

Like events that inspired it, 'Skokie' stirs debate

Four years ago, the tranquility of everyday life in north suburban Skokie was profoundly disturbed by a ragtag neo-Nazi group that wanted to demonstrate there. For more than a year, Skokie was transformed into a legal and emotional battlefield.

On one side was most of Skokie's large Jewish population—including many survivors of the Nazi Holocaust in Europe—pressuring village officials to block the march. On the other side was the American Civil Liberties Union—including Jewish attorney David Goldberger—defending the constitutional right of free speech, even for the several dozen creeps who composed the Nazi group in Chicago.

As it turned out, the free-speech rights of the Nazis were upheld in court. But the group, led by a misanthrope named Frank Collin, ultimately decided against marching in Skokie, thereby ending the protracted nightmare.



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Next Tuesday night these legal and moral issues will be re-examined in a 2 1/2 hour CBS prime-time docu-drama called "Skokie." And although the movie distorts portions of what happened in Skokie during 1977-78, it does dramatize the viewpoints and actions of quite a few real people—most of whom allowed their actual names to be used in the film.

Judging from the reactions of these people, it seems that there are two distinct schools of thought on how well CBS portrayed the issues in "Skokie": (1) Folks who opposed the Nazi 'march under any circumstances, including most Skokie village officials, are generally pleased with the movie, but (2) advocates of the First Amendment are disappointed, accusing CBS of ignoring the important legal issue in favor of the more obvious (and exploitable) emotional angle.

THIS COLUMN contacted most of the principal figures in the controversy. All had seen "Skokie" at various advance screenings. Here are their reactions:

- Albert J. Smith, mayor of Skokie (who's played by Ed Flanders): "On the whole, I'd say it's excellent and even-handed. Unfortunately, I didn't have the opportunity to meet Flanders before he played the part, and so he could not

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TV / Radio critic

capture my true feelings about what took place. But I think he did a representative job. The main thing, though, is the story of the Holocaust survivors [in Skokie] and how they saw the Nazi threat to march as a continuation of what took place in Europe. The most moving moment for me is when Max Feldman [the Danny Kaye character] says at the conclusion. 'This time, in Skokie, I was not alone.'

- David Hamlin, former Illinois ACLU director (who's played by James Sutorius): "The movie is factually inaccurate, of course, and many of the inaccuracies were unnecessary and could have been put right. There are moments when it feels so real that it's like a documentary to me. Then I'll see my character begin a conversation that's so far removed from reality that I don't know whether to laugh or cry. For instance, I'm shown equivocating about the First-Amendment and wondering about the impact the Nazi case might have on ACLU membership and public relations. That's so radically removed from what happened, it's a total fiction."

Hamlin, now a writer in Southern California, also complained about news media coverage of the Skokie-Nazi confrontation.

"The newspapers did enormous damage to all sides, but they walk away Scott-free in the movie. Although the newspapers sensationalized all the issues, the movie only shows the press turning up every time Frank Collin has something to say—as if that was all they did. These subtle distortions make the film very unsatisfying."

- A. Abbott Rosen, Midwest director of the Anti-Defamation League (who's played by Carl Reiner): "I think the film's

content captures the essence of the Skokie conflict. One must come away impressed, and with tremendous sympathy and understanding for the feelings of the survivors. Although there was an attempt to capture our position, the movie doesn't fully convey the enormous anguish and sensitivity we felt when we confronted the survivors. Also, some of the language attributed to me wasn't true."

- Harvey Schwartz, Skokie village attorney (who's played by Ell Wallach under the stage name "Bertram Silverman"): "On balance, I thought it was good—not great—and I found the second half to be very repetitive. The film did not show the [Mayor] Al Smith I know. Al Smith has more empathy and contact with the Jewish community than anyone I've ever known. And the movie didn't convincingly portray the legal argument the village tried to make."

- Sol Goldstein, Holocaust survivor (who's the basis for the composite character played by Danny Kaye): "If somebody asked me whether they should watch it, I'd say yes. But it's a very bad movie. Not enough credit is given to the role of the survivors in persuading everyone to take our position. In the beginning, most people said, 'Lock your doors, hide in the basement and ignore them.' But we made them understand that it's not a question of the First Amendment when Nazis come to tell Jews that they haven't finished the job Hitler started."

IN ADDITION, David Goldberger, the ACLU legal director at the time of the Skokie controversy, was so disturbed by the CBS movie's cavalier treatment of the events that he demanded that his name be removed from the cast of characters. The producers of "Skokie" complied. Like Hamlin, Goldberger believes the movie portrays the ACLU figures as "cold, insensitive and excessively legal."

One principal character in the Skokie confrontation couldn't be reached for his comment on the CBS docudrama. Frank Collin, the former Chicago Nazi leader, is serving a prison term for child molesting.

DEEB'S LOCAL LINE: The Chicago White Sox are expected to decide by this weekend which radio station will win the privilege of broadcasting all their ballgames next season. After two years with WBBM-AM, there are strong indications that Sox bossman Eddie Einhorn might switch the team back to WMAQ, which had carried the games for many years.