

# Stella Adler

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Today it is commonplace for stars of Hollywood and Broadway to speak out on political and social issues. But it was not always that way. One of the first national celebrities to take a leading role in political controversies was the actress Stella Adler, and the issue that captivated her was America's failure to rescue Jews from Hitler.

Stella's parents, Sara and Jacob Adler, were stars of the early twentieth-century Yiddish theater, and Stella was an acclaimed actress since childhood. In the 1930s, she brought the famous Stanislavski Method of acting to America and began working as an acting coach, in addition to her many roles in plays and movies. Eventually Stella would establish one of the most influential acting schools in the United States. Her students included such future stars as Warren Beatty, Candice Bergen, Marlon Brando, Kevin Costner, Robert De Niro, Melanie Griffith, Bette Midler, John Ritter, Cybill Sheppard, and Henry Winkler.

In 1942, when news of the Holocaust was just beginning to reach America, Stella joined an activist group led by Peter Bergson (Hillel Kook), an emissary from Jerusalem who was trying to raise public awareness of the Nazi genocide and pressure the Roosevelt administration to take action. The Bergson group lobbied Congress, organized public rallies, and placed full-page advertisements in newspapers around the country.

**THINK ABOUT IT: Can you name some examples of recent political controversies in which celebrities have spoken out?**

Many of those newspaper ads were filled with the names of prominent artists and writers who endorsed Bergson's rescue campaign. Stella Adler, with her many connections in Hollywood and on Broadway, played a crucial role in recruiting major figures from the world of entertainment to lend their support. Bergson's backers included comedians Bob Hope,

Milton Berle, Carl Reiner, Groucho and Harpo Marx, actor Paul Robeson and Marlon Brando, singers Frank Sinatra and Perry Como, band leader Count Basie, and many others. The involvement of celebrities was important because it helped get the American public to pay attention to the plight of the Jews in Europe.

In their practice of what is today called "coalition politics," Stella Adler and her fellow-activists were ahead of their time. They understood the need to work together with people who might disagree with them on other issues, but agreed with them on the issue that was most important to them—rescuing Jews from Hitler.

Some of the entertainers who endorsed Bergson signed on to the newspaper ads but did not take part in additional protest activities. Not Stella Adler. She was consistently on the front lines of Bergson's campaigns.



*Stella Adler  
1901-1992*

For example, to help make the American public aware of the Holocaust, Bergson's group in early 1943 sponsored a dramatic pageant called "We Will Never Die." It was written by the Academy Award-winning screenwriter, Ben Hecht ("Gone With the Wind"). The all-volunteer cast included Stella Adler, her brother and fellow-actor Luther, and numerous other stars of stage and screen, such as Edward G. Robinson and Paul Muni. The pageant 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.

Stella’s apartment on the West Side of Manhattan hummed with political activity. Bergson activists frequently gathered there to plan strategy and exchange ideas for forthcoming rallies or newspaper ads. There Stella would introduce them to prominent figures from Hollywood and Broadway whose support was crucial to the group’s publicity campaigns.

***THINK ABOUT IT: Are you more likely to pay attention to an issue if a movie star or famous athlete is involved — if so, why?***

After the Holocaust, the Bergson group turned its attention to the plight of the hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors, or DPs (Displaced Persons), who were languishing in Europe and were prevented from entering British-controlled Mandatory Palestine. It began a public protest campaign urging the creation of a Jewish state to which the refugees could immigrate. To help publicize the plight of the DPs, Stella again collaborated with Ben Hecht, this time on his new play, “A Flag is Born.” For two of the leading roles, Stella recruited her half-sister Celia, who was also a prominent actress, and one of Stella’s most promising students, 22 year-old Marlon Brando. (Brando would later become famous for such films as “A Streetcar Named Desire” and “The Godfather.”)

Despite her busy career as an actress, acting coach, and stage director, Stella always went the extra mile in the struggle for Jewish rights and freedom. When the Bergson group decided to send a delegation of its representatives to Mexico in 1946 to seek financial and political support, they chose Stella to head the group, knowing that her fame as an actress would attract immediate attention to the delegation’s visit.

Stella gave the keynote address at a huge rally in

Mexico City. “Stella spoke in Yiddish, a beautiful Yiddish, a beautiful woman with a beautiful soul,” one of her colleagues later recalled. “Tall, graceful, proud like a prophetess of old, her words rang out sharply and clearly as she read Ben Hecht’s ‘My Dark Prayer’ in a Yiddish translation ... Stella was a great actress, but it was no act she put on that night. The words were written by Ben Hecht, but they poured out of her soul like a furious fire. She felt what she spoke. The great assembly was silent. Stella stood there, shoulders back, head held high, her blonde hair like a golden halo around her angelic face. The audience was stunned by Stella’s beauty and by her sincerity, and they broke into applause, spontaneous and real, very real.”

Thanks largely to the efforts of Stella Adler, the Bergson group was able to build a coalition of Jewish activists and prominent writers, artists, and entertainers. This unusual alliance made a strong impression on public opinion and demonstrated that there was broad public interest in the rescue of Jews from Hitler. This helped make it possible for the Bergson group to persuade Members of Congress, in 1943, 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.) Stella Adler and her colleagues had played a role in bringing about the only meaningful American intervention against the Holocaust.

“It was one of the most important experiences of my life,” Stella later recalled. “The people were men of value, aristocrats of the mind, with social responsibility and the force to do something about it.”

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