



THE  
Pennsylvania  
Magazine  
OF HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY

*Facing Change  
in Wartime Philadelphia:  
The Story of the Philadelphia USO*

**D**URING WORLD WAR II, African American soldiers on leave occasionally arrived at the Stage Door Canteen in Philadelphia to dine, dance, and be entertained. Alerted to their presence, senior hostesses immediately rushed over to the men and personally escorted them to seats as close to the floor show as possible. Even the food hostesses made a special effort to extend to them the usual canteen hospitality. The hostesses were faithfully following the special instructions of Mrs. Upton Favorite, the presiding officer of the canteen's Women's Committee, who hoped that these diversions would avoid the unseemly possibility of a black soldier asking a white junior hostess to dance.<sup>1</sup>

Similar scenes were frequently played out in USO (United Service Organizations) facilities throughout the city between those whose necessary contribution to the war made them challengers of the social status quo and

<sup>1</sup> "Women's Committee of the Stage Door Canteen Minutes," Feb. 8, 1943, World War II Collection, USO Series, box 34, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (hereafter, WWII/USO).

the prominent USO officials who felt threatened by the demands of a rapidly changing society. From community-conscious Jews resisting the wartime assimilation of their young, to Labor Plaza officials denying services to swing-shift workers, to Stage Door Canteen volunteers refusing admittance to women in uniform, USO workers at all levels struggled with the social consequences that wartime inclusion inevitably demanded.

As the national government campaigned to enlist the support of diverse Americans, groups which had long been denied economic opportunities and basic human rights became subjects of specific appeals. Americans of all races and religions responded as twelve million men and women left home for military service and African Americans and women were lured to manufacturing jobs in record numbers. Whether serving in the military or working in defense plants, women and minorities at last envisioned themselves as true competitors for the American dream. Challenged to provide services to an increasingly diverse population of soldiers and defense workers, USO facilities in Philadelphia and throughout the country often became the juncture at which those with new aspirations boldly confronted those entrenched in wealth and privilege. Committed to a united effort for preparedness yet feeling increasingly threatened, USO volunteers clearly waged the unity campaign within the traditional parameters of racism, sexism, and class distinction.

The establishment of the national USO, which mobilized volunteer efforts months before any direct threat to U.S. security existed, ranks among the Roosevelt administration's most dramatic efforts to implement propaganda of the deed in an effort to generate a war spirit among Americans. By encouraging people's active involvement, the administration hoped to generate a widespread commitment to war before the United States was actually attacked. The organization brought "together six national religious and welfare agencies in a cooperative program to establish more than 360 service clubs outside 125 major defense areas."<sup>2</sup> These national agencies included the YMCA, YWCA, National Catholic Community Service, Jewish Welfare Board, Salvation Army, and National Travelers Aid Society. In addition to these familiar prewar welfare organizations, numerous

<sup>2</sup> "Meet the Challenge From Abroad—Battlecry of the U.S.O. Head Here," *Philadelphia Record*, June 8, 1941. WWII/USO, box 17. At its peak in 1944, the USO operated 3,035 clubs and other units both here and abroad. For a more detailed discussion, see Edward H. York Jr., "National USO Dissolves," n.d., WWII/USO, box 5.

new agencies were established by socially active and politically involved citizens to provide wartime services in local communities throughout the nation.

In its need to recruit large numbers of volunteers nationwide in order to provide services to everyone regardless of gender, race, or creed, the USO adopted the government's policy of inclusion which was necessary if the nation was to be fully mobilized for war. The purposes of the USO as outlined in its Articles of Incorporation emphasized the following: aiding the war and defense program of the United States by serving the religious, spiritual, welfare, and educational needs of men and women in the armed forces as well as defense industry workers; contributing to the maintenance of morale in American communities; and providing the means and organization for cooperation among its member agencies.<sup>3</sup>

With Republican politician and New York district attorney Thomas E. Dewey's selection as national campaign chairman, massive USO fund-raising began in the spring and summer of 1941. Having strong ties to the business community and a reputation for extolling the virtue of American individualism, Dewey successfully toured the nation, making a public appeal for \$10,765,000 and calling on every American who was "still on the sidelines," who had "found no part in national defense," to play a "part in making his [or her] country secure against the world."<sup>4</sup> In an effort to strengthen national morale and unity through active participation, Dewey stressed the USO's persona as a civilian organization which required the commitment of all Americans to help assume the burden of providing services for increasing numbers of soldiers and defense industry workers.

As USO officials coordinated the organization's activities and those of its six member agencies with representatives of the Office of Community War Services of the Federal Security Agency, its workers specifically engaged in civilian war services by providing programs "for service men and women and war industry workers and their families." A civilian organization that was essentially quasi-governmental, the USO cooperated with local branches of the Office of Civilian Defense (OCD) by registering its volunteers "as a part of the great army of men and women for civilian war services." USO workers

<sup>3</sup> United Service Organizations, *USO Field Service Manual* (New York, 1944), 2.

<sup>4</sup> "Address of District Attorney Thomas E. Dewey," May 16, 1941, WWII/USO, box 7.

were often recruited from the volunteer offices of the OCD and were also required to report all services they provided to their local OCD office.<sup>5</sup>

The USO was undoubtedly an organization promoted and administered by affluent and influential Americans. Although the government provided funds for the building of 360 clubhouses nationwide, the financing of all other USO operations was basically the responsibility of private individuals and corporations. During the first two years of operation, the USO raised funds by conducting its own campaigns, but after that the organization drew its support almost entirely from the National War Fund. Criticized for soliciting private donations while at the same time receiving government funds, USO organizers justified their fund-raising by claiming to represent the majority of Americans who, they said, preferred to minimize government involvement. Whether this view represented a consensus on the issue or not, the organizers' use of elaborate public fund-raisers stimulated widespread interest in, and support for, war preparedness.

To attract leadership and financial support among prominent Americans, USO organizers campaigned hard among the socially elite and financially successful. As it targeted the business community for at least 25 percent of its national budget, the USO National Corporations Committee issued an official statement in 1941 addressed specifically to the executives of leading U.S. corporations. Claiming that the responsibility for a soldier's private life and religious guidance was not a government function as in Nazi Germany, but was a personal obligation of every American, Dewey particularly emphasized the role of business in "preserving the essentials of freedom in this, our homeland—almost the last free country in the world."<sup>6</sup>

Encouraged to envision themselves as the vanguard of traditional American values, elite Americans were offered a unique opportunity to preserve their persons, families, and fortunes in a time of unparalleled national emergency by financing and controlling USO recreational facilities and services. By describing corporate funding for the USO as "the highest type of corporate public relations policy," the committee reminded financial leaders that their support was not only essential for their own personal safety, but also for the very survival of the American free enterprise system in a

<sup>5</sup> *USO Manual*, 159.

