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Army Air Forces
Headquarters, Africa-Middle East Wing
Air Transport Command
Station #1

APO 625, c/o Postmaster
Miami, Florida
1 November 1943

C O N F I D E N T I A L

Rabbi Philip Bernstein
Jewish Welfare Board
220 Fifth Avenue
New York, N. Y.

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AJJC AR 33/45

Dear Rabbi Bernstein:

Unless I misunderstand, I am expected to assist in organizing civilian Jewish communities adjacent to Army camps, so that Jewish men may find wholesome Jewish surroundings in which to spend leisure hours. Until I reached Marrakech, Morocco, there were no Jewish communities that could be contacted for this purpose, there never being as many as half-a-dozen Jews in the nearby town. It will be inadvisable to consider such a project in Marrakech, although its Jewish population is about 8,000. The poverty, disease, and civil insecurity of the native Jewish community make it highly imprudent to pursue the matter.

I feel sure that you would take my word on these facts without further ado. I think, however, that you ought to know certain facts of the local situation in Marrakech, so that you will see fit to refer this community to the Joint Distribution Committee for study and assistance.

The vast majority of Jews live in a ghetto within the native section, or medina. Long before the coming of Naziism and Viehyism, they felt the full force of being the humblest element of a feudalistic Moslem society. In spite of the fact that they had citizenship status under democratic France, they have been poverty-stricken, illiterate, and disease ridden. The black skull-cap and robe they wear over their Arab-type garments, and have for centuries, typifies their status in the community. When I asked several of them why they dress in this way, they explained matter-of-factly, that local tradition requires that they must be reminded that they are infidels, that they live here by the sufferance of their hosts, and that they should have no occasion to rejoice in their infidel status.

In the post-war period, the pressure to maintain these distinctions was considerably relaxed. But the local Jew had been so thoroughly assimilated, that very few shook off these marks of their separate status. As a matter of fact, when there were opportunities to move many of the Jews and their institutions out of the medina, the Jewish leaders won their people to this view - that since they had lived for centuries in their own section, and since the ghetto section could be improved they ought to remain. The significance of this decision was to brand the Jew a Moroccan, and not a European, and thus keep him the nethermost element of a benighted and fanatical local society.

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For many decades the Alliance Israelite Universelle has worked among them, and among other things established a school. But in this feudal society, education is not compulsory. Recently handicraft and agricultural departments have been added - yet the school reaches only the children of those Jews who have any personal standards. Illiteracy is very commonplace, and lack of vocation the rule, rather than the exception. The acceptance of the Jew of his present place in Moslem society, has not merely kept him out of the channels of world Jewish life, but has kept him ignorant and suspicious of even modern sanitation and medicine. Assuming that a hospital is a place in which to die, the Jew largely lost his opportunity to "keep clean". The Jewish section of the local native hospital was largely superimposed by the benevolence of the French Rothschild family.

There have been individuals who have risen above this lethargy and ignorance. Some of them have had European schooling, and accumulated great wealth, judged by local standards. They have been genuinely sacrificial in assisting their people. In a society that knows nothing of charity or civic responsibility, their example has been outstanding indeed. They have maintained their Jewish loyalties and moral integrity in the face of great temptation. But the number of such families is less than a handful - Abipol, Israel and Assor exhausts to my knowledge, the group of people of means - and their sacrifice has scarcely dented the colossal misery of the group.

In August 1943, the medina was placed "off-limits". Bubonic plague and typhus had reached epidemic proportions. The epidemics have meantime run their course, but the military ban has not been lifted, and I think rightly so. It is inconceivable to me that the epidemics could be checked, because of the filth, vermin, and overcrowding which undoubtedly produced the epidemics remain unchanged. It is true that the government built a bathhouse for the Alliance School because of the outbreak, but that seems a very modest palliative.

The food situation is sensational. War-time rationing of already depleted stocks, complicated by Vichy "principal", created the additional communal problem of hunger. American lend-lease commodities have reached Marrakech, but they have not perceptibly changed the situation. Many explanations are offered, but all must be classed as heresy because personnel of the armed forces are not authorized to conduct investigations of local life in allied countries. What I have to offer are the chance discoveries of a visit to town to set up a hospitality committee, conversations with Christian missionaries, and military personnel. Even with this limited substantiation the facts are self-evident.

On yes, the explanations - the amenities of Moslem society require that the faithful be fed first. The black market consumes so much before legitimate distribution begins - even the venality of Jewish communal leaders is blamed for the starvation of the Jews. All of this is "unsubstantiated", - but hunger persists. The Jews do NOT complain. They insist that the government, even under Vichy, was as generous as possible. - that you cannot distribute stores that do not exist. They point out that the government allows the Alliance school extra rations

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so that the pupils can to the extent of need, 50%, get breakfast and lunch at school - because they come from such underfed homes.

But Frenchmen of good-will and missionaries do not agree with this explanation. They point out that Jews were beaten, insulted, and in some cases killed at the food and cloth distributions - that the hatred of Jews by French leaders and Moslems provoked these disorders. But even if all the explanations be discounted, it is self-evident that Jewish children beg and pimp in the streets. And those who frequent brothels point out that they have disproportionate numbers of Jewish women in them. And equally significant - a number of people in the Jewish community have begged me unofficially to use "my good offices" to bring their plight to the attention of those who could help them. On Yom Kippur morning, a report circulated through the community, and reached even the Army camp - that the Jewish prostitutes had not worked on Kil Nidre night, thus creating a near-panic. To understate, venereal disease has been added to the burden of the Jewish community.

This letter has been cleared through the Intelligence and Security section of this Headquarters - and they have asked me to remind you that this letter is to be shared only with those organizations and government agencies, "to whom this may concern." It is not for publication under any circumstances. May I reiterate, this letter is intended to give you a small picture of the Marrekech situation so that it may be brought trust for assistance. The local Jews feel that they need more teachers - but I believe in keeping with the traditional rules of Jewish charity, that one should feed the hungry before giving them advice.

With warmest personal regards, I am

Very sincerely yours,
/s/ Edward Ellenbogen
EDWARD ELLENBOGEN
Chaplain - U S A
Assistant Wing Chaplain

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