

THE "YOUNG WOMEN'S HEBREW ASSOCIATION,"
Under the Auspices of the National Council of Jewish Women
Early Recollections by Lea Damsky Field

An ad in the then current Social Service magazine from a Jewish Center in Detroit, Michigan announced an opening for a woman to direct dramatics and plan programs. I immediately sent a letter and my resume and to my delight, a prompt answer asked me to come for an interview.



Lea Damsky Field

Detroit was an overnight journey from Utica, New York, by train. I took a sleeper bunk bed; however, I slept very little.

Taking a taxi to the Jewish Center at 89 Rowena Street, I found myself in front of a large old home. The sign read "Young Women's Hebrew Association under the auspices of the National Council of Jewish Women." Miss Landsman, the executive director, and Mrs. Samuel Glogower, president of the National Council of Jewish Women, conducted the interview and showed me through the house. It was, as I have said, a large old home with many bedrooms on the second and third floors. These became meeting rooms and were rented to other small groups for meetings during the week, with the exception of two bedrooms on the second floor. One large front room and bath were occupied by the executive director and the other was to be occupied by the dramatic director.

The first floor was made up of the former dining room and living room and now served as the recreation room. There was an office and a so-called "powder-room." The kitchen and servants' quarters were occupied by the caretaker and his wife. In back, the three-stall garage became the auditorium with a raised platform for a stage. Its capacity was 120 chairs.

The interview was very successful and I was offered a good salary which included the room and bath on the second floor. As dramatic and program director I put the dramatic department on a more professional basis. First, I had three classes each week - beginners, intermediate and seniors. I taught them speech, diction, poise, stage presence and gestures. Instead of only presenting one-act plays with an all-girl cast, and girls trying to take men's parts, I encouraged men to come to our classes.

Then, in preparation for a three-act play to be presented at the end of the season, I turned my attention to creating a proper stage. I only had a raised platform and a curtain which had to be pulled by hand and a few scattered over-head lights to work with. There was no budget to speak of, so all alternations had to be done by volunteers. I decided to visit each young men's group who held their meetings at the Center and asked for electricians, carpenters, paper-hangers, painters and those involved in various crafts to help. As a result, we had floodlights, dimmers, stage scenery, even stage hands to move "flats" and change furniture during intermissions. I used my former experience in the Theater Stock Company in Utica, when I still had been a student, to make this little theater as professional as possible.

My "crew" fell into the spirit, worked evenings and became a jolly group, happy to be part of this "great adventure."

During the evenings when I had no classes, I would start a "Sing-Along" with those

YOUNG WOMEN'S HEBREW ASSOCIATION

young men and women who just dropped in because they had no place to go and wanted to meet other young people. Soon word went out that everyone would feel welcome.

Miss Ella Vera Feldman, the new executive director, noting the success of our informal evenings, started the Saturday Night Dances once a month at Webster Hall with a live orchestra appealing to singles. Webster Hall was a residential hotel on the Wayne State University campus for married and foreign students. It was amazing how many came - an average attendance of 300. A very nominal fee offset the expense of the orchestra. These dances became very popular and continued year after year.

It was nearing the end of the winter season and time to present our first three-act play which we had been rehearsing for many weeks. We posted notices in the club rooms, sent invitations and tickets to the Board of the National Council of Jewish Women and reserved a section of seating for them - and many came! We played three nights at a charge of \$1.50 a ticket. The auditorium was filled to capacity well before showtime and we had to turn many away. The "players" all gave a fine performance and even the "stage hands" knew their "cues." It was a huge success.

Quoting from the YWHA booklet of 1928, "...this very briefly tells the story of what the Young Women's Hebrew Association, with its limited facilities of a fourteen room house, has been able to do for the Jewish youth of Detroit."



Sunday evening Open House at The YWHA. Lea Damsky, program director, met her future husband, Walter Field, at The YWHA.