<sup>6</sup> "Your Corporate Stake" (1941), 6, WWII/USO, box 7.

world seriously threatened by totalitarianism.<sup>7</sup> As well as being the only undertaking in which all Americans could share in the national defense, the USO was corporate America's best stake in the protection of the American institutions businessmen most cherished.<sup>8</sup>

Responding to the government's urgent call for a unified war effort, many of Philadelphia's most prominent citizens successfully coordinated the resources of the city's existing agencies and created new ones. In doing so they established a USO that became deeply enmeshed in the city's political and social milieu. These volunteers, who often held positions of power and influence, touted their efforts as "a significant experiment in social engineering" as they rallied public support and spearheaded the establishment and operation of facilities at thirty-one locations throughout the city.<sup>9</sup>

The Committee for the Mobilization of Recreational Resources, comprised of leaders from local education and recreation agencies, reviewed all existing services and facilities as they attempted to coordinate efforts for expansion. They met with military officials such as Fort Dix chief morale officer Major J.C. Donoghue, and at their January 15, 1941, meeting expressed the hope that a national defense campaign would soon be initiated to help provide funding for additional budgetary demands.<sup>10</sup> This committee's research became the foundation for the recommendations eventually made by the Philadelphia Council of Defense to representatives of the national USO for the effective development of citywide defense and war services.<sup>11</sup>

The Philadelphia USO began organizing in the spring of 1941 with

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>9</sup> York, "USO Dissolves." York was elected chairman of the USO Council on June 24, 1943, succeeding Lewis M. Stevens. Still in office in 1947 when the national USO was terminated, he was responsible for submitting the final report which includes a description of the achievements of the USO in Philadelphia.

<sup>10</sup> Harold Beker to Arthur Bloch, Jan. 22, 1941, WWII/USO, box 19.

<sup>11</sup> C. H. English, "Report To Policy Committee," WWII/USO, box 19.

Dewey's appointment of the Philadelphia Committee for the USO. The committee included representatives from member agencies under the chairmanship of David E. Williams. An ex-soldier wounded in France during World War I, and then president of the Corn Exchange National Bank and a member of the exclusive Philadelphia Club, Williams was joined by several other wealthy and powerful Philadelphians in a massive effort to raise funds for USO operations. Among these organizers were such notables as Horace P. Liversidge, president of the Philadelphia Electric Company, William H. Harman, vice president of the Baldwin Locomotive Works, Edward G. Budd Sr., chairman of the board of the Edward G. Budd Manufacturing Company, and well-known seed merchant, W. Atlee Burpee.

Although members of the privileged class, these USO leaders were well aware that for ultimate success they needed to rally general support among the city's diverse population. They organized a massive drive that opened on June 2 when a Navy training blimp and five Navy airplanes "bombed" the city with large blue paper "missiles" calling attention to the nationwide USO campaign. Pedestrians could hardly avoid being influenced by the dramatic and obvious symbolism when they were "attacked" with leaflets which said, "No, this isn't a bomb. It was dropped not to destroy but to build."<sup>12</sup> Further activities included a mass rally at the centrally located Academy of Music on June 20, after which 117 district headquarters were opened throughout the city and suburbs. Organizers planned a sixty thousand-block, house-to-house canvass to be conducted from July 27 to August 2 to encourage every family to contribute one dollar toward Philadelphia's \$550,000 quota set by the national USO.<sup>13</sup>

Along with the Academy of Music, organizers used other familiar social and cultural institutions of which they were prominent members to promote USO participation with the city's rank and file. As the door-to-door campaign proceeded, USO literature was disseminated and volunteer workers enrolled at railway stations, local YMCAs, and Salvation Army centers. Church leaders from a variety of denominations endorsed the movement as they held services on June 22 throughout the city in support of

<sup>12</sup> "U.S.O. Drive Opened With City Bombing," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 3, 1941, 8.

<sup>13</sup> "Service Organizations To Launch Canvass of Phila. Homes," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 20, 1941, WWII/USO, box 17.



USO fund-raising banners on South Broad Street. Philadelphia, ca. 1941. Box 17, USO Photos, World War II Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. (All illustrations are from this collection unless otherwise noted.)

the campaign. In a pastoral letter, Dennis Joseph Cardinal Dougherty described the USO movement as one that would “thwart adverse influences and prevent our youth from being ruined physically and spiritually.” Emphasizing the USO’s role in the preservation of traditional values, he urged support “for the sake of religion, morality and patriotism.”<sup>14</sup>

Keeping careful records of all major donors’ names and specific contributions, organizers regularly published these lists in local newspapers

<sup>14</sup> “Churches To Ask Help For USO,” *Philadelphia Bulletin*, June 21, 1941, WWII/USO, box 17.

in an effort to encourage further interest and generosity. The result of these extensive efforts was gratifying. Philadelphians raised \$631,000—\$81,000 over quota—and moved closer to viewing the war as inevitable.<sup>15</sup> These successful efforts were soon tainted with controversy, however, when city treasurer Dr. Luther A. Harr demanded an official investigation into the allocation of these funds. Harr expressed shock that the amount collected, which exceeded the \$450,000 earmarked for the national USO, would not be used solely for the recreational needs of soldiers and sailors in the city.

Implying that organizers were planning to use this money to further their own social or political agendas, he accused USO and city officials “of breaking faith with the public . . . at a time when morale of the Army is low and that of the public is none too good.” David Williams responded by explaining that the campaign for the additional \$100,000 had always been intended to meet emergency defense needs in the city and was to be disbursed at the discretion of the finance committee of the Defense Council chaired by Philadelphia National Bank president, Evan Randolph.<sup>16</sup>

Refusing to relinquish control over USO finances yet anxious to resolve the issue quickly to avoid any additional negative publicity, USO leaders used their political influence to reach a compromise with city officials. They agreed to allocate half the funds in question directly to recreational purposes, while distributing the remaining half to various city committees associated with the defense effort. Among the latter were the Division for American Unity to help make Philadelphia “defense conscious” and the Fair Rentals Committee to protect defense workers against rent profiteering.<sup>17</sup> Although staving off this early criticism by publicly reaffirming their commitment to preparedness, the organizers would eventually do exactly what Harr feared when they promoted their own personal goals through their association with the home-front organization. Created in their own likeness, the Philadelphia USO would be used by elite Philadelphians to preserve traditional values and

<sup>15</sup> Edward H. York Jr., “A Look Backward,” n.d. WWII/USO, box 5.

<sup>16</sup> “Council Asked for Funds to Halt U.S.O. Diversion,” *Philadelphia Bulletin*, Aug. 22, 1941, USO Philadelphia, Labor Plaza/Reyburn Plaza, box 425, Temple University Urban Archives (hereafter, Temple Urban Archives), Philadelphia.

<sup>17</sup> “Half of \$100,000 U.S.O. Gifts Won’t Go to Service Men; Defense Council Will Get It,” *Philadelphia Bulletin*, Aug. 22, 1941, U.S.O. Philadelphia, Labor Plaza/Reyburn Plaza, box 425, Temple Urban Archives.

social mores threatened by change in the wartime society.

