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The Harrison Report (September 1945)

This report by lawyer and civil rights activist Earl G. Harrison for the American President Harry S. Truman from the summer of 1945 painted a rather grim picture of the situation of Jewish and Eastern European refugees and expellees in Germany and Austria. Harrison criticized the fact that the situation of former concentration and labor camp inmates had hardly improved under Allied liberators. In many cases, they had to continue living in the same barbed wire-enclosed camps as before. There was a lack of food, clothing, medicine, and winterized buildings. Appropriate psychological care and efforts at family reunification and repatriation hardly existed. Harrison criticized the Allied bureaucracy and the behavior of the officers on the ground, who were more intent on not spoiling their relationship with the German population than on helping victims. Offers of help from civilian aid offices or the refugees themselves were being turned down. The situation of the Jews was especially disastrous. Harrison was strongly in favor allowing many death camp survivors to follow their wish and emigrate to Palestine. He also recommended allowing more refugees to enter the U.S.

Report of Earl G. Harrison

Mission to Europe to inquire into the conditions and needs of those among the displaced persons in the liberated countries of Western Europe and in the SHAEF area of Germany – with particular reference to the Jewish refugees – who may possibly be stateless or non-repatriable.

London, England

The President,
The White House,
Washington

MY DEAR MR. PRESIDENT:

Pursuant to your letter of June 22, 1945, I have the honor to present to you a partial report upon my recent mission to Europe to inquire into (1) the conditions under which displaced persons and particularly those who may be stateless or non-repatriable are at present living, especially in Germany and Austria, (2) the needs of such persons, (3) how those needs are being met at present by the military authorities, the governments of residence and international and private relief bodies, and (4) the views of the possibly non-repatriable persons as to their future destinations.

My instructions were to give particular attention to the problems, needs and views of the Jewish refugees among the displaced people, especially in Germany and Austria. The report, particularly this partial report, accordingly deals in the main with that group.

On numerous occasions appreciation was expressed by the victims of Nazi persecution for the interest of the United States Government in them. As my report shows they are in need of attention and help. Up to this point they have been "liberated" more in a military sense than actually. For reasons explained in the report, their particular problems, to this time, have not been given attention to any appreciable extent; consequently they feel that they, who were in so many ways the first and worst victims of Nazism, are being neglected by their liberators.

Upon my request, the Department of State authorized Dr. Joseph J Schwartz to join me in the mission. Dr. Schwartz, European Director of the American Joint Distribution Committee, was granted a leave of absence from that organization for the purpose of accompanying me. His long and varied experience in refugee problems as well as his familiarity with the Continent and the people made Dr. Schwartz a most valuable associate; this report represents our joint views, conclusions and recommendations.

During various portions of the trip I had, also, the assistance of Mr. Patrick M. Malin, Vice Director of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees and Mr. Herbert Katzski of the War Refugee Board. These gentlemen, likewise, have had considerable experience in refugee matters. Their assistance and cooperation were most helpful in the course of the survey.

I. GERMANY AND AUSTRIA

Conditions

(1) Generally speaking, three months after V-E Day and even longer after the liberation of individual groups, many Jewish displaced persons and other possibly non-repatriables are living under guard behind barbed-wire fences, in camps of several descriptions (built by the Germans for slave-laborers and Jews), including some of the most notorious of the concentration camps, amidst crowded, frequently unsanitary and generally grim conditions, in complete idleness, with no opportunity, except surreptitiously, to communicate with the outside world, waiting, hoping for some word of encouragement and action in their behalf.

(2) While there has been marked improvement in the health of survivors of the Nazi starvation and persecution program, there are many pathetic malnutrition cases both among the hospitalized and in the general population of the camps. The death rate has been high since liberation, as was to be expected. One Army Chaplain, a Rabbi, personally attended, since liberation 23,000 burials (90 per cent Jews) at Bergen Belsen alone, one of the largest and most vicious of the concentration camps, where, incidentally, despite persistent reports to the contrary, fourteen thousand displaced persons are still living, including over seven thousand

Jews. At many of the camps and centers including those where serious starvation cases are, there is a marked and serious lack of needed medical supplies.

