

# Rhode Island's Voices Against the Holocaust

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J. Howard McGrath (1903-1966) was a Rhode Island political powerhouse. While still a student at Boston University in 1928, he was named vice chairman of the Rhode Island Democratic Party, of which he became chairman two years later, a post he held until his appointment as U.S. district attorney in 1934. In 1940, McGrath was elected to the first of three terms as Governor of Rhode Island. He subsequently served as U.S. Senator from Rhode Island (1947-49) and chairman of the Democratic National Committee (1947-1949) before becoming President Truman's Attorney General (1949-1952).



*J. Howard McGrath  
1903 - 1966*

to Save the Jewish People of Europe, a maverick political action committee that campaigned for rescue. Led by Peter Bergson, a Zionist emissary from Jerusalem, the committee used unorthodox protest tactics, including dramatic pageants, rallies, and full-page newspaper advertisements.

The ads, many of which were authored by Hollywood screenwriter Ben Hecht, played a crucial role in raising public awareness of the Nazi genocide and dramatizing the need for rescue. They bore headlines such as "How Well Are You Sleeping? Is There Something You Could Have Done to Save Millions of Innocent People—Men, Women, and Children—from Torture and Death?" and "Time Races Death: What Are We Waiting For?" The ads usually included the names of the committee's supporters, and McGrath's name appeared on many of them. The prestige of his position as governor lent important credibility to the Bergson group's efforts.

What is not well known is that at a time when many Americans were indifferent to the fate of the Jews in Hitler Europe, McGrath was outspoken in urging U.S. government action to rescue Jews from the Holocaust.

During the 1940s, while serving as governor, McGrath became active in the Emergency Committee

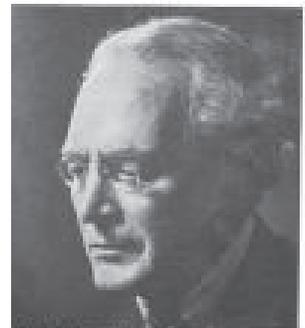
McGrath was also a co-sponsor of one of the most important events in the Bergson group's rescue campaign, a week-long Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People of Europe, which attracted more than 1500 delegates to the Hotel Commodore in New York City in July 1943. The Roosevelt administration contended that the only practical means of aiding Hitler's victims was to win the war. The well-publicized rescue conference challenged that claim, by featuring panels of experts outlining specific ways to save Jews from Hitler.

For a sitting Democratic governor to openly take issue with a Democratic president sent a powerful message about the importance of the rescue issue. The fact that McGrath was a strong supporter of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies made it all the more impressive that he was boldly breaking with the president on the refugee issue.

Another prominent Rhode Islander likewise deserves recognition for his courageous stance during the Holocaust.

In 1943, Herbert C. Pell, Jr., a former U.S. ambassador to Portugal, was named by President Roosevelt to serve as the chief U.S. representative to the Allies' War Crimes Commission.

Although FDR had publicly pledged, in 1942, that Nazi war criminals would be punished, the State Department wanted to prosecute only a small number of them, so as not to undermine postwar U.S.-German relations. It wanted to limit postwar trials to those war crimes that had been committed against Allied forces, arguing that there was no legal basis to prosecute war criminals whose victims were



*Herbert C. Pell  
1884 - 1961*

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citizens of Axis-occupied countries—chiefly the Jews.

Pell disagreed. He wanted the Allies to prosecute the murderers of European Jews as war criminals. As a result, State Department officials repeatedly undermined his work for the War Crimes Commission. Pell was ready to travel to London in the summer of 1943 for the initial meetings of the commission, but the State Department stalled his departure for three months.

During the spring of 1944, Pell, in London, succeeded in persuading the European representatives on the commission to support his strong position on prosecuting war criminals. But the State Department refused to endorse Pell's stance, and Pell's own legal assistant, apparently acting at the State Department's behest, repeatedly contradicted Pell's positions in meetings with their European counterparts.

In early 1945, the State Department informed Pell that his service had been terminated because it could no longer find \$30,000 in its budget to fund his position. Pell then offered to work for free; State replied that it would be illegal for him to work without being paid.

Pell turned to the Bergson group for help. Recognizing that the State Department's position could not hold up under the pressure of public scrutiny, Bergson organized a press conference "to force the issue into the open." At the press conference, Pell exposed the truth and blasted the State Department's explanation for his dismissal as "damned nonsense."

The press conference set off a firestorm of criticism. An editorial in the *New York Times* called the State Department's position on Pell's firing "disingenuous" and argued that opposition to comprehensive prosecution of war criminals was the work of "certain well-entrenched functionaries in the State Department." The *Washington Post* denounced "the narrow-minded legalists in the State Department." In the days to follow, State Department spokesmen were confronted by what the *Post* called "persistent heckling from the press."

Bergson's instincts were correct. Embarrassed by the publicity, the State Department soon reversed its position and agreed to the principle of prosecuting Nazi murderers of Jews. The British Foreign Office quickly followed suit, announcing that it, too, would regard German killers of Jews as war criminals. Pell himself was not reinstated, but his goal was accomplished. Principle triumphed over politics.

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