Throughout their efforts to organize, city USO officials often found it necessary to widen the range of their public support. They solicited the help of local labor leaders Carl Bersing of the CIO and Joseph McDonough of the AFL who were both invited to join the USO's Philadelphia Committee. Regardless of such public overtures, however, USO organizational direction was clearly established and maintained by the city's elite. Such prominent women as Mrs. Fayette Stern of the St. James Hotel and Mrs. Ralph Earle of Haverford were involved in organizing the fund-raising campaign for West Philadelphia. On the Main Line, Mrs. Owen Toland of Wynnewood and Mrs. Francis R. Strawbridge of Villanova helped organize Junior League fund-raisers. Gertrude Ely of Bryn Mawr, nationally recognized as a World War I organizer for the YMCA and a former head of both the Philadelphia and national Junior League, became intricately involved in the operations of several USO agencies in the city throughout their existence.

Particularly unique to the Philadelphia USO was the Sisters' Club, generally comprised of Main Line debutantes whose brothers were serving in the armed forces. These young women from affluent families did their part by distributing posters and acting as couriers, ushers, and assistants at various campaign functions. They enjoyed a high profile among city residents when they were frequently photographed wearing their specially designed Bonwit Teller hats which were modeled after overseas caps, trimmed, of course, in red, white, and blue, and decorated with the initials of the USO.<sup>18</sup>

By the fall of 1941, following this massive publicity blitz, the Philadelphia USO Council was organized. It was composed of representatives from each of the six member agencies of the National USO as well as representatives from the United Service Club and the Hospitality Center, the latter organized and supported by the city of Philadelphia. By 1942 the following agencies were added to the USO family: the South Broad Street USO Club, a facility primarily for African American soldiers; the Stage Door Canteen;

<sup>18</sup> For a picture of members of the club wearing their hats, see *Philadelphia Ledger*, July 2, 1941, WWII/USO, box 17.

the Broad Street Station Lounge (Travelers Aid); and the USO Women's Committee.<sup>19</sup>

With an estimated 30,000 volunteers contributing a total of 5,015,770 hours of service to an estimated 27,160,019 persons who attended USO facilities over the seven years of their existence, the establishment of the Philadelphia USO was clearly a victory for the socially prominent. Through their efforts the energy of a diverse city was channeled into an organization that was destined to play a significant role on the World War II home-front.<sup>20</sup> By 1944 at its peak of operation, USO centers not only operated within the city; they also extended additional services to naval bases, military hospitals, and encampments in the area as well as to more remote military posts through the mobile canteens.

Among the prominent Philadelphians who generously contributed to the USO's efforts to rally the city's resources for war were members of its active Jewish community. With a long tradition of banding together in community organizations, as well as in fraternal and sororal groups to provide assistance to the needy and disabled, Jews also relied on collective action to combat instances of anti-Semitism, which occurred frequently in the United States. Organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith were established to fight bigotry and intolerance which had long plagued our pluralistic society.

Faced with a world conflict in the 1930s that posed the ultimate threat to the survival of international Jewry, many Jewish organizations actively supported America's involvement in World War II. Rabbi Stephen Wise of the American Jewish Congress along with other prominent leaders urged the national government to take specific steps to save European Jewry from fascist terror. Unresponsive to these pleas, President Franklin D. Roosevelt instead stressed the need for an ultimate military victory in Europe as the most expedient means for saving these victims. Although dismayed by the

<sup>19</sup> During 1943, the following agencies joined the Philadelphia USO: YMCA and YWCA of Germantown; USO Date Club; St. Stephen's Service Club; Christian Association of the University of Pennsylvania Trainee Service; Drexel Institute Trainee Service; Morning Cheer Victory Center; Emergency Aid of Pennsylvania; USO-Labor Plaza; Service Women's Club; Presbyterian Hospitality House; Reading Terminal Lounge (Travelers Aid); Lutheran Service Center; Baptist Hospitality Center; and North Philadelphia Station Lounge (Travelers Aid). Although Drexel Institute Trainee Service was closed in 1944, the USO center at the Army Induction Center was added in the same year.

<sup>20</sup> "A Look Backward," 2-4, WWII/USO, box 5.

government's unwillingness to act on their behalf, Jews across the country nevertheless worked diligently to foster war preparedness by rallying efforts to mobilize the home front.

A part of the national USO from its inception, the Jewish Welfare Board (JWB) made available a vast network of social and welfare services throughout the country and became a substantial resource for promoting unity and providing valuable wartime services. Joining this effort, through its affiliation with the National Jewish Welfare Board, the Philadelphia Army and Navy Service Committee of the JWB established its headquarters in the Young Men's and Young Women's Association Building at Broad and Pine Streets. Commonly called the YMHA (Young Men's Hebrew Association), this extensive facility was equipped with a swimming pool, gymnasium, hand-ball courts, table tennis, and a library. Serving an estimated 750 to 1,000 men who visited the YMHA building monthly, the board's outreach also included dances and performances at the Navy Yard, Fort Mifflin, Fort Dix, Fort DuPont, as well as various armories where men were stationed in the area.<sup>21</sup>

The JWB's ability to offer an efficient and extensive range of services was substantially enhanced by an established network of Jewish community resources that predated the war. Mrs. Stanley Wise, chairperson of the Housing Committee for the USO-JWB, was aided in her efforts to locate housing for defense workers newly arrived in Philadelphia by her experience as former head of the Conference of Jewish Women's Organizations. With a clear commitment to a united war effort, Mrs. Wise and others like her established a USO operation with services enmeshed in the religious and social structures of Philadelphia's active Jewish community.

As part of its efforts to promote war preparedness to the community at large, the Philadelphia JWB freely advertised and offered its activities and services to military personnel of all religions. Familiar USO services which were routinely rendered at the YMHA free of charge included exceptionally good menus and a variety of entertainment.<sup>22</sup> As a USO agency generously supported by the Jewish community, the JWB consistently maintained remarkably high standards of operation even in a society besieged by

<sup>21</sup> "Activities of the Jewish Welfare Board," 1942, WWII/USO, box 2.

<sup>22</sup> Minutes of clubroom captains' meeting, Jewish Welfare Board, June 21, 1945, WWII/USO, box 18.

shortages. For the year 1944 alone the Allied Jewish Appeal's contribution of \$24,500 nearly matched the total USO allocation of \$29,783.76.<sup>23</sup> Also in 1944, law partners William Portner and Arthur Lichtenstein donated an additional \$12,000 to be used specifically for the construction of a roof garden atop the YMHA. This facility would enable soldiers and hostesses to socialize in an attractive and relaxing atmosphere.<sup>24</sup>

Although committed to national unity, JWB organizers were aware of the serious threat that wartime assimilation posed to the survival of the Jewish identity. They witnessed a changing wartime society in which Jews were recruited into the vast and diverse armed forces, and more and more Americans relocated for either defense work or military training. Viewing the war as a moral necessity yet fearful of its potential to accelerate the assimilation of young Jews into the melting pot, organizers sought ways to insulate their own from outside influences.

In their efforts to sustain a religion founded on historical consciousness, JWB officials developed special YMHA programs to reaffirm Jewish values and historical traditions. As members of a group often victimized by discrimination, these individuals also sought to guarantee the spiritual and emotional guidance of Jewish soldiers who had special religious needs which the military or other home-front organizations might easily neglect. JWB programs included the preparation and distribution of special foods, especially during religious holidays, and the sponsorship of services and activities at military outposts where significant numbers of Jewish soldiers were stationed.

