

Gardens, Parks, Playgrounds Tonic for Urban Living

by Jack Intrator, JMG Historian

As city dwellers, we know the soothing effect that gardens, parks and playgrounds have on us and our families as we deal with day-to-day urban stress. Jefferson Market Garden, with its intense beauty and lushness, offers us an escape from the bustling city surrounding it. So it was wonderful for me to learn that a playground figured prominently in the rehabilitation of women incarcerated in the Women's House of Detention. This structure was torn down in 1973, clearing the way for the Garden's creation in 1975.

The House of Detention opened in 1932 and was intended to serve as a model institution for the social rehabilitation of female wrongdoers, mostly those convicted of moderate crimes such as prostitution and shoplifting. Including art was part of the plan for rehabilitation. In this case, it was a WPA-sponsored mural titled *Cycle of a Woman's Life from Childhood to Womanhood* created in 1936 by Lucienne Bloch. The mural was installed in one of the rooms in the institution.

In her notes the artist wrote "At my first visit to the Women's House of Detention where I was assigned to paint a mural, I was made sadly aware of the monotonous regularity of the clinic tiles and vertical bars... It seemed essential to bring art to the inmates by relating it closely to their own lives... I chose the only subject which would not be foreign to them— children—framed in a New York landscape of the most ordinary kind. The tenements, the trees, the common dandelions were theirs." The mural did have a wonderful effect. The inmates began "adopting" the painted children and even gave them names.

Due largely to overcrowding, conditions gradually worsened at the Women's House of Detention. While built to house about 200 inmates, by the end of the 1960s over 400 women were incarcerated there. The House of Detention was closed in 1971 and torn down in 1973. It is believed that the mural was demolished at that time.