

Pola Negri - Europe's First Hollywood Star

Pola Negri was the first European star to come to America and paved the way for Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich to follow. Yet, few people today know this magnificent actress or the dramatic events of her life.

Pola Negri began her life on January 3, 1897 born Barbara Apollonia Chalupiec in Lipno, Poland. Miss Negri had a flair for self-publicity, so she gave her birthday as December 31, 1899 – perhaps to lessen her age, but also to add the drama of being born on the eve of a new century.

Her early life in Poland was difficult. Her Father was jailed for being a revolutionary and her Mother scraped by an existence for the two of them.

Pola found her talent early in life and gained admission to the Imperial Ballet School in Warsaw. She moved to the Rozmaitosci Theatre and made a spectacular debut in 1913 in the play “Hannele.” Together with Alexander Hertz, she made eight films in Poland. Max Reinhardt spotted her during a visit to Warsaw and convinced her to move to Berlin. It was there that she joined up with her fellow actor, Ernst Lubitsch, who then became her director in her early European films.

The films *Sumurun*, *Carmen* and *Madame duBarry* established Pola Negri as a box office sensation in Europe. It was no surprise that Hollywood came calling. Jesse Lasky, President of Paramount Pictures, signed Pola Negri to a five year contract beginning in 1922. She went on to make 20 movies with Paramount in Hollywood. All of her films were box office successes. The best known films are: *The Spanish Dancer*, *Forbidden Paradise*, *Men*, *Hotel Imperial*, *Barbed Wire*, and *A Woman of the World*.

Her life in the US also made the headlines of newspapers and gossip columns. Pola Negri was engaged to Charlie Chaplin at one time and was engaged to Rudolph Valentino at the time of his death in 1926. Pola Negri was the first “woman in black” grieving at Valentino’s tomb.

She returned to Europe after her contract expired to perform in vaudeville shows and a film in London titled *The Woman He Scorned*. In 1932, she returned to Hollywood and made her first talkie titled *A Woman Commands*. Pola even sang in the film and her song, *Paradise*, became an international hit.

Miss Negri then returned to Europe to work at UFA in Germany from 1935 to 1938. Her best-known films from that period are *Mazurka*, *Tango Notturmo*, *Madame Bovary* and *From Moscow to Shanghai*. Pola never appeared in any propaganda films. She fled from Germany to France where she worked for the Red Cross and then went on to Portugal and escaped back to America.

Pola Negri spent the next 46 years of her life living quietly with her friend, Margaret West, in Los Angeles and then in San Antonio, Texas. Pola supported the arts and local Catholic charities. She made only two more films: *Hi Diddle Diddle* in 1942 and *The Moon-Spinners* in 1964. Miss Negri became a US citizen in 1951. In 1970, her autobiography, “Memoirs of a Star,” was published.

After an illness, she passed away on August 1, 1987. She is entombed at Calvary Cemetery in Los Angeles.

Miss Negri was married twice; first to Count Dambski and then to Prince Mdvani. Both marriages ended in divorce. Miss Negri always said that Valentino had been the love of her life. During her life time, Pola Negri started many fashion fads including red fingernails and toenails and turbans.

Miss Negri’s movies are sometimes shown at film festivals and on TV. Most recently, the Polish-born director Mariusz Kotowski has completed a documentary titled, “Pola Negri – Life is a Dream in Cinema” that brings Miss Negri’s life and work back to life.