(3) Although some Camp Commandants have managed, in spite of the many obvious difficulties, to find clothing of one kind or another for their charges, many of the Jewish displaced persons, late in July, had no clothing other than their concentration camp garb – a rather hideous striped pajama effect – while others, to their chagrin, were obliged to wear German S.S. uniforms. It is questionable which clothing they hate the more.

(4) With a few notable exceptions, nothing in the way of a program of activity or organized effort toward rehabilitation has been inaugurated and the internees, for they are literally such, have little to do except to dwell upon their plight, the uncertainty of their future and, what is more unfortunate, to draw comparisons between their treatment “under the Germans” and “in liberation.” Beyond knowing that they are no longer in danger of the gas chambers, torture, and other forms of violent death, they see – and there is – little change. The morale of those who are either stateless or who do not wish to return to their countries of nationality is very low. They have witnessed great activity and efficiency in returning people to their homes but they hear or see nothing in the way of plans for them and consequently they wonder and frequently ask what “liberation” means. This situation is considerably accentuated where, as in so many cases, they are able to look from their crowded and bare quarters and see the German civilian population, particularly in the rural areas, to all appearances living normal lives in their own homes.

(5) The most absorbing worry of these Nazi and war victims concerns relatives – wives, husbands, parents, children. Most of them have been separated for three, four or five years and they cannot understand why the liberators should not have undertaken immediately the organized effort to re-unite family groups. Most of the very little which has been done in this direction has been informal action by the displaced persons themselves with the aid of devoted Army Chaplains, frequently Rabbis, and the American Joint Distribution Committee. Broadcasts of names and locations by the Psychological Warfare Division at Luxembourg have been helpful, although the lack of receiving sets has handicapped the effectiveness of the program. Even where, as has been happening, information has been received as to relatives living in other camps in Germany, it depends on the personal attitude and disposition of the Camp Commandant whether permission can be obtained or assistance received to follow up on the information. Some Camp Commandants are quite rigid in this particular, while others lend every effort to join family groups.

(6) It is difficult to evaluate the food situation fairly because one must be mindful of the fact that quite generally food is scarce and is likely to be more so during the winter ahead. On the other hand, in presenting the factual situation, one must raise the question as to how much longer many of these people, particularly those who have over such a long period felt persecution and near starvation, can survive on a diet composed principally of bread and coffee, irrespective of the caloric content. In many camps, the 2,000 calories included 1,250 calories of a black, wet and extremely unappetizing bread. I received the distinct impression and considerable

substantiating information that large numbers of the German population – again principally in the rural areas – have a more varied and palatable diet than is the case with the displaced persons. The Camp Commandants put in their requisitions with the German burgomeister and many seemed to accept whatever he turned over as being the best that was available.

(7) Many of the buildings in which displaced persons are housed are clearly unfit for winter use and everywhere there is great concern about the prospect of a complete lack of fuel. There is every likelihood that close to a million displaced persons will be in Germany and Austria when winter sets in. The outlook in many areas so far as shelter, food and fuel are concerned is anything but bright.

II. NEEDS OF THE JEWS

While it is impossible to state accurately the number of Jews now in that part of Germany not under Russian occupation, all indications point to the fact that the number is small, with one hundred thousand probably the top figure; some informed persons contend the number is considerably smaller. The principal nationality groups are Poles, Hungarians, Rumanians, Germans and Austrians.

The first and plainest need of these people is a recognition of their actual status and by this I mean their status as Jews. Most of them have spent years in the worst of the concentration camps. In many cases, although the full extent is not yet known, they are the sole survivors of their families and many have been through the agony of witnessing the destruction of their loved ones. Understandably, therefore, their present condition, physical and mental, is far worse than that of other groups.

While SHAEF (now Combined Displaced Persons Executive) policy directives have recognized formerly persecuted persons, including enemy and ex-enemy nationals, as one of the special categories of displaced persons, the general practice thus far has been to follow only nationality lines. While admittedly it is not normally desirable to set aside particular racial or religious groups from their nationality categories, the plain truth is that this was done for so long by the Nazis that a group has been created which has special needs. Jews as Jews (not as members of their nationality groups) have been more severely victimized than the non-Jewish members of the same or other nationalities.

When they are now considered only as members of nationality groups, the result is that special attention cannot be given to their admittedly greater needs because, it is contended, doing so would constitute preferential treatment and lead to trouble with the non-Jewish portion of the particular nationality group.