In addition, efforts were regularly made to extend home hospitality to Jewish servicemen on leave. Soldiers were encouraged to dine with local Jewish families, after which they were usually treated to some form of entertainment. In town meetings conducted at the YMHA center, discussions not only included such topics as "Shall We Declare War on Hitler Now?" and "Must We Fight Japan?" but also subjects suggested by a national JWB publication entitled, "Jewish Themes for Discussion."<sup>25</sup> No matter how far they were from home, soldiers who visited the YMHA were

<sup>23</sup> Financial statement 1944, Jewish Welfare Board, Dec. 31, 1944, WWII/USO, box 20.

<sup>24</sup> Dedication announcement, Jewish Welfare Board, June 28, 1944, WWII/USO, box 19.

<sup>25</sup> Jewish Welfare Board programs, Oct. 24–Nov. 13, 1941, WWII/USO, boxes 4 and 19.

constantly surrounded by vivid reminders of their heritage.

JWB hostesses whose job was to entertain and comfort these soldiers were carefully selected for their contributions to the Jewish community. Accepting only girls recommended by its affluent and active Jewish membership, the JWB organized a brief orientation for prospective hostesses consisting of four or five lessons. This training reflected traditional values and stressed the importance of assuming civic, religious, and social responsibilities in the community. It encouraged the girls to work at bond rallies and blood donor drives and rallied their support as both solicitors and contributors for the Allied Jewish Appeal. Before these girls were selected to help nurture the religious identity of YMHA visitors, they had to demonstrate their own faithfulness to the Jewish traditions of charity and community involvement.

In demanding the girls' volunteer efforts and praising their deeds as significant assets to Jewish communal life, organizers also promoted traditional values through service to the broader community.<sup>26</sup> Only those girls who represented these values through their USO-JWB activism were ultimately selected. While hostesses at other agencies, such as the Stage Door Canteen, were prohibited from having any outside relationships with soldiers they met at USO clubs, JWB officials encouraged such liaisons. In fact, they provided as many opportunities as possible for permanent relationships to develop among these young men and women. By doing so they hoped to minimize the "outside" influences on Jewish soldiers and to protect and perpetuate their own cultural uniqueness.<sup>27</sup>

Hostesses at the YMHA club were not the only women in Philadelphia who had to conform to traditional standards of behavior if they wished to be welcome at USO facilities. In agencies throughout the city, USO officials, as perpetuators of the status quo, constantly struggled against war-inspired changes which threatened to blur traditional gender distinctions and expand the acceptable range of female behavior. As women boldly challenged conventional gender roles by assuming new wartime responsibilities, they aroused the powerful forces of traditional society which aimed to keep them in their rightful place. Conservative institutions like the USO were

<sup>26</sup> Army and Navy Committee of the JWB, report, Mar. 4, 1945, WWII/USO, box 18.

<sup>27</sup> Minutes of clubroom captains' meeting, Jewish Welfare Board, June 21, 1945, WWII/USO, box 18.

determined to set parameters within which these women might challenge prewar conventions.

Traditional gender roles were threatened as throughout the country large numbers of women became actively committed to the war effort, and many joined the military or sought defense-related employment. Although initially reluctant to hire women, defense employers who faced increasing labor shortages by 1942 were forced to employ women in 70 percent of semiskilled positions and 63 percent of professional and managerial openings.<sup>28</sup> Even African American women and older women, although often seen as a last resort, found increasing opportunities to move from farm and domestic jobs into higher paying manufacturing and service positions. Although they often earned less than men while doing essentially the same work, women still enjoyed expanding occupational opportunities which temporarily freed them, if only in part, from their routine lives as homemakers. For the first time many American women felt empowered as they significantly contributed to the national effort and earned more money than ever before.

Yet the wartime experience for women workers was not without its problems even if they now had more money to spend. These problems were addressed at a 1943 conference convened by Florence Williams of the USO Division of the YWCA which was attended by twenty-five nationally recognized women leaders in health, education, recreation, and labor. They concluded that because of the "scarcity of recreational facilities, bad housing and poor diet [which] all reduce the vitality of women workers," a nationwide campaign was urgently needed to "combat the conditions causing increasing fatigue and strain among women industrial and white collar workers."<sup>29</sup>

These findings undoubtedly reflected the general conditions many defense workers faced at the time. Yet women seemed especially victimized by having to cope not only with the rigors of wartime employment, but also with their traditional responsibilities of home and family. Affordable housing was often unavailable or undesirable, and routine searches for essential items such as gasoline or even laundry soap could monopolize precious leisure time

<sup>28</sup> Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston, 1982), 55.

<sup>29</sup> Information sheet, United Service Organizations, June 1943, WWII/USO, box 6.

needed for rest.<sup>30</sup> The difficulty of finding adequate supervision for their children, while mothers worked long and irregular hours, placed undue stress on many women, especially those who were left to raise children alone because of the war.<sup>31</sup>

In Philadelphia as elsewhere in the nation, women who had reached beyond their familiar feminine roles to work for victory had limited access to needed recreational and welfare services. Regardless of the efforts of the YWCA to provide workers with recreational activities at their 18th and Arch Streets facility, it was obvious by 1943 that these programs were still inadequate. To expand the opportunities for relaxation so badly needed by both men and women, the YWCA approached the USO-Labor Plaza, a facility located opposite City Hall, and requested permission to conduct a dance there one night a week for swing-shift workers. With a spacious dance floor, two nickel canteens, numerous small tables, and a capacity of three hundred couples, the plaza was a large open-air facility fully capable of accommodating these workers commonly known as the "lost battalion."<sup>32</sup>

As a USO facility established through the efforts of the city's organized labor, the plaza seemed uniquely appropriate for the workers' needs. By providing free materials and labor throughout its construction and contributing to its financial support after its opening, labor unions had become strongly identified with the plaza. Yet the real impetus for establishing and maintaining this facility rested with such socially prominent individuals as Lewis M. Stevens and William Fulton Kurtz. Actively involved in both city politics and defense-related activities, Stevens was a prominent attorney who also served on the Council of the USO and Associated War Time Agencies. Kurtz, an official with the United War Chest, was also president of the Pennsylvania Company, a major center city insurance firm.

After discussing the YWCA's proposal, plaza officials rejected it,

<sup>30</sup> Michael C. C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore, 1994), 119. See chap. 6 for a graphic discussion of general living conditions among defense industry workers, particularly women and minorities.

<sup>31</sup> Hartmann, *Home Front and Beyond*, 84.

