

ACLU fund situation improves

By Bob Olmstead

The American Civil Liberties Union, hard-hit by a drop in contributions because of its support of Nazis' legal rights, appears to be out of the financial woods.

The national ACLU, which received \$3.3 million in membership renewals in 1976, dropped to \$2.8 million last year.

The national office had cut its staff from 52 to 40 as angry letters, mostly from Jews, poured in canceling memberships because the ACLU's Illinois Division defended the right of the Nazis to rally in heavily Jewish Skokie.

Regional offices including

the Chicago office, also had to cut staff as membership funds dropped.

THE TIDE turned, ACLU spokesmen said Wednesday, when David Goldberger, the Chicago-based attorney who represented the Nazis in the Skokie issue, sent out an emergency fund-raising letter early this year that began:

"I am the ACLU lawyer who went into court last April to defend freedom of speech in Skokie, Ill., for a handful of people calling themselves Nazis. The case has had an enormous impact on my life.

"It has also gravely injured the ACLU financially.

"I would like to explain why we took the case and

why the ACLU needs your help now."

The letter raised \$50,000, more than three times the normal amount the ACLU gets from an emergency fund-raising appeal.

The reaction of the donors perhaps was best summarized by a man who sent in a check and a note saying simply: "Defend the bastards."

IRONICALLY, it also was Goldberger who represented the Nazis Tuesday when U.S. District Court Judge George N. Leighton gave the Nazis the right to meet in Marquette Park. Afterward, Nazi leader Frank Collin said he may call off the Skokie march because gaining the right to meet in Marquette Park was his first objective, and the Skokie march was just a tactic toward that end.

If the Skokie march is canceled, the action could be expected to further mollify liberal Jews angered by the ACLU's unpopular cause.

Looking back on the ACLU crisis, national ACLU executive director Aryeh Neier said by telephone from New York Wednesday, "We were astonished by the reaction against our support of the Nazis.

"I had been with the ACLU for 15 years, and in every one of those years we had one of these Nazi or Ku Klux Klan cases, and we just assumed our members knew we handled such cases and that everybody agreed with us."

The trouble was, he said, ACLU membership had grown fat supporting relatively popular civil rights issues in behalf of Vietnam War protesters, racial civil rights and in opposition to abuses of the Nixon administration.

When publicity was focused on the ACLU and the Nazis, ACLU membership dropped from its 1974 peak of 270,000 members to 200,000, where it remains.