Thus there is a distinctly unrealistic approach to the problem. Refusal to recognize the Jews as such has the effect, in this situation, of closing one's eyes to their former and more barbaric persecution, which has already made them a separate group with greater needs.

Their second great need can be presented only by discussing what I found to be their

Wishes as to Future Destinations

(1) For reasons that are obvious and need not be labored, most Jews want to leave Germany and Austria as soon as possible. That is their first and great expressed wish and while this report necessarily deals with other needs present in the situation, many of the people themselves fear other suggestions or plans for their benefit because of the possibility that attention might thereby be diverted from the all-important matter of evacuation from Germany. Their desire to leave Germany is an urgent one. The life which they have led for the past ten years, a life of fear and wandering and physical torture, has made them impatient of delay. They want to be evacuated to Palestine now, just as other national groups are being repatriated to their homes. They do not look kindly on the idea of waiting around in idleness and in discomfort in a German camp for many months until a leisurely solution is found for them.

(2) Some wish to return to their countries of nationality but as to this there is considerable nationality variation. Very few Polish or Baltic Jews wish to return to their countries; higher percentages of the Hungarian and Rumanian groups want to return although some hasten to add that it may be only temporarily in order to look for relatives. Some of the German Jews, especially those who have intermarried, prefer to stay in Germany.

(3) With respect to possible places of resettlement for those who may be stateless or who do not wish to return to their homes, Palestine is definitely and pre-eminently the first choice. Many now have relatives there, while others, having experienced intolerance and persecution in their homelands for years, feel that only in Palestine will they be welcomed and find peace and quiet and be given an opportunity to live and work. In the case of the Polish and the Baltic Jews, the desire to go to Palestine is based in a great majority of the cases on a love for the country and devotion to the Zionist ideal. It is also true however, that there are many who wish to go to Palestine because they realize that their opportunity to be admitted into the United States or into other countries in the Western hemisphere is limited, if not impossible. Whatever the motive which causes them to turn to Palestine, it is undoubtedly true that the great majority of the Jews now in Germany do not wish to return to those countries from which they came.

(4) Palestine, while clearly the choice of most, is not the only named place of possible emigration. Some, but the number is not large, wish to emigrate to the United States where they have relatives, others to England, the British Dominions, or to South America.

Thus the second great need is the prompt development of a plan to get out of Germany and Austria as many as possible of those who wish it.

Otherwise the needs and wishes of the Jewish groups among the displaced persons can be simply stated: among their physical needs are clothing and shoes (most sorely needed), more varied and palatable diet, medicines, beds and mattresses, reading materials. The clothing for the camps too is requisitioned from the German population, and whether there is not sufficient quantity to be had or the German population has not been willing or has not been compelled to give up sufficient quantity, the internees feel particularly bitter about the state of their clothing when they see how well the German population is still dressed. The German population today is still the best dressed population in all of Europe.

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IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Now that the worst of the pressure of mass repatriation is over, it is not unreasonable to suggest that in the next and perhaps more difficult period those who have suffered most and longest be given first and not last attention.

Specifically, in the days immediately ahead, the Jews in Germany and Austria should have the first claim upon the conscience of the people of the United States and Great Britain and the military and other personnel who represent them in work being done in Germany and Austria.

2. Evacuation from Germany should be the emphasized theme, policy and practice.

(a) Recognizing that repatriation is most desirable from the standpoint of all concerned, the Jews who wish to return to their own countries should be aided to do so without further delay. Whatever special action is needed to accomplish this with respect to countries of reception or consent of military or other authorities should be undertaken with energy and determination. Unless this and other action, about to be suggested, is taken, substantial unofficial and unauthorized movements of people must be expected, and these will require considerable force to prevent, for the patience of many of the persons involved is, and in my opinion with justification, nearing the breaking point. It cannot be overemphasized that many of these people are now desperate, that they have become accustomed under German rule to employ every possible means to reach their end, and that the fear of death does not restrain them.

(b) With respect to those who do not, for good reason, wish to return to their homes, prompt planning should likewise be undertaken. In this connection, the issue of Palestine must be faced. Now that such large numbers are no longer involved and if there is any genuine sympathy for what these survivors have endured, some reasonable extension or modification of the British White Paper of 1939 ought to be possible without too serious repercussions. For some of the European Jews, there is no acceptable or even decent solution for their future other than Palestine. This is said on a purely humanitarian basis with no reference to ideological or political considerations so far as Palestine is concerned.