<sup>32</sup> For photographs of the plaza, see Philadelphia Photographs (USO), Temple Urban Archives, box 425.

preferring instead to reserve their facility for soldiers alone. Many of the elite individuals who served on the plaza's executive board, such as Stevens and Kurtz, had difficulty identifying with the needs of those whose primary contribution to the war was working in factories. In the course of the discussion, some members of the board saw the workers' needs as lying clearly outside the USO's responsibility, considering them chiefly the concern of the YWCA or of industry itself. Others were concerned that there were too many workers on too many different shifts to accommodate them all, while still others considered swing workers unworthy recipients of additional services when they were already amply compensated for their labor.<sup>33</sup>

There were those, however, who did sympathize with workers' unique wartime needs. Harry Ferliger of the United War Chest explained that although there had been a great deal of discussion on the issue of recreational service for industrial workers, both before and during the war, little or nothing had been done.<sup>34</sup> But his remarks as well as those of others had little impact. Chairman of the board Kurtz issued a formal letter claiming that the inclusion of swing workers "would create great confusion, would make our housekeeping job almost impossible and would prevent our having the Plaza in shipshape order when the service men arrived for the evening."<sup>35</sup> If facilities for workers were indeed as inadequate as Ferliger and the Florence Williams's conference had indicated, it is unfortunate that they were refused admittance at a USO facility so closely connected with the wartime efforts of other workers in the city of Philadelphia.

On the national scene, military service, as well as defense work, offered women new opportunities to expand prewar gender roles. As several hundred thousand women answered the call to join various branches of the armed forces, they too felt a new sense of personal achievement as they traveled and earned rank. Used solely as unpaid volunteers in civilian or quasi-military organizations in previous crises, women in World War II were integrated

<sup>33</sup> Minutes of the meeting of the executive committee, USO-Labor Plaza, Nov. 18, 1943, WWII/USO, box 22.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> William Fulton Kurtz to Harry A. Schmidt, July 7, 1943, WWII/USO, box 25. Schmidt served as secretary of the USO-Labor Plaza Committee.

into the armed forces in every capacity, short of actual combat. Although a major departure from the past, women's work in the military still reflected the gender-based division of labor in the civilian economy of the 1940s. The United States Army Air Force was perhaps the most progressive in utilizing women. Women Air Force Service Pilots (WASPs) ferried planes around the country and towed anticraft gunnery targets for practice missions. Yet approximately half of all servicewomen in the Women's Army Corps (WACs) performed some type of administrative and office work. As the war progressed and military officials became more aware of women's capabilities, their roles expanded. Nonetheless the overwhelming majority of servicewomen throughout the conflict remained engaged in the traditional female areas of health care, clerical work, and communications.

Regardless of these limitations, women in the military served as vivid examples of the power of war to reshape the gender roles that were firmly entrenched in the 1940s. This defiance led to efforts by traditional forces



Servicemen and -women at the USO Labor Plaza. Philadelphia, ca. 1944.

within society to glamorize and trivialize the women's essential contributions to the war effort. Far from the reality of the drab and monotonous military existence, life for women in the service was often depicted in newsreels as exciting and superfluous. Generally referred to as "girls" or "gals," they were frequently shown going to beauty salons or shopping for underwear.<sup>36</sup> Military recruitment efforts also reflected this popular sentiment. Convinced that the majority of women would never accept a role that challenged the prewar sexual order, officials promised women that joining the military would never compromise their femininity or jeopardize any postwar marriage plans.<sup>37</sup>

In a society that discouraged women from stepping outside of their appropriate roles, even for a good cause, these women in uniform undeniably stretched the limits of acceptable femininity. Tolerated but rarely welcomed by USO officials in Philadelphia who wished to preserve the social order, servicewomen experienced ambivalent receptions at various locations throughout the city. Although officials at the JWB and the Labor Plaza admitted women in uniform, their primary concerns were to attend to the needs of the male soldiers. With thousands of senior and junior hostesses specifically trained to entertain and comfort men, the social needs of servicewomen were of marginal concern. Female soldiers who challenged proper gender etiquette by arriving without escorts usually had to compete with large numbers of hostesses if they desired any male companionship.<sup>38</sup> In a wartime society where women's primary responsibility was the sustenance of the men who struggled for victory, the USO promoted gender relationships in which the needs of women remained clearly subordinate to those of men.

Although most organizations were at least available to servicewomen, one popular USO club within the city, the Stage Door Canteen, totally refused to admit them. A facility that boasted of serving the needs of 1,166,991 servicemen during its three years of existence, the canteen was located in the old basement bar of the Academy of Music at Broad and Locust Streets.

<sup>36</sup> Hartmann, *Home Front and Beyond*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

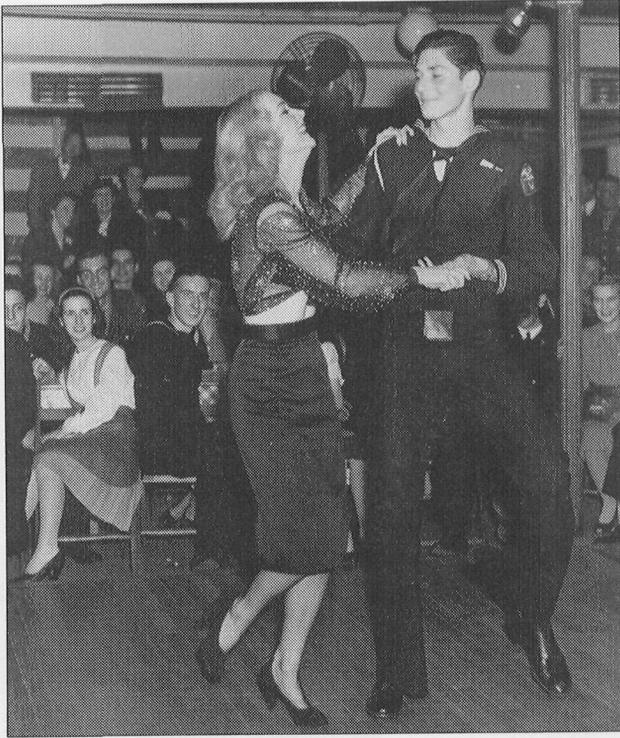
<sup>38</sup> Army and Navy Committee of the JWB, report, Mar. 4, 1945, box 18; and attendance report, USO-Labor Plaza, July 5, 1943–Sept. 7, 1946, box 24, WWII/USO.



Emlen Etting, entrance to Stage Door Canteen. Philadelphia, ca. 1944. Sketch for mural.

Essentially a nightclub that offered at least three different shows every night, seven days a week, the canteen was established under the auspices of the War Activities Committee of the American Theatre Wing. Attracting a wide range of local and national talent in a series of heavily publicized programs, the canteen presented acrobats, choral groups, magicians, dancers, comedians, composers, and well-known stars of stage, screen, and radio. Everyone from Frank Sinatra and Irving Berlin to Oscar the Performing Seal from the Shriners' Circus visited this facility to entertain the boys free of charge.<sup>39</sup> Other services for the boys included a free barber service, portrait sketches for the folks back home, and private rooms where soldiers could play cards, read, or nap.

