

Nazi march attempt drew world attention

By Steve Silverman

This event in Skokie history started with a robust roar and ended with a weak whimper.

During the 30-plus years that the Skokie Review has been covering the village, the most traumatic time and most newsworthy story occurred in 1977 and 1978 when a group of Chicago-based neo-Nazis decided they wanted to stage a rally on the steps of the Skokie Village Hall.

The group, called the National Socialist Party of America, had chosen Skokie as the spot to hold a rally because the village has always been thought of as predominantly Jewish, even though it has a large Roman Catholic population.

Frank Collin, the leader of the neo-Nazi group, was actually born Jewish with the name Frank Cohn. He had originally asked the Chicago Park District for a parade permit in Marquette Park, but when the park district asked for a \$250,000 insurance bond, the Nazis were effectively stopped.

COLLIN HAD the alternative to take the Chicago Park District to federal court on the grounds that his right to hold a peaceful demonstration had been denied, but that legal battle could have taken months or years.

The Chicago Park District's officials and lawyers had concocted an almost perfect scheme — no permits to demonstrate would be issued until the demonstrators could prove that they had insurance, which was impossible to obtain.

The only way into Chicago's parks was through the courtroom, where Chicago's army of lawyers waited.

After a brief attempt at gaining a permit to march on the grounds of the Skokie Park District, Collin turned his attention to the village.

He wrote a letter to the village board, and informed the board that he and 50 followers would assemble on the sidewalk in front of the Skokie Village Hall for one-half hour on Sunday, May 1, 1977. The rally would be confined to the sidewalk and the demonstrators would be in neo-Nazi uniform, with swastikas on display, but no speeches would be given.

THE PLANNED protest struck the nerve center of Skokie's population. Both Jews and Gentiles were outraged by the attempt of the Nazi group to march in the village.

While the park district had attempted to dissuade the group by making them post an even more expensive insurance bond than Chicago had asked for, the village board chose a different tact. They attempted to stop the march through the legislative process.

The village board challenged Collin with a series of restraining orders and ordinances. As a result of the board's attempt to stop Collin, an inevitable confrontation between the village and Collin's defenders, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) was impossible to deflect.

The order to prevent Collin and his group from demonstrating that Village Atty. Harvey Schwartz asked for was based on the belief that Skokie's security was at risk.

YET, THE ACLU and its attorney, David Goldberger, did not concern

themselves with the possibility of violence.

"This is a classic First Amendment case, your Honor. It tests the very foundations of democracy. The village of Skokie moves for an order enjoining speech before it has occurred even though that speech is to occur in an orderly fashion, in front of the village hall, for a period of between twenty and thirty minutes on a Sunday afternoon. Such an order, whatever we might feel about the content of the speech, violates the very essence of the First Amendment."

The village fought the First Amendment argument with the reasonable belief that a demonstration by Collin and his group would throw the community into a rage that might not be controllable, therefore Collin should not be permitted to demonstrate.

THAT POINT of view was made even stronger when Skokie resident and holocaust survivor Sol Goldstein testified in the hearing.

Goldstein personified the anger that was rampant throughout the village. When he took the witness stand, he found himself less than 10 feet away from Collin. Goldstein fixed Collin with a stare that actually made Collin squirm and he held that derisive look throughout his testimony.

After describing the horrors that he had seen in Germany during the Nazi years, Goldstein was asked if he would physically attack Collin if he was to appear in the village. "I may," Goldstein replied.

Wosik issued an injunction against Collin and the NSPA from demonstrating in the village on May 1, 1977.

BUT THE RULING was eventually overturned by higher courts, and Collin was given his right to march in the village.

The final step in the legal process came when U.S. District Court Judge Bernard Decker ruled on Feb. 23, 1978 that three ordinances based on insurance, use of military uniforms in political demonstrations and group libel were groundless.

"It must be made clear from the outset that the defendants (Skokie) have no power to prevent plaintiffs (Collin and the NSPA) from stating their philosophy, including their opinions of black and Jewish people, however noxious and reprehensible that philosophy may be. The Supreme Court has held that "...above all else, the First Amendment means that government has no power to restrict expression because of its message, its ideas, its subject matter or its content."

WITH THAT ruling, and the subsequent affirmation by the United States Court of Appeals for the 7th Circuit, Collin had the opportunity to walk right up to the steps of the Skokie Village Hall on June 25, 1978.

But just as he had won the court battle, Collin deferred his right to demonstrate. He had decided that he really wanted to march in Marquette Park and never wanted to go into Skokie at all.

And so on the day that the march was supposed to go forward, Collin did not show up in the village. He failed to exercise his court-ordered right to appear at the Skokie Village Hall.