It is my understanding, based upon reliable information, that certificates for immigration to Palestine will be practically exhausted by the end of the current month (August 1945). What is the future to be? To anyone who has visited the concentration camps and who has talked with the despairing survivors, it is nothing short of calamitous to contemplate that the gates of Palestine should be soon closed.

The Jewish Agency of Palestine has submitted to the British Government a petition that one hundred thousand additional immigration certificates be made available. A memorandum accompanying the petition makes a persuasive showing with respect to the immediate absorptive capacity of Palestine and the current, actual man-power shortages there.

While there may be room for difference of opinion as to the precise number of such certificates which might under the circumstances be considered reasonable, there is no question but that the request thus made would, if granted, contribute much to the sound solution for the future of Jews still in Germany and Austria and even other displaced Jews, who do not wish either to remain there or to return to their countries of nationality.

No other single matter is, therefore, so important from the viewpoint of Jews in Germany and Austria and those elsewhere who have known the horrors of the concentration camps as is the disposition of the Palestine question.

Dr. Hugh Dalton, a prominent member of the new British Government, is reported as having said at the Labour Party Conference in May 1945:

“This Party has laid it down and repeated it so recently as last April ... that this time, having regard to the unspeakable horrors that have been perpetrated upon the Jews of Germany and other occupied countries in Europe, it is morally wrong and politically indefensible to impose obstacles to the entry into Palestine now of any Jews who desire to go there....”

“We also have stated clearly that this is not a matter which should be regarded as one for which the British Government alone should take responsibility; but as it comes, as do many others, in the international field, it is indispensable that there should be close agreement and co-operation among the British, American and Soviet Governments, particularly if we are going to get a sure settlement in Palestine and the surrounding countries....”

If this can be said to represent the viewpoint of the new Government in Great Britain, it certainly would not be inappropriate for the United States Government to express its interest in and support of some equitable solution of the question which would make it possible for some reasonable number of Europe's persecuted Jews, now homeless under any fair view, to resettle in Palestine. That is their wish and it is rendered desirable by the generally accepted policy of permitting family groups to unite or reunite.

(c) The United States should, under existing immigration laws, permit reasonable numbers of such persons to come here, again particularly those who have family ties in this country. As indicated earlier, the number who desire emigration to the United States is not large.

If Great Britain and the United States were to take the actions recited, it might the more readily be that other countries would likewise be willing to keep their doors reasonably open for such humanitarian considerations and to demonstrate in a practical manner their disapproval of Nazi policy which unfortunately has poisoned so much of Europe.

3. To the extent that such emigration from Germany and Austria is delayed, some immediate temporary solution must be found. In any event there will be a substantial number of the persecuted persons who are not physically fit or otherwise presently prepared for emigration.

Here I feel strongly that greater and more extensive efforts should be made to get them out of camps for they are sick of living in camps. In the first place, there is real need for such specialized places as (a) tuberculosis sanatoria and (b) rest homes for those who are mentally ill or who need a period of readjustment before living again in the world at large – anywhere. Some will require at least short periods of training or retraining before they can be really useful citizens.

But speaking more broadly, there is an opportunity here to give some real meaning to the policy agreed upon at Potsdam. If it be true, as seems to be widely conceded, that the German people at large do not have any sense of guilt with respect to the war and its causes and results, and if the policy is to be “To convince the German people that they have suffered a total military defeat and that they cannot escape responsibility for what they have brought upon themselves,” then it is difficult to understand why so many displaced persons, particularly those who have so long been persecuted and whose repatriation or resettlement is likely to be delayed, should be compelled to live in crude, over-crowded camps while the German people, in rural areas, continue undisturbed in their homes.

As matters now stand, we appear to be treating the Jews as the Nazis treated them except that we do not exterminate them. They are in concentration camps in large numbers under our military guard instead of S.S. troops. One is led to wonder whether the German people, seeing this, are not supposing that we are following or at least condoning Nazi policy.