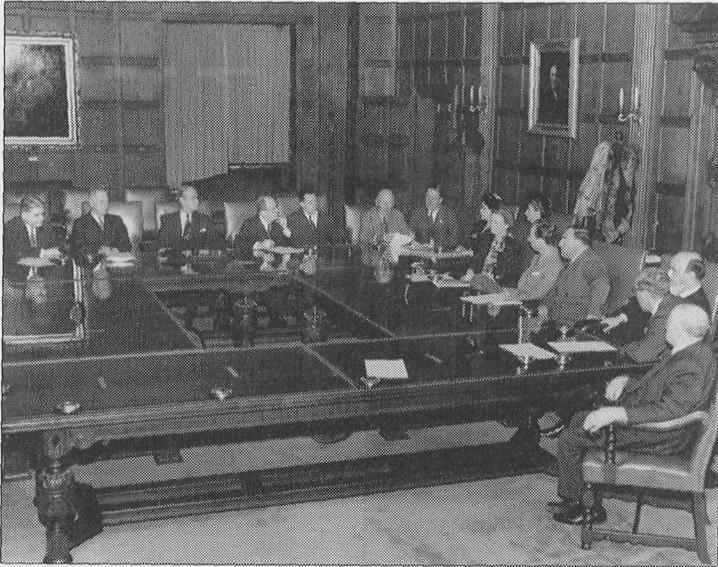
<sup>39</sup> "Biography of the Philadelphia Stage Door Canteen," n.d., WWII/USO, box 16.



Actress June Havoc dancing with sailor at the Stage Door Canteen. Philadelphia, ca. 1944.

Established and operated by many of Philadelphia's social elite who were also associated with performing arts in the city, canteen officials included such notables as John D. M. Sullivan of Willow Brook Farm, who had served as chairman of the Republican National Committee, and Livingston R. Sullivan, who was president of the Market Street National Bank. Although they successfully mobilized a vast entertainment community as part of the united war effort, these prominent individuals remained highly selective in their choice of recipients of these services.

Offered an opportunity to admit WACs in 1942, the Women's Committee of the Canteen denied the request. Claiming that the women's "uniforms would detract from the party atmosphere so desirable at the Canteen," they failed to explain why the only male soldiers admitted to the



The board of directors of the Stage Door Canteen, meeting at the Pennsylvania Company, 15th and Chestnut Streets. Philadelphia, October 1945.

canteen were those in uniform.<sup>40</sup> The committee further justified their decision by explaining that “the Canteen was established strictly for service men, and other recreational centers are being established to take care of the women in service.”<sup>41</sup> Responding to this double standard, a WAC lieutenant visited the canteen to personally request that servicewomen be admitted. She suggested that perhaps servicewomen might serve as junior hostesses who were in short supply, explaining that off-duty WACs were not required to wear uniforms after 4 P.M. The lieutenant added that although it was quite true that other facilities were being developed for these women, the recreational facilities that currently existed were very limited.<sup>42</sup> The final

<sup>40</sup> Minutes of the Women’s Committee meeting, Stage Door Canteen, Nov. 16, 1942, 3, WWII/USO, box 34.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., Dec. 21, 1942, 1.



Junior hostesses and servicemen at the Stage Door Canteen. The figure of Livingston R. Sullivan posing as a waiter was tipped into the photograph. Sullivan was president of the Market Street National Bank and chairman of the board of directors of the Stage Door Canteen. Philadelphia, ca. 1944.

recommendation of the committee remained unchanged. The Stage Door Canteen continued to exclude servicewomen whose uniforms, whether worn or not, still represented an unwanted challenge to acceptable gender roles.

It is hardly surprising that the women who were selected as volunteers at the canteen and at other USO facilities had to meet rigid criteria of acceptable behavior. Just as hostesses at the YMHA personified traditional Jewish values, hostesses at both the canteen and the plaza were also expected to represent a traditional ideal of femininity. Intended by USO officials to provide a diversion for male soldiers, these women were expected to present a wholesome yet provocative image in order to distract men from the large

numbers of promiscuous women then on the streets.<sup>43</sup> The Labor Plaza was constructed with this goal in mind. Located near Arch Street, a high-crime district notorious for its bars and brothels and known as the “Barbary Coast,” the plaza was intended to divert soldiers from fraternizing with the sixteen- to twenty-one-year-old runaway girls who congregated in that area. Plaza officials offered as an alternative morally and socially acceptable young women with whom soldiers could talk, dine, dance, or play games.<sup>44</sup>

Selected for their physical attractiveness to men, USO hostesses were expected to meet the personal standards established by conservative members of the executive boards of various agencies. Strict dress codes were in effect in most USO facilities. Hostesses at the Labor Plaza were prohibited from removing their stockings or wearing flat-heeled “jitterbug shoes.” This was particularly unfortunate since they were also required to dance with every soldier who asked them, unless of course, he was totally intoxicated. They were forbidden to wear short, wide dresses or sweaters, and were required to dress in formal gowns for certain occasions. The formal dress rule was eventually amended by the Executive Committee, upon the request of the Hostess Committee, to permit the girls to dress in either formal or informal gowns. With the continuing emphasis on sex appeal, it is obvious how essentially unchanged the female persona remained during the war. Those in charge of USO facilities continued to promote the “feminine mystique” in their treatment of women whether visitors or volunteers. By doing so the officials reinforced society’s traditional emphasis on a woman’s physical attractiveness as an important measure of her personal value.

According to the junior hostesses’ rules of the Stage Door Canteen, a hostess at all times was expected to be “in class 1-A as an American Girl doing her job on the home front.”<sup>45</sup> Many of these young women, often the daughters of military officers, government officials, or business executives, enthusiastically responded to the canteen’s initial call for volunteers, which

<sup>43</sup> Frederic M. Miller, et al., *Philadelphia Stories: A Photographic History, 1920–1960* (Philadelphia, 1988), 142–43. Miller presents an interesting contrast as he juxtaposes pictures of “wholesome” recreation at USO facilities with scenes of a prospering vice district northeast of City Hall in May 1942.

<sup>44</sup> Norma B. Carson, “The Juvenile Delinquent,” Nov. 17, 1943, WWII/USO, box 25. This description of the plaza’s function as a crime deterrent was in a speech given by Carson, who served as supervisor of Philadelphia policewomen, to the Regional Health Institute in Washington, Pa.

<sup>45</sup> “Forward,” *Junior Hostesses’ Rules*, Stage Door Canteen, n.d., WWII/USO, box 10.



Interviewing a prospective junior hostess. Philadelphia, ca. 1944.

clearly indicated the qualifications. "We want them pretty. We want them young and unmarried. We want to be sure they dance well."<sup>46</sup> A junior hostess had first "to win the approval from the discerning eye of a committee of personnel chairmen" who reportedly had lived in Philadelphia long enough to know a pretty girl when they saw one.<sup>47</sup> After her selection a hostess was expected to be constantly mindful of her duty to take "the loneliness out of the war for the men in the armed forces of our country."<sup>48</sup> Encouraged to wear short skirts or dresses of gay prints or dark sheers brightened with vivid shades, the canteen women were "requested to look as feminine and pretty as possible," keeping in mind "that boys appreciate

<sup>46</sup> "Welcome by Stage Door Girls," *Evening Bulletin*, June 1942, WWII/USO, series II J17.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Junior Hostesses' Rules*, "Forward," WWII/USO, box 10.



Junior hostesses on duty at the Stage Door Canteen.  
Philadelphia, ca. 1944.

dainty frills in girls' dress."<sup>49</sup> Considering these priorities, it is hardly surprising that servicewomen and defense workers were unwelcome. They were simply incompatible with the traditional gender images which canteen officials wished to portray: the handsome, brave soldiers who risked their lives to protect the pretty, helpless girls back home.

