



**Georgie
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Nazis and Skokie: incredible morality play

WASHINGTON — If the demonstration had not been canceled Thursday night, a large group of American Nazis would have marched through the pleasant, mostly Jewish suburb of Skokie, Ill., this Sunday. As they moved past the houses of the people there, many survivors of the concentration camps, they would have spoken, shouted, provoked and given out literature to celebrate—two months late—the birthday of Adolf Hitler. And all of it would have been protected by precisely those First Amendment rights that they would so wantonly destroy if they could.

That, at least, was the picture given out by the press, and this had stirred emotions in many to the level of terror.

THERE IS ONLY ONE TROUBLE. Much of it wasn't true. And I have to say as a journalist that, if there had been trouble Sunday, we in the press would have borne some responsibility for it. My purely emotional feeling has been that the Nazis should not have been permitted to be in Skokie. Most countries of the world have laws against either group libel or advocacy of genocide.

But ... the Nazis were not going to “march through Skokie,” as almost every article said. They were going to wear the heinous uniforms we all hoped died in the bunkers of Berlin, but they were not going to speak a word. Indeed, as they circled for only a half hour in front of city hall, they would have engaged only in what is called “symbolic speech” — uniforms and signs. Legally, it is a form of speech also protected by the First Amendment in the same manner as wearing arm bands during the Vietnam War.

I HAVE TO THINK THAT SOME of the inner and outer terror the once-victims of Skokie have been put through might not have occurred were it not for the incredible overwriting of this emotion-ridden story.

As Executive Director David Hamlin of the American Civil Liberties Union in Chicago says, “If I see the ‘march through Skokie’ one more time, I’ll scream. To a great extent, the things people have feared have come from the stark relief way in which the press has perceived it from the beginning. A simple little Nazi demonstration was not enough.”

The ACLU lawyers, many of whom are themselves Jewish and thus have suffered a particularly exquisite torment, have convinced me that even Nazis, as disgusting as they are, have the right to “symbolic speech.”

But what, I have kept asking myself lately, about the kind

of anti-group libel law or anti-genocide law which other countries enjoy? Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal touched on this when he visited Chicago recently, saying, “You need what we have in Europe—a law against racial hatred.”

But Hamlin persuaded me against this. “The group libel law [that the Illinois Legislature was considering] would also sweep up the Bible for decrying the Jews who left the fold, Shakespeare because of Shylock and, if it didn’t get Randy Newman’s ‘Short People,’ it would surely get his ‘Rednecks.’”

WHY NOT A LAW against the advocacy of genocide?”

“My difficulty here,” Hamlin says, “is that then I can’t see my enemies. As it is, I know where they are. The enemies I’m afraid of are the ones I can’t see. The minimum would be to drive them underground. Also, you see how loosely all of this can be applied in the UN.” He paused. “It has been said that Zionism is the equivalent of racism; in effect, that Zionism is ‘group libel.’ Do we want that?”

When it is all played out, what will be left behind is the memory of an incredible morality play: young Jewish ACLU lawyers acting out their lives in the best tradition of *The Book and The Law* against precisely that other atavistic primitivism that is always there, too, lurking in the mold and shadows, to destroy civility and civilization.