It seems much more equitable and as it should be to witness the very few places where fearless and uncompromising military officers have either requisitioned an entire village for the benefit of displaced persons, compelling the German population to find housing where they can, or have required the local population to billet a reasonable number of them. Thus the displaced persons, including the persecuted, live more like normal people and less like prisoners or criminals or herded sheep. They are in Germany, most of them and certainly the Jews, through no fault or wish of their own. This fact is in this fashion being brought home to the German people but it is being done on too small a scale.

At many places, however, the military government officers manifest the utmost reluctance or indisposition, if not timidity, about inconveniencing the German population. They even say that their job is to get communities working properly and soundly again, that they must "live with the Germans while the DPs (displaced persons) are a more temporary problem." Thus (and I am ready to cite the example) if a group of Jews are ordered to vacate their temporary quarters, needed for military purposes, and there are two possible sites, one a block of flats (modest apartments) with conveniences and the other a series of shabby buildings with outside toilet and washing facilities the burgomeister readily succeeds in persuading the Town Major to allot the latter to the displaced persons and to save the former for returning German civilians.

This tendency reflects itself in other ways, namely, in the employment of German civilians in the offices of military government officers when equally qualified personnel could easily be found among the displaced persons whose repatriation is not imminent. Actually there have been situations where displaced persons, especially Jews, have found it difficult to obtain audiences with military government authorities because ironically they have been obliged to go through German employees who have not facilitated matters.

Quite generally, insufficient use is made of the services of displaced persons. Many of them are able and eager to work but apparently they are not considered in this regard. While appreciating that language difficulties are sometimes involved, I am convinced that, both within and outside camps, greater use could be made of the personal services of those displaced persons who in all likelihood will be on hand for some time. Happily in some camps every effort is made to utilize the services of the displaced persons and these are apt to be the best camps in all respects.

4. To the extent that (a) evacuation from Germany and Austria is not immediately possible and (b) the formerly persecuted groups cannot be housed in villages or billeted with the German population, I recommend urgently that separate camps be set up for Jews or at least for those who wish, in the absence of a better solution, to be in such camps. There are several reasons for this: (1) a great majority want it; (2) it is the only way in which administratively their special needs and problems can be met without charges of preferential treatment or (oddly enough) charges of "discrimination" with respect to Jewish agencies now prepared and ready to give them assistance.

In this connection, I wish to emphasize that it is not a case of singling out a particular group for special privileges. It is a matter of raising to a more normal level the position of a group which has been depressed to the lowest depths conceivable by years of organized and inhuman oppression. The measures necessary for their restitution do not come within any reasonable interpretation of privileged treatment and are required by considerations of justice and humanity.

There has been some tendency at spots in the direction of separate camps for those who might be found to be stateless or non-repatriable or whose repatriation is likely to be deferred some

time. Actually, too, this was announced some time ago as SHAEF policy but in practice it has not been taken to mean much for there is (understandably if not carried too far) a refusal to contemplate possible statelessness and an insistence, in the interests of the large repatriation program, to consider all as repatriable. This results in a resistance to anything in the way of special planning for the "hard core," although all admit it is there and will inevitably appear. While speaking of camps, this should be pointed out: While it may be that conditions in Germany and Austria are still such that certain control measures are required, there seems little justification for the continuance of barbed-wire fences, armed guards, and prohibition against leaving the camp except by passes, which at some places are illiberally granted. Prevention of looting is given as the reason for these stern measures but it is interesting that in portions of the Seventh Army area where greater liberty of movement in and out of camps is given there is actually much less plundering than in other areas where people, wishing to leave camp temporarily, must do so by stealth.

5. As quickly as possible, the actual operation of such camps should be turned over to a civilian agency-UNRRA. That organization is aware of weaknesses in its present structure and is pressing to remedy them. In that connection, it is believed that greater assistance could be given by the military authorities, upon whom any civilian agency in Germany and Austria today is necessarily dependent so far as housing, transport and other items are concerned. While it is true the military have been urging UNRRA to get ready to assume responsibility, it is also the fact that insufficient cooperation of an active nature has been given to accomplish the desired end.

