

# Peter Bergson (Hillel Kook)

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On a cold November morning in 1942, Peter Bergson opened the *Washington Post* and was shocked to read that the U.S. government had confirmed that at least two million Jews in Europe had been murdered by the Nazis. Bergson later called it “the most traumatic day in my life.”

Bergson was a 27 year-old Zionist activist from Jerusalem who had come to America to seek the public’s support for the idea of establishing a Jewish state in British Mandatory Palestine (the Land of Israel). His real name was Hillel Kook, but because he came from a well-known family—his uncle was the Chief Rabbi of Palestine—he decided to use a pseudonym so that his family would not be embarrassed if he took part in controversial protests overseas.

The news that two million Jews lay dead—and millions more were in danger of becoming Hitler’s next victims—convinced Bergson to set aside his other concerns and focus all his attention on the plight of European Jewry.

But a campaign in America to rescue Jews from Hitler faced major obstacles. First, not too many Americans knew what Hitler was doing to the Jews. Most newspapers put the news about the mass murders on the back pages, or even ignored it. In fact, the article that Bergson saw in November 1942, which changed his life, was only a few paragraphs long, buried on an inside page of the newspaper where fewer readers saw it.

***THINK ABOUT IT: Aren’t you more likely to take a news report seriously if it is on the front page, rather than on an inside page, and if it is a long article, rather than just a few paragraphs?***

The second major obstacle Bergson faced was that President Roosevelt opposed taking any special action to help Jewish refugees. Most Americans were opposed to letting in more refugees and Roosevelt

was worried he would be criticized if he opened the gates. FDR claimed there was nothing that could be done for the Jews until after America and its allies defeated Germany in the war. To make matters worse, Roosevelt’s State Department tried to block news about the Holocaust from reaching the American public, and even quietly interfered with some opportunities for rescue.

A third obstacle was that some American Jews were opposed to organizing protests on behalf of European Jewry. They feared that such Jewish protests might provoke anti-Semitism in America. They were also nervous about being seen as opposing the president in the midst of a world war.

Determined to press for rescue despite these obstacles, Bergson established a new organization, the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe. Although there were many organizations in the Jewish community, none of them were devoted exclusively to the issue of rescuing Jews from Hitler. And none of them used the kind of unique and creative protest tactics that Bergson was to employ.



*Peter Bergson  
(Hillel Kook)  
1901-1992*

For example, to help make the American public aware of the Holocaust, Bergson’s group sponsored a dramatic pageant called “We Will Never Die.” It featured famous Hollywood actors, and was performed at Madison Square Garden in New York City, and then in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C.,

Chicago, Boston, and at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles. More than one hundred thousand Americans attended performances of “We Will Never Die,” and for many of them, it was the first time they learned about the Nazi massacres of the Jews.

The Bergson group also organized many public rallies. One, which was held just before Yom Kippur in 1943, was a march in Washington by over 400 rabbis to appeal to President Roosevelt to save Jewish refugees. But the president refused to meet with the rabbis.

***THINK ABOUT IT: Can you recall other examples of Jewish or non-Jewish protests in Washington, D.C.?***

Another important part of Bergson’s campaign for rescue was the placement of full-page advertisements in newspapers around the country. The ads used catchy slogans and shocking headlines, such as “How Well Are You Sleeping? Is There Something You Could have Done to Save Millions of Innocent People from Torture and Death?” and “Time Races Death: What Are We Waiting For?” Many of the ads were written by Bergson’s close friend Ben Hecht. During the 1930s and 1940s, Hecht was one of the best-known writers in the Hollywood movie industry. (He worked on such famous films as “Gone With the Wind.”) When he heard the news about the Nazi Holocaust, Hecht began using his talents to promote the rescue issue.

***THINK ABOUT IT: If it was your job to design the next Bergson group newspaper ad, what kinds of headlines might you use?***

Bergson and Hecht were especially effective at persuading celebrities to support the rescue campaign and to add their names to the Emergency Committee’s newspaper ads. Bergson’s supporters included many Members of Congress, governors, prominent writers and artists, and famous entertainers—such as actor Marlon Brando, boxing champion Barney Ross, singers Frank Sinatra and Perry Como,

and comedians Bob Hope, Milton Berle, Carl Reiner, and Groucho and Harpo Marx.

The Bergson group was also successful at convincing members of other ethnic groups to join the calls for rescue. For example, Bergson attracted support from many prominent African-Americans, such as singer-actor Paul Robeson, poet Langston Hughes, labor union leader A. Philip Randolph, and author W.E.B. DuBois. In his practice of what is today called “coalition politics,” Bergson was ahead of his time. He understood the need to work together with groups that might disagree with him on other issues, but agreed with him on the issue that was most important to him—rescuing Jews from Hitler.

***THINK ABOUT IT: Why was it significant that celebrities supported the Bergson group? How did their involvement help the cause?***

Lobbying Congress was another key part of the Bergson group’s work . Bergson activists went door to door on Capitol Hill, informing Members of Congress about the plight of European Jewry and pleading for the U.S. government to intervene. In November 1943, Bergson persuaded prominent Congressmen to introduce a resolution calling for the creation of a federal government agency to rescue refugees.

The Roosevelt administration objected to the resolution, but when it became clear that Congress was ready to pass it anyway, President Roosevelt announced the creation of the agency that the resolution demanded—the War Refugee Board. During the final fifteen months of World War II, the Board played a major role in the rescue of more than 200,000 Jews from Hitler. (Among other things, the War Refugee Board sponsored the work of rescue hero Raoul Wallenberg.)

These efforts demonstrated that Bergson had been right all along—rescue was indeed possible. How many more might have been rescued if FDR had heeded their pleas earlier?

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