

CBS recaps a slice of life in 'Skokie'

By SUZANNE WEISS

Skokie: to some it was just a suburb west of Evanston. To some, it meant home. To the rest of the nation, Skokie was only a dot on the Illinois map—until the spring of 1977.

That was when Frank Collin, local leader of the National Socialist Party of America, announced plans to march his men, in uniform, through the streets of the town. The proposed date, May 30, was Memorial Day.

Collin made no attempt to disguise the fact that his organization was a latter-day version of the Nazi Party. The target, Skokie, is the home of a large number of Jews, many of them survivors of Hitler's concentration camps. The whole thing was a volatile combination that eventually exploded into a test of our national attitudes, our local governments and our constitutional guarantees.

FOR MEN LIKE Max Feldman, it was even more. The very thought of a swastika in the streets of the haven they had found after the Nazi horror evoked memories too painful to endure. It had taken more than 30 years for the wounds to heal over; it was inconceivable for them to be opened again.

Some of the participants are real, Al Smith, the beleaguered mayor of the village, and the police chief and American Civil Liberties Union attorneys who wound up carrying the ball - or fumbling it, depending on where your sympathies fell. Feldman is a fictional character, played by Danny Kaye.

"Skokie," a two-hour-plus CBS made-for-TV film depicting the events, will air at 8 p.m. Tuesday on Channel 2. In addition to Kaye, the special stars Kim Hunter as his wife, John Rubinstein, Eli Wallach, Carl Reiner and Lee Strasberg in a cameo. Their performances, and those of the rest of the large cast, vary from disappointing (Reiner, Strasberg) to adequate (Hunter, Wallach) to terrific (Rubenstein). Kaye, called upon to carry the burden of the dramatic scenes, runs the gamut of all three.

THE REAL STAR is the story itself; the most compelling scenes are those in the streets and offices and courtrooms of the town. While the semi-fictional tale of the survivor who is determined never again to stand idly by as his world is falling apart; his wife, who would rather lie on her bed and listen to Brahms than face an unthinkable reality, and their daughter, more concerned with getting her driver's license and going to a rock concert than "how Grandma Ida died," is an acceptable, even a necessary dramatic device, it pales be-

side the documentary aspects of the actual event.

A shot of the Nazi motorcade speeding down the Eisenhower, swastikas fluttering in the breeze, is more chilling than any actor's soliloquy. The strident "Never again" repeatedly screamed out at a village meeting by an angry member of the militant Jewish Defense League is more stirring than a bucket of Hunter's tears. And, as the assembled counter-demonstrators break into "My Country 'Tis of Thee" on hearing that Collin has been turned back by a court order at the Skokie exit ramp, you may shed a few tears of your own.

COMPELLING, TOO, IS the dilemma faced by Rubenstein, as a Jewish ACLU attorney who must reconcile his personal loyalties with his intellectual and professional conviction regarding the First Amendment. He defends Collin—seeking every loophole and advantage to be found within the law—in the face of ostracism and harassment from, not only the Jewish community, but every radical fringe group around seeking to get into the act.

The second half of the overlong drama focuses on this aspect of the story. ACLU financial support falls off dramatically, first locally, then on a national level as the litigation escalates to stop a second planned march, this one on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar.

The legal and intellectual arguments that began in the synagogues and administrative offices of Skokie reach as far as the U.S. Supreme Court.

THE REAL POINT of the controversy must give us pause. As expressed by CBS, "Can the constitutional guarantees of free speech for an individual — no matter how reprehensible his beliefs — be curtailed in order to protect the well-being of the entire community?" or, as Rubenstein puts it, in the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, "freedom for the thought we hate."

And it is difficult, even for the hardened critic, to fault the handling of this aspect of the tale. Not only is Rubenstein totally believable as the young lawyer torn between two masters, but most of the others involved — Ed Flanders in a sympathetic portrayal of Mayor Smith, Brian Dennehy as the police chief and Wallach as the village attorney—ring as true. The exception is Strasberg, famed teacher of actors, who delivers the lines of a disappointed ACLU board member like a robot —albeit a Jewish robot.

Robot-like, too, at times, is Kaye, especially in the scenes with his family as he tugs at the heartstrings in the assumed accents of the survivor. Far better is he in his

rage, as he bares the tattoo on his arm and asks the would-be pacifiers: "Can you know what is a Nazi?"

