

2001

Minnie F. Low

Mary Jo Deegan

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, maryjodeegan@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub>

 Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#)

Deegan, Mary Jo, "Minnie F. Low" (2001). *Sociology Department, Faculty Publications*. 366.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub/366>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology Department, Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

THIS FILE CONTAINS THE FOLLOWING MATERIALS:

Deegan, Mary Jo. 2001. "Minnie F. Low." Pp. 520-522 in *Women Building Chicago 1790-1990: A Biographical Dictionary*, edited by Rima Lunin Schultz and Adele Hast. Bloomington, IN; Indiana University Press.

LOW, MINNIE F.

November 9, 1867–May 28, 1922

SOCIAL REFORMER, SETTLEMENT WORKER, SOCIAL WORKER

Minnie Low was a leader among the Chicago women who worked in social reform and social service between 1890 and 1920. Low was born in New York City, the second child of six in a Jewish family. Her parents' names, occupations, and country of birth are unknown. When she was ten years old, the family moved to Chicago, where she finished elementary school. She attended South Division High School for less than a year and left school because she was in poor health.

Low's first recorded job was as HANNAH SOLOMON's secretary, when Solomon was organizing the Jewish Women's Congress for the Parliament of Religions at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. Low may have been working with Solomon as early as 1891. At that time Solomon began to send correspondence about the congress to women throughout the country. Under Solomon's leadership, the Jewish Women's Congress formed a permanent organization, the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW).

Low had entered volunteer social welfare work by 1893 as well, when she cofounded the Maxwell Street Settlement near Jefferson Street. This West Side social settlement served a Jewish community composed primarily of immigrants from eastern Europe, especially Russia and Poland. Although many Jewish residents of the neighborhood participated in Hull-House activities, Low believed that Jewish settlement workers could best serve immigrant Jewish communities.

The initial meetings to organize the settlement were held at Hull-House, headed by JANE ADDAMS. Addams's enduring relationship to Low began in the "winter of 1893 and 1894 when [they] . . . met often to consider the many problems arising out of mass feeding for 'soup kitchens'" (Addams, 1). The economic depression during the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 galvanized reformers, including Low, to organize against brutal conditions facing the poor, whose lives contrasted with the glamour and promise displayed at the exposition.

In 1897 Hannah Solomon and other members of the Chicago section of NCJW established a Bureau of Associated Charities in the 7th Ward of Chicago. The name was soon changed to the Bureau of Personal Service (BPS), independent of the NCJW. Low became the paid executive director and Solomon chaired the volunteer board. Low served with the organization for the rest of her life. Although nominally non-sectarian, in practice the BPS served mostly Jewish cases and sent non-Jewish clients to another branch of Associated Charities. Under Low's leadership, BPS set up a workroom to serve Jewish women, arranged for legal aid, established a summer playground in a local park, and created the Helen Day Nursery where working mothers could leave their children. Seeking to improve living conditions, the BPS took part in a study of tenement conditions and supported improved housing laws.

Also in 1897, Low joined Solomon and others to found the Women's Loan Association (WLA), which required its clients to submit a loan application and the signatures of two persons in business. After a short investigation, the loan decision was made. Low headed the group making these investigations and decisions, and she was involved in fund-raising. Most of the loans

went to Jewish immigrants, often to help them set up or maintain small businesses. Low made "spirited efforts to secure a loan fund to be used during the seasons of unemployment; to curb the extortion practices so often [used] by the immigrant banks; [and] to prevent the exploitation of newly arrived immigrants by those who had come to the United States a little earlier" (Addams, 1). Although men could apply for loans and financially support the organization, women conducted its business and made the decisions.

The BPS and the WLA emphasized women helping women. The two groups helped persons in need, usually Jews, by promoting self-sufficiency. Both were opposed to charity and to emotionally distant interactions. Low used the technique that she called "Friendly Visiting" (Bogen, 320), particularly for the services of BPS. A friendly visitor, a woman, helped members of a family to achieve goals not by giving direct money gifts but by providing advice, assistance, and information. This approach, stressing help offered by a member of a community to another member, was similar to that called "scientific tzedakah [philanthropy]" ("Minnie Low and Scientific Tzedakah"). Although Low wanted philanthropy to be more "scientific" and "to foster the eventual economic independence . . . of its recipients" ("Minnie Low and Scientific Tzedakah"), she emphasized the importance of Jewish and female participation more than this "scientific" approach did.