6. Since, in any event, the military authorities must necessarily continue to participate in the program for all displaced persons, especially with respect to housing, transport, security, and certain supplies, it is recommended that there be a review of the military personnel selected for Camp Commandant positions. Some serving at present, while perhaps adequate for the mass repatriation job, are manifestly unsuited for the longer-term job of working in a camp composed of people whose repatriation or resettlement is likely to be delayed. Officers who have had some background or experience in social welfare work are to be preferred and it is believed there are some who are available. It is most important that the officers selected be sympathetic with the program and that they be temperamentally able to work and to co-operate with UNRRA and other relief and welfare agencies.

7. Pending the assumption of responsibility for operations by UNRRA, it would be desirable if a more extensive plan of field visitation by appropriate Army Group Headquarters be instituted. It is believed that many of the conditions now existing in the camps would not be tolerated if more intimately known by supervisory officers through inspection tours.

8. It is urgently recommended that plans for tracing services, now under consideration, be accelerated to the fullest extent possible and that, in this same direction, communication services, if on open postal cards only, be made available to displaced persons within Germany and Austria as soon as possible. The difficulties are appreciated but it is believed that if the

anxiety of the people, so long abused and harassed, were fully understood, ways and means could be found within the near future to make such communication and tracing of relatives possible. I believe also that some of the private agencies could be helpful in this direction if given an opportunity to function.

V. OTHER COMMENTS

While I was instructed to report conditions as I found them, the following should be added to make the picture complete:

(1) A gigantic task confronted the occupying armies in Germany and Austria in getting back to their homes as many as possible of the more than six million displaced persons found in those countries. Less than three months after V-E Day, more than four million of such persons have been repatriated – a phenomenal performance. One's first impression, in surveying the situation, is that of complete admiration for what has been accomplished by the military authorities in so materially reducing the time as predicted to be required for this stupendous task. Praise of the highest order is due all military units with respect to this phase of the post-fighting job. In directing attention to existing conditions which unquestionably require remedy, there is no intention or wish to detract one particle from the preceding statements.

(2) While I did not actually see conditions as they existed immediately after liberation I had them described in detail sufficient to make entirely clear that there has been, during the intervening period, some improvement in the conditions under which most of the remaining displaced persons are living. Reports which have come out of Germany informally from refugees themselves and from persons interested in refugee groups indicate something of a tendency not to take into account the full scope of the overwhelming task and responsibilities facing the military authorities. While it is understandable that those who have been persecuted and otherwise mistreated over such a long period should be impatient at what appears to them to be undue delay in meeting their special needs, fairness dictates that, in evaluating the progress made, the entire problem and all of its ramifications be kept in mind. My effort has been, therefore, to weigh quite carefully the many complaints made to me in the course of my survey, both by displaced persons themselves and in their behalf, in the light of the many responsibilities which confronted the military authorities.

(3) While for the sake of brevity this report necessarily consisted largely of general statements, it should be recognized that exceptions exist with respect to practically all of such generalizations. One high ranking military authority predicted, in advance of my trip through Germany and Austria, that I would find, with respect to camps containing displaced persons, "some that are quite good, some that are very bad, with the average something-under satisfactory." My subsequent trip confirmed that prediction in all respects.

In order to file this report promptly so that possibly some remedial steps might be considered at as early a date as possible, I have not taken time to analyze all of the notes made in the course of the trip or to comment on the situation in France, Belgium, Holland or Switzerland, also visited. Accordingly, I respectfully request that this report be considered as partial in nature. The problems present in Germany and Austria are much more serious and difficult than in any of the other countries named and this fact, too, seemed to make desirable the filing of a partial report immediately upon completion of the mission.

In conclusion, I wish to repeat that the main solution, in many ways the only real solution, of the problem lies in the quick evacuation of all non-repatriable Jews in Germany and Austria, who wish it, to Palestine. In order to be effective, this plan must not be long delayed. The urgency of the situation should be recognized. It is inhuman to ask people to continue to live for any length of time under their present conditions. The evacuation of the Jews of Germany and Austria to Palestine will solve the problem of the individuals involved and will also remove a problem from the military authorities who have had to deal with it. The army's ability to move millions of people quickly and efficiently has been amply demonstrated. The evacuation of a relatively small number of Jews from Germany and Austria will present no great problem to the military. With the end of the Japanese war, the shipping situation should also become sufficiently improved to make such a move feasible. The civilized world owes it to this handful of survivors to provide them with a home where they can again settle down and begin to live as human beings.

Respectfully,

Earl G. Harrison

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