

THE HOME FRONT: FROM THE ARCHIVES OF TEMPLE EMANU-EL

Following is an article written by Reva G. Kirschberg, of blessed memory, that appeared in the May 1995 issue of Avenue magazine.

For these women, sewing kit bags “for the boys” was just a matter of changing gears. Back then, people were used to making things at home, and since its founding in 1921, the Women’s Auxiliary had had a sewing room where members made clothing for day nurseries and other charities. The bags, also called “ditty bags,” were usually made from twill, decorated with a bit of chintz or other remnants, and closed at the top with a drawstring. The women filled them with toothpaste, razors, combs, and as in this picture, Pall Mall and Old Gold cigarettes. Tessie Herman, mother of former CBS newscaster George Herman, was in charge of the kit-making operation.

At the beginning of the war, the bags were distributed to the British merchant

marine, and after the United States got involved, the bags went to the Red Cross, which gave them to hospitalized American servicemen.

This “kit room” was the office of Emanu-El’s president and was one of many rooms in the community house turned over to the war effort. The women used several rooms for rolling bandages—up to 75,000 every month—and others for making clothing. Isaac Mayer Wise Hall, in the basement, was a USO canteen, open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with the ladies serving homemade cakes and cookies on Tuesdays and Fridays. More than 1,350,000 military men and women passed through the canteen between 1942 and 1945. Although the

congregations of Emanu-El and Beth-El had merged in 1927, the Beth-El building on Fifth Avenue at 76th Street had not been sold by World War II, so the auxiliary made use of it as well. Helen Schulkind, wearing the white hat in this photograph, was president of the auxiliary during the war and for many years after.

Today, the president’s office is used by one of our rabbis. The bookcases still line the walls, and another lovely feature of the room, not seen here, is a marble fireplace, one of three taken from the Astor mansion, which stood on this site before the Temple was built in 1930.

Ladies at their Singers on the eighth floor of Temple Emanu-El’s community house in 1943, now Rabbi Ehrlich’s study.