Low often sought the support of Julius Rosenwald, the Chicago philanthropist and founder of Sears Roebuck and Company, to fund her activities. They shared a similar commitment to Jewish social services. For many years Rosenwald gave her money each month to care for the cases she brought to his attention or sent cases to her along with the money to aid them. Low's work for Rosenwald entailed a description of the problem, a suggestion for the amount of money needed, and follow-up reports. Minnie Jacobs Berlin assisted Low in this work. Low belonged to a committee that managed a fund donated by Julius Rosenwald to establish a country club for social workers.

The formation of the Juvenile Court in Chicago in 1899 was one of the major achievements of the Progressive Era, and Low played an important role in it. Judge Julian Mack; LOUISE deKOVEN BOWEN, a Chicago philanthropist and Hull-House leader; JULIA LATHROP, also from Hull-House; and LUCY FLOWER, another leader in Chicago's social reform circles and women's clubs, joined forces to establish the Juvenile Court Committee in 1900. This committee paid the salary of some probation officers and maintained a detention home for children awaiting trial. The BPS provided funds for three probation officers' salaries. Low and Minnie Jacobs Berlin became two of the early probation officers for the Juvenile Court, focusing on the needs of Jewish children.

A separate but related group, including Low, Mack, and the social worker Hastings Hart, formed the Juvenile Protective Association (JPA). When the Juvenile Court Committee's functions were taken over by Cook County in 1907, the JPA absorbed many of the volunteers and citizens who had worked previously for the committee. Hannah Solomon and Sara Hart—like Low, active in social reform and philanthropy—played important roles on the original committee and the JPA, although Low's work was full-time, paid, professional employment while the



FIG. 67. Social worker Minnie F. Low, first woman on the far right, was a probation officer for the Chicago Police Department, 1913.

other women's work was a volunteer activity in addition to their married lives.

At the same time that she was dealing with the problems of juveniles in the city, Low was concerned with the abduction of young women—especially naive and confused immigrant girls—into prostitution. Low joined the struggle to combat this white slave traffic, collecting information and then securing and enforcing legislation designed to control and abolish this activity. A few years before the U.S. Congress approved a white slave traffic law in 1910, Illinois passed an act against pandering. Because of this action, Chicago “[made] a determined businesslike fight against the procuring of girls. . . . [Low’s] gallant efforts in behalf of these unhappy victims never faltered and only her fellow workers [could] know how difficult and complicated the situation often became” (Addams, 2).

In addition to her social service work, Low was active in professional conferences and published several important papers. She attended social work conferences where she sometimes was the only Jewish participant. In 1911, at the National Conference of Charities and Correction, she presented “Discussion” on “The Present Status of Family Desertion and Non-Support Laws,” published in the organization’s *Proceedings*. The following year, the *Proceedings* of the same conference included an abstract of her paper, “Co-operation between Courts and Voluntary Public Agencies.” In 1920, she spoke at the National Conference of Social Work (formerly the National Conference of Charities and Correction); her paper, “The Wider Use of Registration,” appeared in the *Proceedings*. Low’s expertise on Russian Jews was reflected in her discussion of philanthropy, “Chicago,” in *The Russian Jew in the United States*, edited by Charles Bernheimer in 1905.

On the national level of professional organizations, she was elected president of the National Conference of Jewish Charities in 1914, a post she held for two years. Low also served on a number of social welfare advisory boards. She was on the board

of directors of the Home for Jewish Friendless, where BPS placed thirteen-to-sixteen-year-old girls as part of a program for dealing with “juvenile delinquency . . . among girls” (Bogen, 291) by finding them satisfactory homes and providing each girl with a woman mentor. She was a member of the board of the Jewish Home Finding Society, which helped widows with dependent children and was also an adoption agency. Continuing her leadership in Jewish social services, she founded the Central Bureau of Jewish Charities, which became the Research Bureau of the Jewish Charities of Chicago.