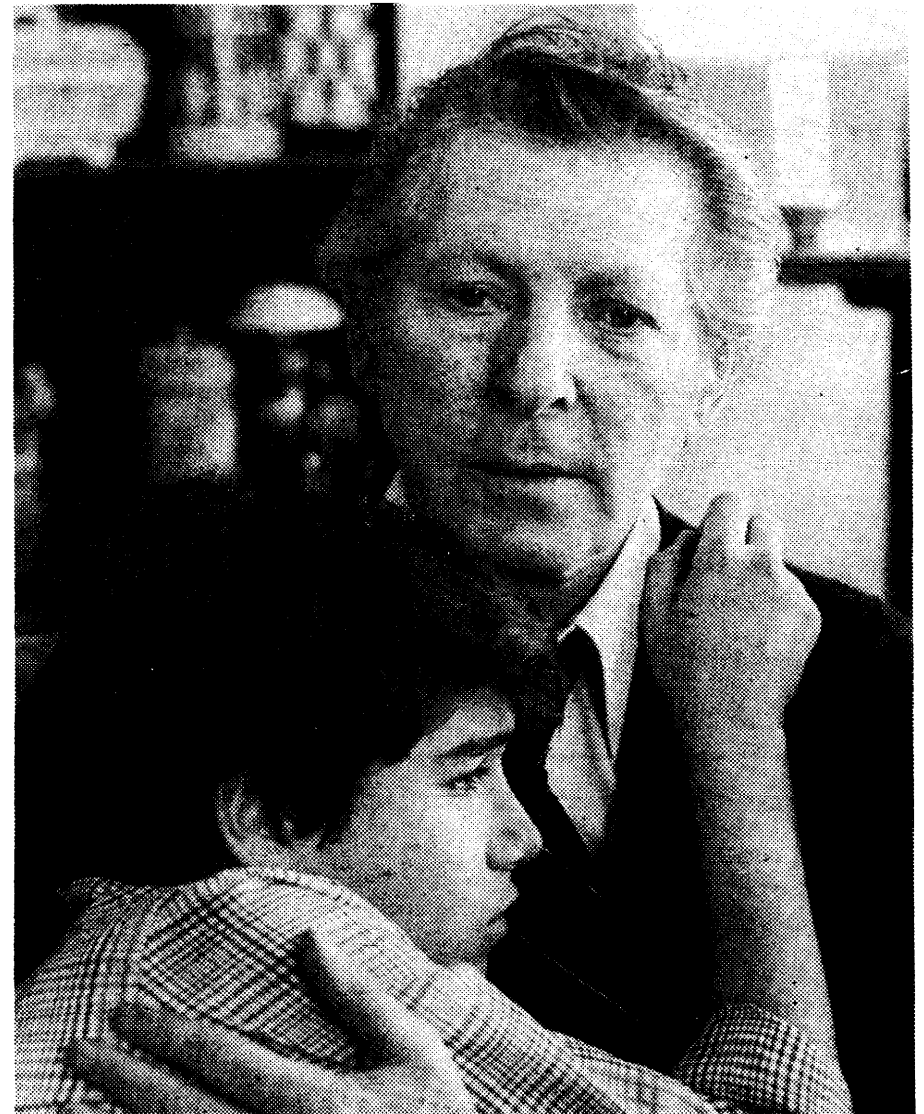
CARL REINER is the man to whom he puts the question. Playing a B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League exec who hopes that ignoring the Nazis will make them go away, the former funnyman performs with the conviction of a wind-up toy. It is said that Reiner has 11 Emmies on his shelf. It is doubtful that this show will give him an even dozen.

George Dzundza is the perfect stereotype of a neo-Nazi in the unpopular role of Collin. Paradoxically, one would wish him

a few more human qualities but, perhaps, at least according to the scriptwriters, he really doesn't deserve any.

And author Ernest Kinoy must take a lot of the blame for much of what is wrong with "Skokie." Fortunately, the event itself and the wonderful faces of the extras, many of whom are your neighbors, in locations where it really all happened, will transcend the difficulties in the script.

"Skokie" may not be the finest TV drama done by the award-winning team of Herbert Brodtkin and Robert Berger ("Holocaust") but, for area residents on Tuesday, it should be the only show in town.



DANNY KAYE MAKES his TV dramatic debut as a Holocaust survivor determined to teach his family that history will not be repeated in Skokie.

THE REAL DRAMA of "Skokie" takes place in the streets and the courtrooms. Here, the village attorney, played by Eli Wallach (left) and John Rubenstein as lawyer for the ACLU, battle it out before the bench.