If female volunteers attempted to challenge the established rules at these facilities, they were usually severely punished. In a letter of resignation, one canteen junior hostess expressed the objections many of the girls had to the restrictive dress code. The hostess said she had been asked to leave the canteen for wearing a suit and that when she had attempted to explain her position to the official in charge, the man had accused her of having an uncooperative attitude instead of praising her initiative. Feeling that she was left with no other option than to resign, the young woman concluded her letter by expressing her confidence that the work done at the Stage Door

<sup>49</sup> Stella Moore to Helen Albertson, June 23, 1945, WWII/USO, box 9.

Canteen was more important than the clothes that were worn there, and she maintained the hope that the unfair rule would soon be revised.<sup>50</sup>

The rule, however, was not revised and conformity to conservative standards continued to be demanded. Discipline remained the responsibility of the captains of the junior hostesses who were required to report any infringement of the regulations by recording the following symbols in their "Junior Hostess Books": "S for wore sweater; B for bad attitude; P for forgot pass; M for left with service man."<sup>51</sup> It is reasonable to conclude from reading rules 8 and 12 in the "Rules for Hostesses" just which transgressions were considered the most serious, and perhaps even the most frequent: "#8 Hostesses are begged to attempt to keep QUIET during entertainment" and "#12 NO HOSTESS IS TO LEAVE THE CANTEEN AT ANY TIME—UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES WITH A SERVICE MAN—OR MEET HIM OUTSIDE IN THE VICINITY OF THE CANTEEN . . . ." <sup>52</sup> Only the girls who complied with the rules might be fortunate enough to be considered for the title of "Stage Door Canteen Pin Up Girl," who was selected after being nominated by the boys and eventually voted on by a jury of servicemen. Apparently the highest achievement for canteen hostesses was one that also sexually objectified them.

Although the war presented dramatic opportunities for American women in all areas of the country to enjoy a new sense of personal value, the overwhelming forces of traditional society both during and after the war continued to define gender relationships. Encouraged by institutions like the USO, women accepted the burden of wartime responsibilities but continued to maintain the centrality of domesticity and relationships with men in their lives. While the wartime experiences of many undoubtedly suggested new career possibilities, most women, although at times reluctantly, accepted their labor as temporary. As the hostilities ended and veterans returned home in need of emotional support, women dutifully responded to strong societal messages that encouraged them to resume lives focused solely on the care of home and family.

<sup>50</sup> Marjorie Simson (?) to Mrs. Upton Favorite, Apr. 8, 1945, WWII/USO, box 9. The signature of the junior hostess who sent this letter is difficult to read and therefore may be incorrect as indicated.

<sup>51</sup> Notes from the *Junior Hostess Book*, Stage Door Canteen, June 1942, WWII/USO, box 10.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, "Rules for Hostesses."

Beyond wartime changes in gender identities and relationships, national and local USO officials also contended with the increasing social mobility that African American soldiers seemed to enjoy as a result of the war, even though the country's system of apartheid was still firmly entrenched. At the start of the war, African Americans faced discrimination on a variety of fronts. One in five blacks was unemployed, and jobs that were available to them were most often unskilled and low paid.<sup>53</sup> Although eligible to enlist in the segregated army or the navy's all-black messmen's branch, they were totally barred from service in either the Air Corps or the Marine Corps. The victims of such institutionalized racism, blacks also endured the further humiliation of knowing that both the Red Cross and the army separated blood plasma according to the donor's race to prevent the "mongrelization" of the white race. Not until 1944 were shortages of American soldiers severe enough to induce military leaders to bend their segregation rules and start to integrate forces on a limited basis.

Seeing World War II as an opportunity for both social and economic progress, African Americans fought hard for full military participation. As the *Pittsburgh Courier* launched the "Double V" campaign for victory over fascism abroad and victory for human rights at home, black organizations and leaders like A. Philip Randolph mobilized the masses to work for an end to both discrimination and segregation. Roosevelt responded to these demands only after black leaders threatened public demonstrations and it became increasingly clear how essential African American participation was for victory. The president eventually signed Executive Order 8802 which ended discrimination in defense industries and government employment. Far from ending the struggle for equality, however, this directive signaled only a beginning. The struggle of African Americans to gain full participation in American society was accelerated by the war but remained far from won.

Expecting African American soldiers to conform to the rules of de facto segregation common to Philadelphia in the 1940s, USO organizers with the help of the black community established the South Broad Street facility for African American use. As the war progressed, however, and as black soldiers became emboldened by their wartime experiences, they began visiting other USO locations throughout the city. Their presence at all-white facilities

<sup>53</sup> Allan M. Winkler, *Home Front U.S.A.: America During World War II* (Arlington Heights, Ill., 1986), 58.

blatantly challenged the accepted rules of society. Wishing to avoid any negative publicity, USO organizers felt compelled to welcome these black soldiers while privately officials struggled to maintain strict racial distinctions throughout their internal operations.

In the summer of 1944, an incident involving interracial dancing at the plaza clearly dramatized the difficulties that black soldiers often experienced at these facilities. Hostesses became alarmed for their own safety when, during a dance between a black soldier and a white hostess, white servicemen began to exhibit threatening behavior. The Hostess Committee expressed its position that permitting interracial dancing was neither in its nor the plaza's best interest, and requested that the executive board formally declare its policy on the issue.<sup>54</sup> The executive committee, wishing to comply with official USO policy yet anxious to avoid further disturbances, responded with a formal statement that "the Plaza was to be open to all service personnel irrespective of race, creed, or color and [advised] that no formal policy be laid down as to the intermingling of these groups." But the committee also added "that solely in the interest of the safety of the thousands of USO-Labor Plaza guests, any practice that might arouse antagonisms on the part of prejudiced persons should be discouraged."<sup>55</sup> For the sake of wartime unity, plaza officials could not exclude black soldiers from the facility, but they still refused to compromise their standards when it came to maintaining racial segregation. African American servicemen, regardless of their wartime sacrifices, continued to face unequal treatment at USO facilities when they were barred from activities that white soldiers simply took for granted.

Behind the scenes at the plaza, the rush was on to recruit African American hostesses to avoid further incidents. Both labor unions and the South Broad Street USO were quickly contacted about supplying qualified women. Although both organizations complied, many of the hostesses from South Broad had difficulty arriving prior to ten o'clock in the evening because of their obligations at the other facility. Recruitment continued, however, until white junior hostesses could be informed that "they [African

<sup>54</sup> Dorothy E. Jackman to executive committee, USO-Labor Plaza, Aug. 3, 1944, WWII/USO, box 22.

<sup>55</sup> Minutes of the meeting of the executive committee, USO-Labor Plaza, Aug. 16, 1944, WWII/USO, box 6.