Although Low was part of a Jewish women’s network in Chicago that included powerful and wealthy married women, she never married and was self-supporting. Low regretted her unmarried state and lack of children. She wrote to Julius Rosenwald, “Every woman feels the need of love and protection, and if she be normally constituted she has the innate maternal instinct which cannot be substituted by anything else on earth” (Rosenwald Papers, August 17, 1913). On another occasion, Low wrote Rosenwald that she felt like a failure because she had never advanced beyond her work as superintendent of the BPS. She felt that if she had been wealthy, he would have supported her work in more important ways and shared more of his responsibilities with her.

In 1921, the BPS, a member of the umbrella organization Associated Jewish Charities, was discontinued. BPS and another agency, the Relief Department, were duplicating efforts. Both organizations were “concerned with the problem of family case work” (Karpf, 37–38), but BPS dealt with social or legal problems, while the Relief Department handled financial assistance. The two agencies were merged into a new organization, the Jewish Social Service Bureau (JSSB), a case work agency. Low was asked to become the superintendent of JSSB for six months, but she declined, giving poor health as the reason. The direction of change was away from the social service of women that Low had developed. The director of the newly formed JSSB of Chicago, Maurice Karpf, deemed the old system inefficient and unpro-

fessional. He established bureaucratic policies and emphasized social work as a formal profession. Low became associate director of the Research Bureau of the Associated Jewish Charities.

After a seven-month illness, Low died in Chicago at Michael Reese Hospital at the age of fifty-four. She was buried at Oak Woods Cemetery in Chicago.

Low was a major leader in Jewish social services and family work. She struggled with personal problems arising from ill-health, limited finances, her status as a working woman, and loneliness and conquered these problems through her public work for immigrant families and the poor. At Low's memorial service, Jane Addams honored her life, exclaiming, "May the social workers of Chicago be able to maintain the standards set by her, one of the most illustrious of their pioneers!" (Addams, 3).

Sources. Several files on Minnie Low and on the Bureau of Personal Service are in the Julius Rosenwald Papers at UC Spec. Coll. These outline her relationship to Rosenwald and some of her professional views. A few letters discuss her loneliness and emotional dependence on friends. There is also material on Low in the National Association of Jewish Social Workers Papers housed at the American Jewish Hist. Soc., Waltham, Massachusetts. Jane Addams's typescript eulogy to Minnie Low, "Tribute to Minnie Low, post May 29, 1922," is in the Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Jane Addams Papers. Minnie Low's writings deal with professional social work issues and the special needs of Jewish women and social services. In addition to the publications cited above, a summary of a speech by Low is found in "Maryland Discussion of Widows' Pensions," *Survey*, December 13, 1913. Hannah G. Solomon's autobiography, *Fabric of My Life* (1946), and collected writings in *A Sheaf of Leaves* (1911) provide information on projects in which Low participated and played major roles, although Low is rarely mentioned by name. Julius Rosenwald's biography, M. R. Werner, *Julius Rosenwald: The Life of a Practical Humanitarian* (1939), mentions Low and discusses many of these projects. Louise deKoven Bowen writes about the Juvenile Court Committee and the court's work, although Low is rarely mentioned, in *Growing Up with a City* (1926). Sara L. Hart, in *The Pleasure Is Mine: An Autobiography* (1947), discusses several issues close to Minnie Low but dismisses Low for interpersonal reasons. Brief biographical information on Low is found in *History of the Jews of Chicago*, ed. Herman Meites (1924, reprinted 1990); the newspaper article "Minnie Low and Scientific Tzedakah," *Forward*, November 21, 1997, and her obituary in *CT*, May 29, 1922. Shelly Tenenbaum's entry, "Minnie Low," in *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Paula Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore (1998), is an excellent overview of Low's life and work. Tenenbaum's *A Credit to Their Community: Jewish Loan Societies, 1880-1945* (1993) includes some discussion of the Women's Loan Association. A helpful account of Jewish social welfare with several discussions of Low is found in Boris D. Bogen, *Jewish Philanthropy: An Exposition of Principles and Methods of Jewish Social Service in the United States* (1917). The series of organizational changes affecting Low and Chicago's Jewish social services is found in Maurice J. Karpf's *A Social Audit of a Social Service Agency: The Jewish Aid Society and the Jewish Social Service Bureau of Chicago 1919-1925* [1926].

MARY JO DEEGAN