabited by people from the earliest ancient times. Ore was extracted from the mines in Gerana, Vilia Glava, and Boeva Mogila, which was transported for processing to Plakatniza Mine.

Initially the village was formed in the closed valley place where the inhabitants could find greater safety from the Ottomans, and the climate was more suitable for living.

Also, there is a story that the village in the area of Staroto Selo was settled after Bulgaria had fallen under Ottoman rule. During that time in a village called Osikovo in the Rodopite – Thrace an outfit was formed to fight the invader. The Ottomans captured the outfit, tortured its members and executed many of them, including the chieftain who was also a priest. The wife of the chieftain got scared and together with her four sons loaded the horses with whatever they could and ran across the Balkan to find a more secure place. They started off up Maritza River and along the road to the Sofia Plain continue onwards along Iskar River until they reached Proboinitza River. From there they headed to the area of Razhishta – Gradishteto, and reached the area of Mramor. There they spotted arable land and discovered that many years ago there places had been inhabited by people who had disappeared since then. The family remained and settled there. They stayed 2-3 years but realised that they could not stay any longer because of the road that had led them to the same place. That road was used by other people and it was possible that the Ottomans might come as well. Then they decided to move to a more hidden place and they shift to the area of Shavaretz.

There they found a more suitable place and a good arable land and water. It's considered that the well that was named in the past and is still named Diadov Kladenetz (the Grandpa's Well) stems from our ancestors, the ancient ones. Soon after that the sons married forming families and another move was necessary. While shepherding their stock, mainly consisting of goats, they spotted the land that is now occupied by Staroto Selo – Osikovo. There they found a flat area overgrown by woods and they started cutting the trees down to create arable land. Later they decided to shift to the area of Laka where they could find more water. This is the assumption of how the first settlement was formed in the first half of the 15th century. Later on, in 1492, when there were 12 houses already, the chapel was built.

Following the founding of the settlement, it quickly grew due to the suitable secure conditions because the village was hidden away in the Balkan hollow – far away from the sight of the invader. The spacious spaces around the village allowed the development of livestock breeding and agriculture. The inhabitants were mainly occupied with sheep, goats, kettle and horses. They grew all kinds of crops – wheat, corn, oats, barley, potatoes, flax, etc. Beekeeping was also developed. Vines, mulberry trees and silkworms were grown in Svrazhen. It is known that a portion of the inhabitants were craftsmen: tub carving, woodworking, hide processing. These articles were transported across the Balkan along trades routes to Vratza and other settlements on the Denube Plain and traded for grain foods and money. The gathering of the wheat and the other activities were carried out using horses nearby the fields of Rusinov Del, Mramor, Razhishta, Lak, Guvna and others. There hey, straw, leaves, corn were obtained and then transported to the village using horses.



STARO SELO NEIGHBOURHOOD

Sveto Rozhdenstvo Bogorodichno Chapel is located in the Staro Selo Neighbourhood and according to the deciphered inscription above the entrance, it was built in 1492.

According to a story told by the locals there was a plague in the old settlement of the contemporary neighborhood. A person was dying in each house. Then the people found twin brothers and two twin heifers and made a circular furrow around the village. Following a sermon they made an oath that no one will settle elsewhere. This is the reason that there are two places around the village bearing the name Krasto (the Cross). According to the legend the first to break the oath were the Bartzovitzs or Semovs, as well as Kerefeovs, who used to live on the slope above the chapel.

The first cemetery was in the chapel's yard, now a lawn. Funerals were carried out by each family. Following the removal of the old cemetery, at holidays such as Georgiovdan (St. George's Day), Petkovdan (St. Petko's Day), etc. the people aligned by family in the yard of the chapel in the order they were buried. They put food on the graves of their relatives. Following the tragic accident and the demise of 15 people from Milanovo in 1968 the cemetery was relocated from Staro Selo to Tzarkvishte, where it still exists. Unfortunately, there are no more traditional ways of burial, everything is done helter-skelter, and nobody cares about preserving the tradition.

After the death of Priest Simeon Kotzov Ragiiov in 1984 the chapel was abandoned and looted multiple times, but a part of the surviving icons are kept till this day.

The population of Milanovo (Osikovo) from the most ancient times has been Bulgarian and Christian. This is told in the legends and there are traces of sacred places all over the region.

