

Former ACLU director's book knocks Skokie

By DIANE DUBEY
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AFTER READING the latest analysis of the Skokie-Nazi conflict, one may wonder whether being subjected to the literary version of Skokie's 1½-year trauma might not be more painful than having lived through that period.

For those who yearn to chronicle such episodes, perhaps the worst thing about the neo-Nazi demonstration that never was is that it didn't

Review

leave much to write about. Few legal precedents were set, no new or surprising theories were offered by the courts, and the damned march never even took place.

The early months of 1979 brought "Defending My Enemy: American Nazis, the Skokie Case, and the Risks of Freedom," a creditable work by Aryeh Neier, a Holocaust survivor and survivor also of eight years as national executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Neier examined the Skokie case by setting forth the thesis that a small neo-Nazi movement in the United States is a positive force for the Jewish community, a deterrent to the expression of anti-Semitism by more palatable groups and a constant reminder to Jews and Christians, alike, of the need to safeguard the rights of a people which has been through the Holocaust.

EARLY 1981 will bring another book on the Skokie-Nazi conflict, a book by someone so intimately involved with the 1½-year event that he would be expected to add new insight to a subject already tapped by

almost every general-interest publication in the country.

But "The Nazi/Skokie Conflict," subtitled "A Civil Liberties Battle," to be published in February by Beacon Press, hardly represents the best of which David Hamlin, former executive director of the Illinois ACLU, is capable.

As the weeks and months of court battles dragged on through 1977 and the first half of 1978, Hamlin provided accurate explanations to the press of each court's ruling, often giving both the ACLU and the Village of Skokie's side of each issue when the village chose not to comment.

One would assume that Hamlin's consideration and cooperation were reciprocated—the ACLU generally was treated fairly in ongoing newspaper accounts of the controversy and no complaints about the coverage were made by Hamlin at the time.

Yet, a recurring theme of his book and of speeches he has given since mid-1978 is the irresponsibility of the press and the reporters' lust for the sensational.

Hamlin's book certainly is not sensational—it is dull, if one must find a one-word modifier—but, ironically it reads like one long, slanted newspaper article.

LIKE NEIER, Hamlin apparently sets out to show that everyone wins when First Amendment rights are upheld. Unlike Neier, he offers only a week-by-week account of the conflict, gives few interesting anecdotes and tells the readers nothing they couldn't have learned from those nasty, sensational newspaper articles.

Hamlin has no compelling hypothesis and he is not as articulate

in print as he is verbally. But he does show that he is not above giving the Village of Skokie a few jabs when he gets a chance.

Skokie has had its share of so-called image problems lately, and it takes no great intellect to add to them. But Hamlin can't resist:

"The village has a unique architectural style, a varied collection of structures which might be called 'postwar slapdash.' Skokie grew in the postwar economic and population booms, and the men who built the community did so with a high regard for the enormous housing demand at the time. To accommodate as many buyers and renters as possible, extra buildings were squeezed onto some blocks, a feat accomplished by placing one or more of the buildings sideways, facing the adjacent building.

"At the same time, the developers managed to bring several styles to a single street. It is therefore possible to motor through Skokie passing golden arches, large red hot-dog signs, orange and red restaurants, large well-lighted pink coffee cups, and a residential street along which sit a natural wood ranch, a white brick duplex, and a three-story apartment building with a blue and green mosaic tile facade."

HIS ASSESSMENT of Skokie's political leanings is equally deprecating and, seemingly, based on quite a few inaccuracies.

Informing readers that "a portion of the village lies in the 'Tenth Illinois Congressional District,'" Hamlin decides that "Skokie's local

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FORMER ACLU Executive Director David Hamlin has written a book about Skokie's 1977-78 struggle to avert a Nazi march in the village. Above is a picture of a demonstration held during that period.

Hamlin's book is dull, has flaws

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politics are, not surprisingly, less bombastic and less liberal than the tenth itself."