Servicemen at the USO Labor Plaza. Philadelphia, ca. 1944. The image has been cropped for newspaper publication, effectively deleting the black soldier on the right. *Philadelphia Record* Collection, V7:4883, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

American hostesses] will roam around 'and take care of the Colored service boys.'"<sup>56</sup> White hostesses were also instructed "that if a colored serviceman approached them they were to be courteous to him and diplomatically handle the situation, explaining that we had colored hostesses to dance with the colored servicemen."<sup>57</sup>

Executive committee chairman William Fulton Kurtz also endorsed this procedure for dealing with blacks at the plaza in his recommendation to the committee that "no person of any race or creed has the right to jeopardize

<sup>56</sup> Minutes of Hostess Committee, USO-Labor Plaza, June 14, 1944, WWII/USO, box 23.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, July 25, 1944.

the happiness or the safety of thousands of his fellow guests. All must give way to the greater good, even though that may mean refraining from activities that of themselves would not be considered harmful.”<sup>58</sup> In attempting to resolve this issue, plaza officials saw themselves as remaining faithful to USO official policy which was to “further tolerance and understanding.”<sup>59</sup> Yet in reality, their actions condoned the familiar attitude of racial intolerance.

The reception received by African Americans at the Stage Door Canteen was essentially no better than at the Labor Plaza. Regardless of officials’ and hostesses’ efforts to “handle” black servicemen in order to avoid any racial intermingling, interracial incidents did occur. In a letter to canteen officials a white soldier protested the treatment his Hawaiian friend had received at the canteen, explaining that the hostesses had refused to dance with his friend because of his color. In describing the incident, the soldier lamented, “I hate to think things like this is [sic] what we are fighting for. What makes me feel so bad is when I go to a foreign port and I am treated so nice and a poor fellow like my buddy has to take insults like this one from the girls here.”<sup>60</sup>

In another incident an African American soldier was told to leave the canteen after being asked to dance by a junior hostess. Ordered upstairs by an Army major who was asked by canteen officials to handle the problem, the soldier was informed “that the Stage Door Canteen was no place for a colored soldier, and that he should go to the Negro Canteen.” In protest the soldier responded “that he had been fighting overseas for 3 years, and thought he was fighting for democracy.” He also replied “that he had bothered no one in the Canteen, and had only danced with the Junior Hostess because she had asked him to.”<sup>61</sup> Although the soldier eventually left the canteen, this episode was decidedly more threatening to the canteen than previous interracial incidents. Not only did the soldier verbally challenge his

<sup>58</sup> Minutes of the meeting of the executive committee, USO-Labor Plaza, Aug. 16, 1944, WWII/USO, box 6.

<sup>59</sup> Field Service Bulletin #24, United Service Organizations, Sept. 17, 1942, WWII/USO, box 5.

<sup>60</sup> Serviceman to Stage Door Canteen, n.d., WWII/USO, box 9. This letter is signed “U.S.M.M.”

<sup>61</sup> Report, Stage Door Canteen, n.d., WWII/USO, box 9. This description records the incident as occurring on Jan. 15, 1945.

treatment, but the event also appeared on the front pages of black newspapers in the city. Responding to these reports, other black soldiers soon arrived at the canteen to protest the unjust treatment of their fellow serviceman. Yielding to these pressures, canteen officials dealt with their interracial problems much as the Labor Plaza had, rapidly recruiting black hostesses to maintain an orderly yet segregated facility when it proved no longer feasible to simply ignore African Americans.

Not all individuals associated with the canteen, however, agreed with its policy on interracial contact. Margaret Halsey, a junior hostess captain, issued a memo to her hostesses recommending the appropriate behavior in dealing with African American soldiers. She boldly stated that what worried her the most was the hostesses' assumption "that no male Negro can so much as glance at you without wanting to get you with child. The truth is, that while you are an extremely attractive group of young women, there isn't one single one of you who's that good . . . You only make it more difficult when you artificially set aside a portion of these strangers as targets for unreasonable, unscientific and undemocratic emotion. If you'd just relax and keep your pores open, there wouldn't be any 'Negro problem.'"<sup>62</sup> Although perhaps an exception to the general racial attitudes that existed among USO representatives at that time in Philadelphia, Halsey's comments are reassuring. They suggest that at least some individuals at the Stage Door Canteen seemed able to accept the changes in a wartime society that challenged traditional race relations.

In the months before the United States became officially engaged in World War II, prominent Philadelphians concurred with the Roosevelt administration's efforts to inspire both a sense of national patriotism and a commitment to war-related activities in their city. Through extensive efforts to arouse popular support for the USO, these local leaders, with the same sense of national urgency so eagerly sought by interventionists throughout the country, stimulated both public interest and involvement in a war still not our own. Enjoying privilege and influence throughout the city as officers of financial institutions, owners of corporations, religious leaders, and society matrons, these individuals were in excellent positions to provide the necessary leadership for a massive campaign to both mobilize and channel the wartime energy of a diverse metropolis.

<sup>62</sup> Margaret Halsey, "Memo to Junior Hostesses," n.d., WWII/USO, box 9.

The success of their efforts realized, USO operations in the city were extensive, providing every conceivable civilian service and recreational activity for those in the armed forces. Regardless of the countless volunteers from every race and social class who responded to its call for unity, the USO remained unmistakably an organization of the social elite who were dedicated to preserving traditional society through their advocacy of USO programs. Prominent members of the Jewish community tapped a wide range of both new and familiar community resources to combat the cultural assimilation of Jewish soldiers, while the city's social and political elite fought any changes in standard gender or race relations at the Labor Plaza and the Stage Door Canteen.

Never aspiring to be a vehicle for social change, the USO nevertheless was forced to confront issues locally that mirrored those facing all Americans during World War II. As the war offered women new career opportunities in industry and the military, it also threatened to redefine their familial relationships as well as to defeminize them by traditional standards. As it expanded the participation of African Americans in both employment and military service, the war also stirred strong feelings of racial dignity which threatened to tear down familiar racial barriers.

The need to remain consistent with national USO policy required racial, religious, and gender tolerance. Leaders of local agencies carefully included African Americans and women among their administrators, volunteers, and service recipients. Behind the scenes, however, they frantically sought new ways to control the increased participation of these groups in order to maintain the status quo. Through such conservative efforts, women who worked in factories or served in the armed forces were successfully reminded that the exigencies of war which had altered their lives were only temporary. Continuing to allow the forces of traditional society to dictate their identity, most American women resumed their roles as wives and mothers after the war. The feminist battle for freedom and equality was years away.

Facing challenges from African Americans who quickly recognized the potential for change that their wartime participation offered, USO agencies could not as easily ignore their demands. Although officials attempted to maintain racial segregation, USO agencies were forced to make concessions in order to avoid unpleasant publicity and potential disruptions. The early stirrings of black revolution were clearly visible as USO facilities were faced with threatening examples of African American determination. The civil rights movement would soon begin.

In remembering the Philadelphia USO as a home-front organization that truly helped unite and sustain a diverse America in its intense struggle against totalitarianism, we must also acknowledge its ambivalent legacy. While committed to serving a nation at war, the USO undoubtedly generated a vibrant sense of community initiative and involvement. Yet as an organization of the privileged, it also remained unwilling to accept the inevitable social changes that the war inspired. In their efforts to serve a wartime America, USO leaders not only worked hard to save their nation from the destructive forces of fascism, but also helped to perpetuate the traditional gender, race, and class intolerance that had for so long typified American society.

*Rutgers University, Camden*

MARYANN LOVELACE