The land of the village contains many votive offering sites dedicated to different saints who have been worshipped by the local families. These include the votive offering grounds of Vlaov Krast (Vlaov Cross) – worshipping St Iliia of Vlaovtzi, Troitza (Trinity) – worshipping the Holy Trinity of Pandovtzi, Suliovo Ravnishte (Suliovo Flats) – worshipping St Peter and Paul of Suliiovtzi, St Spas on the mound – worshipping St Spas of Kiuovtzi, Mogilkata (The Little Mound) in the Razhishta Neighbourhood – The Holy Cross Day.



The Traditions and Ancestral Memory Festival is the final cultural event that draws the attention of the wider community to the restoration of Sveto Rozhdenstvo Bogorodichno Chapel.

The Festival includes representatives of the Roma ethnos in the region. They present specific elements of their life and culture. The event will be joined by representatives of Norway, who will present their local cuisine and traditions.

The Festival covers three consecutive days on the lawn nearby the restored chapel. Alongside the participants already mentioned, there will be representatives of the community – local inhabitants, tourists and visitors of Vrachanski Balkan Reserve and Milanovo Village.

The programme starts with a presentation of the history of Sveto Rozhdenstvo Bogorodichno Chapel (Holy Nativity of Mary), folk customs characteristic for the region. There will be a reenactment of "sedianka" (typical Bulgarian gathering). People art community centres and folk art amateurs are invited to take part. On the second day of the festival there will be a folk celebration. Songs and dances typical for the region will be presented, such as Chichovo Dete (Uncle's Child), Vlashki, Sitnoto po varshchki" (typical folk dance). Those are unique for the village. The programme also envisages a makeshift exhibition of drawing on the topic of Traditions and Ancestral Memory.

Prior to the end of the Festival a voluntary campaign to clean the area will be organised.



PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The Ancestral Memory Shrine Project is initiated by the Regional Administration of Sofia Region (leading organisation) in partnership with the Directorate of Vrachanski Balkan Reserve and POLAR PERMACULTURE SOLUTIONS – Kingdom of Norway.

MAIN OBJECTIVES

- Preservation and restoration of "Sveto Rozhdestvo Bogorodichno Chapel" (Holy Nativity of Mary Chapel) in Milanovo, design and planning of the entire and integrated exposition environment;
- Forging stable partnership between the public and civil organisations of Bulgaria and Norway for the purpose of documenting the cultural heritage, formation of a culture of sustainable development, encouragement of multiform culture, preservation and protection of the cultural and natural heritage and regional development.

MAIN ACTIVITIES

- **Studies:**
 - Art study including study of the icons, icon artwork, decorations and murals from an art point of view, dating, belonging to respective schools, art value, etc.;
 - Local lore study including historical data and sources for the chapel and the region, toponymy, ethnography, rites and ceremonies, myths and legends, natural richness and biodiversity, etc.;
 - Votive Offering and Ceremonies in the Iskar Gorge study;
- **Technical and working projects and conducting preservation, restoration and construction works;**
- **Professional training with representatives of the Roma minority and temporary employment;**
- **Organising and conducting Traditions and Ancestral Memory Festival;**
- **Preparation of information materials,**

MAIN TARGET GROUPS

- Representatives of the civil community – locals, tourists and visitors of Vrachanski Balkan Reserve and the village of Milanovo;;
- People interested in the development of the cultural heritage, the core of the material and spiritual culture, with interests in the area of a culture for sustainable development and cultural dialogue;
- People of disadvantaged status – Roma population, and other minorities;
- Researchers, students, and people seeking opportunities to deepen their knowledge in the field of cultural heritage and the history of Bulgaria, Norway, Iceland, and Lichtenstein;
- Representatives of the public authorities and cultural institutions, non-profit organisations from Bulgaria and Norway.

EXPECTED RESULTS

- A restored and valuable cultural monument that will be exposed in the authentic culture and the environment;
- 20 representatives of the Roma population in the region and the town of Svoge will be trained achieving the educational level of Landscaper or Road Worker;
- Documented cultural heritage through studies of one of the most interesting cultural phenomenon in the region of the Iskar Gorge – votive offering sites and ceremonies;
- Traditions and Ancestral Memory Festival ;
- A forged partnership between governmental organisations that operate in the field of cultural heritage.

The Project has started in April 2015 with duration of 25 months. The total budget is EUR 342,182.81

PARTNERS

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