

Jacob Billikopf

Social Worker
1883-1950

by David Conrads

Jacob Billikopf was a nationally known figure in social work, Jewish philanthropy, and labor arbitration. While his time in Kansas City was just one of many stops in his career, Billikopf made a tremendous contribution to the social welfare of the city in the early part of the twentieth century.

Billikopf was born in Wilna, Russia, in 1883. He came to the United States in his youth and settled in Richmond, Virginia, where he attended school. He earned a doctorate from the University of Chicago in 1903 and went into settlement work in Cincinnati and Milwaukee. He came to Kansas City in 1907, where he worked as the superintendent of the United Jewish Charities. A highly persuasive individual, he agitated for public baths, night schools, a municipal loan agency, and free public legal aid.

In Kansas City, Billikopf became a close friend and associate of William Volker, a businessman and philanthropist. At the time, Kansas City faced an array of serious social problems. High unemployment had given rise to a high crime rate, as well as overcrowded jails and workhouses. Billikopf, Volker, and Frank P. Walsh, a lawyer, served on a volunteer, nonpolitical committee charged with studying courses of action. They recommended the creation of a Board of Pardons and Paroles to supervise the correctional institutions and to handle the pardons and paroles of inmates. Their proposal was adopted in 1908.

Out of the Board of Pardons and Paroles, in 1910, grew the Board of Public Welfare, the first of its kind in the country. The Board of Public Welfare was charged with a broad program that included providing social services and family aid, free legal advice, a loan agency, and the inspection of factories and work places. Billikopf was a member of the Board and Volker served as president.

Billikopf left Kansas City in 1916 and eventually settled in Philadelphia. He held important positions with many public and private welfare agencies, most notably the National Conference of

Jewish Social Service, where he served as president. He was also active in labor relations in Philadelphia, one year settling more than 80 major labor disputes.

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