Actually, all of Skokie lies in the 10th, and all but the least informed of suburban political spectators realize that Skokie and adjacent Evanston provide the center of liberal politics for the 10th District,

Large margins in Niles Township, where Skokie is located, and in Evanston Township provided former U.S. Rep. Abner Mikva with the votes he needed to overcome the more Republican conservative communities in other parts of the 10th district.

Although Hamlin, perhaps for the first time in print, says he and ACLU attorney David Goldberger should have been more sympathetic to the plight of Skokie residents who are Holocaust survivors and although his explanation of the ACLU position is clear and rational, his book has serious flaws.

IT IS WRITTEN as an historical account of what happened in 1977-78, but only the ACLU activities and beliefs have been researched and described. Goldberger is quoted at length in each courtroom scene; Skokie attorneys are occasionally paraphrased, occasionally ignored. A sarcastic and patronizing tone throughout the first half of the book is interrupted only for a paragraph or two of ACLU-inspired back-patting: Sharing a "love affair with the First Amendment," Hamlin and Goldberger "quickly established a trusting, respectful relationship, which was occasionally noisy but always harmonic."

It is understandable that Hamlin would laud the ACLU's courage and determination in defending the neo-Nazis in the First Amendment case against Skokie; indeed, that organization did an admirable job which would not have been taken on by a more establishment-oriented agency.

But, just as the ACLU argues that the cause of democracy is aided by the airing of all points of view, so might the ACLU's position have been more compelling if equal attention had been given to the other side.

If Hamlin had wanted only to write about his organization's role in the Skokie case, he should have done so. But once he decided to contrast the two sides, he had an obligation to document the village's case as well as he does his own.

For the greater part of the book, Skokie officials and Jewish groups opposing the march are depicted as a bunch of lunatics who are not intelligent enough or sane enough to understand the issues. The one exception to this characterization is Hamlin's interpretation of Village Attorney Harvey Schwartz who, the author implies, is bright enough to understand that the ACLU position is right, but must serve a village full of crazies by pandering to their fascist tendencies and trying to avert the march.

HAMLIN ALSO ACCEPTS at face value the cast of characters which was formed in the course of the conflict. Before one writes a book, isn't it natural to examine the motives and background of the

main characters? Is he really describing community leaders or is he making leaders out of those who temporarily were thrust – or forced their way -- into positions of leadership?

Fred Richter was the leader of

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— David Hamlin.

the organized Jewish community within the village, Hamlin writes, and a woman named Erma (sic) Ganz (sic) was a leader of a group called Combined Jewish Citizens. These two individuals, along with Holocaust survivor Sol Goldstein, are the folks Hamlin extrapolates to be representative of the Skokie community in 1977-78.

To this day, it would be safe to

wager that 99 percent of all Skokians do not know who Fred Richter is. Erna Ganz was president of a B'nai B'rith chapter comprising hundreds of Holocaust survivors, but just who are Concerned Jewish Citizens? Is that a group which represents Skokie Jews, or is it a group which was convenient to refer to because its members got a little publicity one day? There are many recognized organizations in Skokie and the Chicago area which represent virtually every viewpoint expressed by the Jewish community during the Nazi conflict. Why are their members not quoted?

SOMETIMES IT IS BEST to let one's actions tell the whole story. As an ACLU executive director, David Hamlin's conduct was exemplary. It was a delight to hear him describe his organization's struggle against popular opinion to defend the basis of democracy and free speech in this country.

His help was invaluable, his explanations totally accurate. For nearly 1½ years, David Hamlin was at the mercy of his organization's members, of reporters from all over the world, and of hostile cranks.

He survived and the First Amendment survived and both deserve a lot of credit. But it is sad that, at a time when civil liberties in this country again are threatened, when spokesmen are needed to champion the rights of women, minorities and the poor, David Hamlin has retired from the public eye and moved to California – to become a writer.